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alternative media

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approaching alternative media: theory and methodology

Preliminaries

In this chapter I propose a theory of alternative and radical media that is not limited to political and 'resistance' media but which may also account for newer cultural forms such as zines and hybrid forms of electronic communication. It draws principally on the theoretical 'sketches' of Downing (1984), Dickinson (1997) and Duncombe (1997) and expands their work to propose a model that privileges the transformative potential of the media as reflexive instruments of communication practices in social networks: there is a focus on process and relation.

Alternative and radical media hardly appear in the dominant theoretical traditions of media research. This is surprising, since some theoretical accounts seem to have space for them. The classic Marxist analysis of the media contains within it the seeds of such a space, in that alternative media may be considered as offering radical, anti-capitalist relations of production often coupled to projects of ideological disturbance and rupture. The Gramscian notion of counter-hegemony is discernible through a range of radical media projects (and not only in the obvious places such as the working-class newspapers (Allen, 1985; Sparks, 1985) and radical socialist publications (Downing, 1984)). Attempts to theorize and develop conceptual frameworks for alternative and radical media alone are even sparser. The Frankfurt School appear to have supported an alternative press through Adorno's assertion that the culture industry was best

combated by 'a policy of retreatism in relation to the media which, it was argued, were so compromised that they could not be used by oppositional social forces' (cited in Bennett, 1982: 46). Adorno found the mimeograph 'the only fitting ... unobtrusive means of dissemination' to be preferred over the bourgeois-tainted printing press (*ibid.*).

Enzensberger (1976) has proposed a politically emancipatory use of media that is characterized by (1) interactivity between audiences and creators, (2) collective production and (3) a concern with everyday life and the ordinary needs of people. Denis McQuail has configured this as an extreme of the liberal-pluralist scale, but doubts whether the model is able to withstand such a radical reconception:

we are now speaking of a version of relationships yet another step further from the notion of dominant media, in which people using small-scale media prevail and large media institutions and undifferentiated content can no longer be found. (McQuail, 1987: 88)

The range, number and diversity of alternative media in all their forms (printed and electronic) and perspectives (single-person zines, large-scale working-class newspapers, radical community newspapers, magazines of sexual politics, anarchist samizdats) suggest the theory of liberal pluralism pushed to its limits. A model of the media where 'people using small-scale media prevail' need not be the product of idealism or entail the overthrow of large-scale media; we may find spaces in which small-scale media already prevail (I shall explore these conceptually later). In a revised edition of McQuail (1987) we find a 'democratic-participant' model (again based on Enzensberger) that is founded on the use of communications media 'for interaction and communication in small-scale settings of community, interest group and subculture' that favour 'horizontal patterns of interaction' where 'participation and interaction are key concepts' (McQuail, 1994: 132). This theory is only superficially limned: nowhere (not even in Enzensberger) is it fully developed. From McQuail (1987) we may also take a warning that perhaps it is more useful to find theoretical purchase for alternative and radical media not in existing accounts of dominant media, but in accounts of the media that oppose such domination. Here I propose a theory of alternative and radical media that proceeds from these accounts. The theory will not be limited to political and 'resistance' media: the intention is to develop a model that will also be applicable to artistic and literary media (video, music, mail art, creative writing), as well as to the newer cultural forms such as zines and hybrid forms of electronic communication (ICTs). Even within a single area of alternative media there is much heterogeneity (of styles, of contributions, of perspectives).

We might consider this range of production as a Foucauldian 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges' (Foucault, 1980: 81). The range of voices that is able to speak directly about these 'subjugated knowledges' moves closer to a situation where 'the Other' is able to represent itself, where analogues of Spivak's (1988) 'native informants' can speak with their own 'irreducibly heterogeneous' voices. Alternative and radical media might then be considered a 'heteroglossic (multiple-voiced) text' (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, cited in Gauntlett, 1996: 91, and drawing on the dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin) that gives full, heterogeneous voice to all those Others. The model presented here goes further than the textual, however, finding heterogeneity, experimentation and transformation in the principles of organization, production and social relations within and across these media by considering the means of communication as socially and materially produced (Williams, 1980). This approaches Raymond Williams's earlier notion of democratic communication, the origins of which are 'genuinely multiple ... [where] all the sources have access to the common channels ... [and where those involved are able] to communicate, to achieve ... [a]ctive reception and living response' (Williams, 1963: 304).

