

INTRODUCTION

The Scope of the Book

What is alternative journalism? For those encountering the term for the first time – and even for those familiar with it – it can appear infuriatingly vague. How does it relate to an array of similar terms such as citizen journalism, citizen's media, community media, democratic media, emancipatory media, radical media and social movement media? When we turn to specific practices there is an even wider range to consider: newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations; blogs and social networking sites; pamphlets and posters; fanzines and zines; graffiti and street theatre; independent book publishing and even independent record production. These practices are often informed by the desire to provide news, information, comment and analysis to specific, identified communities defined in geographic or socio-cultural terms (such as ethnic minority journalism, gay/lesbian journalism, or community media).

In what is the first academic book-length study of alternative journalism, we argue that what all these concepts and practices share is an emphasis on thinking about journalism in a particular way: in other words, they are primarily informed by a critique of existing ways (the dominant practices) of doing journalism. Alternative journalism proceeds from dissatisfaction not only with mainstream coverage of certain issues and topics, but also with the epistemology of news. Its critique emphasizes alternatives to, *inter alia*, conventions of news sources and representation; the inverted pyramid of news texts; the hierarchical and capitalized economy of commercial journalism; the professional, elite basis of journalism as a practice; the professional norm of objectivity; and the subordinate role of audience as receiver.

Alternative journalism, at least in its ideal form, is produced outside mainstream media institutions and networks. It 'can include the media of protest groups, dissidents, fringe political organisations, even fans and hobbyists' (Atton, 2004: 3). It tends to be produced not by professionals, but by amateurs who typically have little or no training or professional qualifications as

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journalists: they write and report from their position as citizens, as members of communities, as activists or as fans. (Though as we shall see, there are examples of alternative journalism where professional journalists and professional techniques are employed, often in ways radically different from their conventional uses.) Much of the work of alternative journalism is concerned with representing the interests, views and needs of under-represented groups in society. As well as being homes for radical content, projects of alternative journalism also tend to be organized in non-mainstream ways, often non-hierarchically or collectively, and almost always on a non-commercial basis. They hope to be independent of the market and immune to institutionalization. Practitioners of alternative journalism also seek to redress what they consider an imbalance of media power in mainstream media, which results in the marginalization (at worst, the demonization) of certain social and cultural groups and movements.

It is this emphasis on media power that we argue lies at the heart of alternative journalism. It is for this reason that, despite all the cognate terms used to refer to its practices, we prefer to call it alternative journalism. This is because, as Nick Couldry and James Curran have argued, it functions as a comparative term to indicate that 'whether indirectly or directly, media power is what is at stake' (Couldry and Curran, 2003b: 7). We develop this argument in detail in Chapter 7, where we explore a range of theories that have been put forward to make sense of alternative media production. These include John Downing's theory of radical media (Downing, 1984; Downing et al., 2001); Clemencia Rodriguez's 'citizens' media (Rodriguez, 2001) and Hackett and Carroll's (2006) notion of democratic media activism. These studies are undoubtedly extremely useful: they offer valuable insights into the ideologies and practices of non-mainstream media. However, they share a common assumption that alternative media are primarily concerned with radical politics and social empowerment, with what Pippa Norris has called 'critical citizens' (Norris, 1999). Once again we find ourselves in agreement with Couldry and Curran; just as they do in their in their own work, we wish to explore non-mainstream media that 'may or may not be politically radical or socially empowering' (Couldry and Curran, 2003b: 7).

Alternative journalism, then, becomes both a comparative term and a broader term. Within it we may place not only the journalisms of politics and empowerment, but those of popular culture and the everyday. Alternative journalism may be home to explorations of individual enthusiasm and sub-cultural identity just as much as to radical visions of society and the polity. This one reason why, as we conclude the theory chapter of this book, we apply the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu to alternative journalism, a theory that is capable of dealing with all forms of cultural production, all forms of journalism, whatever the aims and practices of those forms.