In his study of zines in the US, Duncombe (1997: 15) talks of his attempts to 'discipline undisciplined subjects'. How well a single theoretical model may 'contain' such diversity will be one of its tests, along with an examination of its explanatory power. I will draw principally on the theoretical 'sketches' presented by three key studies: the politically radical media of the US and Europe in the 1970s and early 1980s (Downing, 1984), a study of British 'cultural alternatives' (Dickinson, 1997) and Duncombe's (1997) study of American zines. I will also use aspects of cultural theory (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993 and 1997).

Defining 'Alternative' and 'Radical'

The apparent looseness in defining terms in this field has led some critics to argue that there can be no meaningful definition of the term 'alternative media' (Abel, 1997). Whilst 'radical' encourages a definition that is primarily concerned with (often revolutionary) social change (and 'Radical' the same for a specific period of English history), 'alternative' is of more general application. Custom and practice within alternative media of the past decade appear to have settled on 'alternative' as the preferred word. As a blanket term its strength lies in the fact that it can

encompass far more than radical, or 'social change publishing' can; it can also include alternative lifestyle magazines, an extremely diverse range of zine publishing and the small presses of poetry and fiction publishers. To deploy 'alternative' as an analytical term, however, might afford us little more specificity than saying 'non-mainstream'. Some commentators appear to confuse the two terms.

I think it valuable to look in some detail at the competing definitions of the alternative media. The most conspicuous arguments put forward by both proponents and antagonists of the alternative media are inadequate, since neither offers a sophisticated understanding of the phenomena. In their place I propose a model of the alternative media that is as much concerned with how it is organized within its sociocultural context as with its subject matter. I shall begin, though, with that subject matter.

There is no shortage of studies to show how the mass media characterizes and represents specific social groups in ways suggesting that those groups are blameworthy for particular economic or social conditions, or that they hold extreme political or cultural views. Such groups rarely comprise the powerful and influential elites that routinely have access to such media. By contrast, other groups are marginalized and disempowered by their treatment in the mass media, treatment against which they generally have no redress. The Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1982, 1985, for example) have shown how trade unions, striking workers and the depiction of industrial relations are portrayed largely from the position of the powerful: the politicians, the company owners and their managers; workers and their representatives, on the other hand, are portrayed at best as irritants, at worst as saboteurs operating outside the bounds of logic and common sense. David Miller's (1994) study of the mainland reporting of Northern Ireland, Todd Gitlin's (1980) examination of the American media's characterizing of the American New Left in the 1960s and Marguerite J. Moritz's (1992) study of the American media's representation of gays and lesbians all point to extremely selective and prejudiced news reporting. I am less interested here in exploring the reasons for the social construction of mass media news (based on a complex of newsroom routines and rituals, conditions of production, notions of professionalism and objectivity, rehearsed standards of writing and editing, as well as accident and opportunity); rather I wish to emphasize the alternative press's responses to such construction as 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. In short, these values proceed from a wish to present other interpretations of stories – and to present stories not normally considered as news – which challenge the prevailing 'hierarchy of access' (Glasgow

University Media Group, 1976: 245) normally found in the media. An élite of experts and pundits tends to have easier and more substantial access to a platform for their ideas than do dissidents, protesters, minority groups and even 'ordinary people': 'powerful groups and individuals have privileged and routine entry into the news itself and to the manner and the means of its production' (Glasgow University Media Group, 1980: 114). The aim of that part of the alternative media interested in news remains simple: to provide access to the media for these groups on those groups' terms. This means developing media to encourage and normalize such access, where working people, sexual minorities, trade unions, protest groups – people of low status in terms of their relationship to elite groups of owners, managers and senior professionals – could make their own news, whether by appearing in it as significant actors or by creating news relevant to their situation.

John Fiske (1992d) has pointed out differences between the mainstream media and the alternative media in their selection of news and in the way that selection is made, particularly how the alternative media politicize the 'repression of events' (though Fiske is severely sceptical of the relevance of the alternative press to the quotidian concerns of ordinary people). This remains a continuing, defining characteristic of how much alternative media view their approach to their content. The US pressure group Project Censored produces an annual publication that contains the US's 'top censored stories'. Of the 25 stories presented as 'the news that didn't make the news' in its 1999 volume, only four had been covered by the American mainstream media. Since its founding in 1976, Project Censored has consistently proved the assumption that the alternative media is the home to stories that, for whatever reasons (government advice, commercial pressure from advertisers or cross-media ownership, an innate conservatism in news reporting, news priorities) do not appear in the mainstream media. Whilst no such project exists in the UK, it is possible to find similar examples here too. *Lobster*, the British journal of parapolitics, was the first to break the story about Colin Wallace and 'Operation Clockwork Orange', the MI5 plot to destabilize the Wilson Government. Well before *The Sunday Times* and *Nature* locked horns over the topic, the occasional alternative investigative magazine *Open Eye* published an annotated feature on Peter Duesberg and the AIDS/HIV controversy, which also included notes on where to find more on 'unconventional viewpoints' regarding AIDS. News on some British topics is only to be found abroad: the US journal *Covert Action Quarterly* has published an extensive feature on the targeting of Republican teenagers in Northern Ireland by the British military. In a media culture that appears less and less interested in in-depth investigative

reporting, alternative media provide information about and interpretations of the world which we might not otherwise see and information about the world that we simply will not find anywhere else. Alternative publications are at bottom more interested in the free flow of ideas than in profit.

Two American studies demonstrate the significance of alternative media for radical or unconventional content. Patricia Glass Schuman (1982: 3) argues that 'the alternative press – in whatever format – is our modern pamphleteer'. The alternative media employ methods of production and distribution, allied to an activist philosophy of creating 'information for action' timeously and rapidly. As such, they can deal with emerging issues. It is in the nature of such media to have these emerging issues at their very heart, since it is in the nature of activism to respond to social issues as they emerge. Schuman shows how rape as a social issue was first constructed as a 'sex crime' by an alternative press publication – a full year before the *New York Times* identified it as such, and four years before a major book publisher tackled the subject. In the second essay, Terri A. Kettering (1982) examines the issue of rape in more detail, comparing its coverage in the US alternative media and in mainstream publications, along with a similar study of the Iranian revolution of 1970s. In both cases she presents compelling evidence to confirm her thesis that 'in both timeliness and content, the alternative press can be shown to be a more dependable information resource' (1982: 7). Subsequently my own work (for example Atton, 1996a: Ch. 3) has presented further confirmation from a British perspective.

Such arguments bear out the second and third elements of a definition of the alternative press proposed by the Royal Commission on the Press (1977):

- 1 An alternative publication deals with the opinions of small minorities.
- 2 It expresses attitudes 'hostile to widely-held beliefs'.
- 3 It 'espouses views or deals with subjects not given regular coverage by publications generally available at newsagents'.

The Commission went on to emphasize the potential value of '[a] multiplicity of alternative publications [that] suggest satisfaction with an insufficiently diverse established media, and an unwillingness or inability on the part of major publications to provide space for the opinions of small minorities' (1977: 40). It also recognized the marginality of many of the presses, their small print runs and virtual invisibility in the marketplace.