It is not enough, of course, simply to answer the question: what is alternative journalism? If media power is indeed at stake in its varied principles and practices, we must also ask such questions as: how does it relate to the dominant practices and ideologies of journalism, as well as those of politics and economics? How is it – and how has it been – culturally and socially significant? How does it manifest itself in different countries and at different times? To hope for a comprehensive set of answers to these questions is quite unrealistic, not least because of the immense historical and geographical sweep this book would need to take. Instead, we have used the structure shared by all the books in this series of *Journalism Studies: Key Texts* to explore alternative journalism by focusing not on the accumulation of microscopic detail but, first, on the identification of broad currents in the field (such as those found in history and political economy) and second, on case studies that illuminate these currents through their ideologies, practices, and specific locales. In this way we aim to present a study of alternative journalism that is wide-ranging (though with no pretension to comprehensiveness), theoretically coherent and sensitive to the many contexts in which alternative journalism's challenges to media power take place.

The Structure of the Book

The book begins with a history of alternative journalism in the UK and the US (Chapter 1). This historical overview contests the grand narratives of much mainstream media history, which emphasises the development of institutions and the accounts of 'great men' (Hamilton and Atton, 2001). It begins by recounting the emergence of received conceptions of journalism itself, beginning with the rise of Enlightenment positivism, empiricism and their corollaries, not only in Baconian inquiry but also in the appearance of epistolary novels and hybrid forms of reportage prior to the 1700s (Altschull, 1990; Davis, 1983). The subsequent politicization of journalism in the forms of party presses supported by patronage came to be challenged in the Industrial Revolution by the rise of the popular presses (Williams, 1978b) and the industrialization and rationalization of journalism forms in such ways as the inverted pyramid and objectivity as both a prose style and professional creed (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001). This industrialization was challenged in turn both by the continuation of earlier polemical forms of journalism as well as by the development of new narrative forms in the wake of the modernist critique of empiricism, an example being the 'new journalism' of the 1960s, variations of which have been practised more recently in the service of a variety of new social movements (Reed, 2005). Chapter 1 is developed through an overview of historical developments in other parts of the world, such as

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varieties of journalistic practice outside of the Western 'objective' mode, the amateur political journalism of Central and South America (Rodriguez, 2001) and the dissident media of Iran and the former Soviet Union.

An understanding of the history of forms of alternative journalism needs to be complemented by an understanding of the political-economic context of their formation and practice. A dominant theme in accounts of media history is the equation of political independence with the growth of democracy, where press freedom is equated with popular freedom (Curran, 2002). Chapter 2 critiques this approach, drawing on studies that show how alternative media have resisted the effects of neoliberal orthodoxy and market 'reforms' to produce journalism that both critiques the prevailing political and economic orthodoxy and at the same time develops its structures and networks of media production and reception in ways that challenge the institutionalised and capitalised methods of mainstream media.

Alternative journalism is a response most generally to capitalism as a social, cultural and economic means of organising societies, and to imperialism as a global dynamic of domination and consolidation. The practice of capitalism and imperialism enabled the rise of 'liberal' democracies of the West and, later, the socialist revolutions of the twentieth century. It also created the conditions to which subsequent social movements are a response as well as the means of challenge. Resources of challenge include the more immediate, such as new means of manufacture and distribution, new kinds of technologies of reproduction and of infrastructure and distribution, as well as the more general such as the moderation of working hours and the rise of consumer society and institutionalized leisure (Schiller, 1996: 3–38). In particular, the Internet provides a critical point in political-economic examinations of alternative journalism. There is a powerful dialectic here between the use of a neoliberal new technology that is largely in the control of western economic forces, and its deployment as a radically reforming (if not revolutionary) tool for globalized, social-movement-based activism.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus of the book to specific case studies in its exploration of the social demographics of alternative journalism. There are few surveys of alternative journalists (Harcup, 2005 provides the only one for the UK, for example), and no surveys that pretend to completeness. However, accounts of media practices across a range of alternative journalisms do provide insights into the educational background, professional training, and the gender and ethnic mix of practitioners. Of particular importance here is the relationship between the journalist as writer and the journalist as activist (or enthusiast or fan); for many alternative journalists the journalism is a secondary activity at the service of a greater goal (in the case of social-movement journalism, the goal might be political reform or revolution). Many such journalists are autodidacts, which brings not only different ways of writing but different approaches to sourcing and ethics (Atton, 2003b; Atton and

Wickenden, 2005). This chapter therefore locates the social demographics of alternative journalists within wider social and political practices.