For the most part this assessment rings true. However, the first element of the Commission's definition is contentious: the size of minority audiences is debatable (the alternative media have published and continue to

publish for some large minorities: the gay and lesbian media are one example). In the light of mass protest movements, it is arguable whether such views as are propounded in the alternative media are not in fact 'widely-held'. Similarly, John Fiske's (1992a: 47) assertion that much of the alternative media 'circulates among a fraction of the same educated middle classes as does official news' is also contentious. In the light of the accounts of contemporary alternative news production (for example, Dickinson, 1997; Minority Press Group, 1980a; Whitaker, 1981), his further assertion that this represents 'a struggle between more central and more marginalised allegiances within the power-bloc, rather than between the power-bloc and the people' is less credible. Indeed, this would be flatly contradicted by those whose aim in setting up an alternative news publication was to regain power over their lives, since they consider themselves emphatically not of the power bloc.

The editors of *Alternatives in Print* (the major current bibliographical reference work in this field) present three apparently simple criteria against which to test the publishers that appear in their pages. They hold that a publisher can be thought of as alternative if it meets at least one of the following:

- 1 The publisher has to be non-commercial, demonstrating that 'a basic concern for ideas, not the concern for profit, is the motivation for publication'.
- 2 The subject matter of their publications should focus on 'social responsibility or creative expression, or usually a combination of both'.
- 3 Finally, it is enough for publishers to define themselves as alternative publishers. (*Alternatives in Print*, 1980: vii)

Such apparently simple criteria present problems. Whilst non-commerciality is rare enough in mainstream publishing, no indication is given as to how a concern for ideas might be demonstrated. Non-profit-making publishers can easily include charities, some of whose aims might well conflict with what our authors have in mind in their second criterion. Although they do not provide examples of 'social responsibility' the authors are writing from a perspective where we would expect three issues to be prominent: the promotion of sustainable economics, of local communities and of local democracy, all in the face of the increasing globalization and concentration of commercial and political power into a nexus of national government and corporate interests. Unfortunately, the addition in this second criterion of 'creative expression, or usually a combination of both' first of all widens the definition of alternative media to include any type of artistic publication, then apparently narrows it to a category that is, in my experience, rarely encountered in this field: the

combination of creative expression and social responsibility. In my survey of British and American alternative presses, I was able to identify many examples of these two categories as separate, but none that combined them. Though the diversity of features that typify the zine might well include both in one cover, this is not to say that there is any articulation between them (Atton, 1996a). The third criterion, that it is 'enough for publishers to define themselves as alternative publishers' hardly needs comment. Since the rise of the zine in the 1980s, many mainstream publishers (mostly newspapers) have tried to capitalize on their attraction to a young readership largely disaffected with the mainstream media by issuing their own ersatz zines (as I shall show in Chapter 3). This last criterion makes no allowance for such deceit.

Finally, these three criteria – and we must bear in mind that they are meant to be separate criteria, for which a publication need only fulfil any one to be considered 'alternative' – ultimately lead us nowhere more precise than does the more common negative definition best summarized by Comedia: 'it is not the established order; it is not the capitalist system; it is not the mainstream view of a subject ...; or it is simply not the conventional way of doing something' (Comedia, 1984: 95).

Such vagueness of nature and intent leaves proponents of the alternative media and the presses themselves open, on occasion, to fierce criticism that questions their very existence. If they cannot even define what they do, why should they be considered as the special cases they so clearly see themselves to be? Richard Abel has argued that, 'what we are left with is a term so elastic as to be devoid of virtually any signification' (Abel, 1997: 79). He claims that the alternative media fail to offer any convincing display of uniqueness in any of three areas: on the grounds of content, on the championing of social change and on the grounds of economic freedom. A constructive definition of alternative media can begin with the presence of radical content, most often allied to the promotion of social change. Some would argue that the availability of Noam Chomsky's political writings at any branch of Waterstone's (when they were once the mainstay of the small press and the anarchist journal) proves that we simply do not need alternative media for the transmission of radical ideas. However, there remains much opportunity for radical content outside the mainstream: the British and American mass media are supremely uninterested in the radical politics of anarchism (in all its hues). Witness the demonization of the term 'anarchist' in mainstream media coverage of the May Day 2000 protests in London or in the coverage of the previous year's protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization. The equation of anarchism with thuggery (at worst with terrorism) is perennial (Atton, 1996b). By contrast the mass of anarchist journals,

magazines, newsletters and web sites offer accounts of working-class resistance and struggles against global capitalism that, whilst highly personalized and explicitly biased, present stories from under the police baton. The electronic archive Spunk Press (examined in more detail in Chapter 6) offers a rare blend of populist rhetoric, activist information and intellectual substance. We may choose not to subscribe to their views, yet they are available in such 'alternative' publications in the absence of case-making elsewhere. And is not the content of most football fanzines radical to some degree? They are certainly oppositional in large part. At their heart is a critique of corporatism as thoroughgoing as any we might find in an anarchist magazine. An editorial in *Not the View*, the Celtic supporters' fanzine, demonstrates this well enough: 'The problem with having the club run by financial investors is that when they look at Celtic they only see a bunch of assets which make money.... When we as fans see Celtic, however, we see something unique and magical.' However idealized the latter statement might be (and however contentious it might be to, say, a Rangers supporter), to redress the former would require a radical programme of social change. *Not the View* may not be setting out a five-year plan, but it is certainly critiquing the causes of the malaise. It is no surprise that the roots of many football fanzines have been seen to lie in the punk fanzine and that such fanzines have exhibited a similar oppositional stance. Some editors of punk fanzines have gone on to edit football fanzines. This argument sees homologies between two groups of fanzines based on their identity as sites of cultural contestation. *Not the View* demonstrates how popular culture can be politicized to social advantage. It is perhaps not too fanciful to see in the football fanzine a way of creating the kind of counter-hegemonic power bloc of which Stuart Hall has talked.

Tim O'Sullivan (1994: 10) introduces the notion of 'radical' social change as a primary aim of 'alternative' media, in that they 'avowedly reject or challenge established and institutionalised politics, in the sense that they all advocate change in society, or at least a critical reassessment of traditional values'. Elsewhere, in defining independent production (which itself can be construed as a part of alternative media) he notes a further two characteristics that set alternative media practice apart from the mainstream:

1. a democratic/collectivist process of production; and
 2. a commitment to innovation or experimentation in form and/or content.
- (O'Sullivan et al., 1994: 205)

For O'Sullivan, alternative media argue for social change, seek to involve people (citizens, not elites) in their processes and are committed to

innovation in form and content. This set of aims takes into account not only content, but presentation and organizational procedures. It defines alternative media positively and usefully. With these considerations in mind, we can consider Michael Traber's notion of alternative media where:

the aim is to change towards a more equitable social, cultural and economic whole *in which the individual is not reduced to an object (of the media or the political powers)* but is able to find fulfilment as a total human being. (Traber, 1985: 3; emphasis added)

Traber argues that the conventions of the mass media marginalize the role of the 'simple man and woman', foregrounding instead the rich, the powerful and the glamorous. The former are regarded only as observers or marginal commentators on events (as in the 'vox pop' interview); they achieve prominence only when they are the actors in a situation that is bounded by values based on, for instance, conflict or the bizarre. He divides alternative media into two sectors: advocacy media and grassroots media.¹ The alternative advocacy media adopt very different news values from the mass media, introducing 'alternative social actors [such as] the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised and indeed the ordinary manual labourer, woman, youth and child as the main subjects of [their] news and features' (Traber, 1985: 2).