In particular, it draws on and emphasises alternative journalism in the context of actual contemporary practices. The chapter examines the wide range of people involved in the production of alternative journalism, including the amateur, the autodidact and the trained journalist. It explores how these various types utilize existing forms of journalism and production techniques and to what extent they innovate. The chapter also explores the relationships between mainstream and alternative journalists, the possibilities for collaboration and their movement from one field to the other.

Chapter 4 is concerned with policy. The community media sector has enduring and active organisations that function in part as policy forums (for example, AMARC – the World Association of Community Broadcasters – and the UK’s Community Media Organization), and in the UK and the US much governmental attention is given to community media. By contrast, for alternative journalism there is little or no formal policy discussion at governmental or ‘industrial’ levels (in a sense there is no industry). Yet there is no shortage of critiques and position papers that could form the basis of policy here. Some of these come from media organisations and their professional organisations, which consider alternative journalism as a form to be incorporated into the dominant practices of journalism. Others represent challenges to dominant practices and seek to reform them: these include proposals such as *Journalism That Matters* (2007a, 2007b) and the work of the trade association *American Alternative Newsweeklies* (2007). Finally, the most radical proposals come from groups and individuals who seek to subvert dominant practices and to replace them entirely with new ways of reporting that seem to bear little resemblance to traditional journalism.

Contemporary practices have already been introduced as a factor in the social demographics of alternative journalism; in Chapter 5 they are explored in depth. These practices are broadly divided into two, as relating to two broad divisions of journalistic content: the political and the popular-cultural. The political is explored through media that exhibit specifically radical positions, media allied to social movement activities and ideologies, and the individual contributions of bloggers. The popular-cultural is represented by fanzines, zines and other specialist publications that focus on cultural products, genres, movements and individual artists.

Inevitably, the chapter examines the relationship between alternative and mainstream media practices. Some alternative journalism not only employs populist methods of presentation that resemble the practices of tabloid journalism, it also challenges conventional notions of expertise and authority, particularly in their foregrounding of ‘ordinary’ people as sources of news. This foregrounding is not without its problems, though: who is to say that these sources might not be used ideologically? Consequently, this chapter

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examines issues familiar from studies of mainstream media: ethics, objectivity, representation and sourcing practices, and reliability and credibility. How do alternative journalists deal with issues such as representation and objectivity, particularly when they are developed from the structural and cultural characteristics of alternative journalism, and the radicalizing of journalistic practices through notions such as 'active witnessing'?

Journalistic practices are, of course, determined to some degree by their location in differing cultural, social and political contexts. Chapter 6 highlights the comparative significance of specific conditions under which alternative journalism is produced, whether at the local, national, regional or even international level. As with our survey of social demographics, this chapter does not attempt to be comprehensive. Instead it employs case studies to draw attention to the ways in which politics, economics, and social and cultural systems provide specific contexts that contribute to the shaping of a wide range of journalistic practices. Examples come from the present and from recent history (1980s onwards, thus providing chronological connection with the historical material in Chapter 1). The survey encompasses alternative journalism in Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa, as well as the UK, the US and Canada. Comparison is emphasised by analysing different uses of the same medium (radio, television and the Internet) in different countries.

The theoretical arguments in Chapter 7 have their beginnings in critical media studies, which also act as a site for some types of alternative journalism. Three broad theoretical positions are advanced (as we have already noted): Downing's theory of radical media; Rodriguez's concept of citizens' media; and a broader framework for alternative journalism based on media power and the notion of the native reporter. The chapter examines key texts that have shaped our theoretical understanding of alternative media, as well as studies that have addressed alternative journalism itself. Chapter 7 concludes with an appraisal of how Bourdieu's theory of cultural production might aid our understanding of alternative journalism in all its dimensions: the political, the economic, the social and the cultural.

The final chapter of the book begins with what is currently the most conspicuous site for alternative journalism, the Internet. In looking for the future directions of alternative journalism, we question the continuing value and efficacy of a media technology that has been in large part responsible for the massive increase and visibility of alternative forms of journalism. More broadly, we ask to what extent such practices are sustainable in a media-centric world, especially when some of their aims are so grounded in actual political change. Do the number and diversity of alternative journalism projects encourage and sustain 'active' citizenship, or do they merely represent another facet of a media-centric world where lived experience is diminished? Do such journalisms have a coherent future or is their very pluralism a threat to their effectiveness?