It is the grassroots media, Traber argues, that offer the most thorough version of alternative news values. They are produced by the same people whose concerns they represent, from a position of engagement and direct participation. This need not preclude the involvement of professionals, but they will be firmly in the role of advisers, their presence intended to enable 'ordinary people' to produce their own work, independent of professional journalists and editors. Traber is arguing from his experience as a journalist and journalism tutor in India, Zambia and Zimbabwe. His primary concerns are with the production of news and information in areas of these countries where the mass media (if it exists) does not penetrate, but also to provide a counter to the often state-run media or very limited channels for the dissemination of news. This counter, Traber argues, is best provided by local people, often working with a small number of professional journalists. These are not there to set agendas or even to insist on specific working practices; they are there to assist local people in developing their own networks of news-gathering, offer support and instil confidence in them as reporters, writers and editors. Traber is arguing that when media production is placed in the hands of ordinary people the types of news and the style in which it is presented will be more relevant, more 'useful' and more appropriate to the communities in

which such news is produced and distributed. Traber presents a set of alternative news values bound up not just with what is considered as news, but also with approaches to news-gathering and with who writes such news and how such news is presented.

This model can be seen as a form of community media. Similar concerns were at the heart of the alternative community newspapers that sprang up in the early 1970s throughout Britain. Community media have at their heart the concepts of access and participation:

a conviction that the means of communication and expression should be placed in the hands of those people who clearly need to exercise greater control over their immediate environment.... Once this happens, a process of internal dialogue in the community can take place, providing opportunities for developing alternative strategies. (Nigg and Wade, 1980: 7)

A leaflet distributed to publicize the launch of the *Liverpool Free Press* in 1971 proclaimed its difference from mainstream newspapers:

it's not part of a big newspaper chain and it's not trying to make money. The Free Press believes that as long as newspapers are run by businessmen for profit, there will be news that is not reported. The Free Press aims to report this news. In addition, it tries to provide information which community groups, factory workers, tenants and others will not only find interesting – but useful. The Free Press does not represent the views of any political party or organisation. The paper has no editor or owner – it is controlled by the people who work for it (a group of unpaid volunteers). The Free Press really is a different kind of newspaper. (Whitaker, 1981: 103)

This was certainly a different approach from that taken by the mass media, but the *Liverpool Free Press* was also one in a long historical line of newspapers that sought to be free from commercial considerations and to provide 'ordinary people' with news and information that was directly useful to them in their daily lives. The publicity material for the *Liverpool Free Press* identified three prime elements that it shared with many alternative media ventures: commercial independence (anti-commerciality, even) and the journalistic freedom this was felt to bring; editorial independence from political parties and other organizations; and the empowerment of specific communities of interest (which in the case of the *Liverpool Free Press* and many other similar papers is also a local community).

As an unnamed participant in a seminar led by Noam Chomsky put it: 'by alternative I'm referring to media that are or could be citizen-controlled as opposed to state- or corporate-controlled' (quoted in Achbar, 1994: 197). By such control not only freedom from corporate influence may be obtained, but also the freedom to publish on subjects directly *useful* to citizens and to involve those same citizens in their production.

Whilst the content of such media is clearly important, my concern here is to examine theories of alternative media that privilege the processes by which people are empowered through their direct involvement in alternative media production. Stephen Duncombe has said that 'the culture of consumption can neutralise all dissenting voices' by 'assimilating their content' (1997: 127). In other words, it is not the simple content of a text that is evidence of its radical nature; Duncombe is arguing what many alternative publishers would also argue: that it is the *position* of the work with respect to the relations of production that gives it its power and enables it to avoid recuperation by the mere duplication of its ideas. This is not to deny the significance of content, rather it is to present it within a productive context that can be the radical equal of content in the pursuit of social change. Here I follow Duncombe in his argument that 'the medium of zines is not just a message to be received, but a model of participatory cultural production and organisation to be acted upon' (Duncombe, 1997: 129).

In arguing for social change alternative media may then not only be understood as producing instrumental discourses (theoretical, expository, organizational) to provoke change: following Duncombe, they are able to enact social change through their own means of production, which are themselves positioned in relation to the dominant means of production. Position and attitude both may argue for social change at a number of levels. The change that is looked for need not be structural on a national or supra-national level; it may be local, even individual: for Duncombe even the personal act of becoming a zine editor is a social transformation, regardless of how few copies of the zine are sold (or even made). If the personal may be political, the personal may be of social consequence.

At this stage it is useful to develop a set of characteristics that proceed from the above definitions and place these, rather than definitional competition, at the heart of a theoretical framework. Definitions, in any case, have historical and cultural contingencies. 'Alternative' in West Coast counter-cultural terms invokes 'alternative therapies' and 'New Age' thinking. 'Radical' for some can be as much to do with avant-garde artistic activity as with politics. For zine writers, neither term may be preferable: the even looser 'DIY publishing' might replace both. Does 'radical' always entail 'opposition'? Downing talks of 'radical media' (1984), an 'alternative public realm' (1988), 'alternative media' (1995) and 'radical alternative media' (2001), but he also refers to 'counter-information' and 'popular oppositional culture'. His discussion of Negt and Kluge's (1972/1983) work raises Gramsci's notion of 'counter-hegemony' which, Downing implies, is also a driving force behind the contemporary media

he is examining. We might consider the entire range of alternative and radical media as representing challenges to hegemony, whether on an explicitly political platform, or employing the kinds of indirect challenges through experimentation and the transformation of existing roles, routines, emblems and signs that Hebdige (1979) locates at the heart of counter-hegemonic subcultural style. Jakubowicz (1991) finds in 'alternative' a wider meaning: not simply sects or narrow special interests, but a wide-ranging and influential sphere that may include all manner of reformist groups and institutions. Yet its influence is significantly mitigated by state censorship (since its publications are very visible) and its own policy (an interest in long-term survival) prevents it from advocating widespread social change. This last is reserved for an 'oppositional', revolutionary public sphere.

From a sociological point of view, there is a discrepancy between what 'alternative' signifies and what 'oppositional' (and what we might consider its cognates: 'counter-information' and 'counter-hegemony') signifies. It is instructive here to refer to Raymond Williams's interpretation of them:

Williams made a vital distinction between alternative and oppositional practices. Alternative culture seeks a place to coexist within the existing hegemony, whereas oppositional culture aims to replace it. For instance, there is a world of difference between a minority 'back-to-nature' cult and the ecology movement's global reach. (McGuigan, 1992: 25)

Culturally and politically, then, such media as defined by Downing as 'alternative' and by Jakubowicz as 'oppositional' are perhaps best considered as oppositional in intent, having social change at their heart. This accords with Williams's hope that the culture of the new social movements, although termed an 'alternative' culture, was 'at its best ... always an oppositional culture' (Williams, 1983: 250). In his study of radical media in the US and mainland Europe, Downing (1984) offers one of the few detailed essays into a theory of the media of these oppositional cultures.

Downing's Theory of Radical Media

Downing proposes a set of 'alternatives in principle' that draw on anarchist philosophy, though they do not presuppose any explicit anarchist tendency within any particular publication (indeed, none of Downing's case

studies are of anarchist publications; most might be broadly characterized as radical socialist). Instead, he presents these principles in contrast to 'transmission belt socialism', which, he argues, rather than liberating media, constrains them by demanding unquestioning allegiance to the Party, its intelligentsia and the institutions of the State. Revolutionary socialist media, Downing holds, whatever their totalizing claims against the monopolies of the capitalist mass media, are hardly exemplars of media democracy in action: they are as hierarchical, limiting and bound by authority as are the mass media of capitalism. Whilst interested primarily in political media, he is not prescriptive about content: rather he privileges process over product, organization and engagement over words on the page and circulation figures. He argues:

- 1 the importance of encouraging contributions from as many interested parties as possible, in order to emphasise the 'multiple realities' of social life (oppression, political cultures, economic situations);
- 2 that radical media, while they may be partisan, should never become a tool of a party or intelligentsia;
- 3 that radical media at their most creative and socially significant privilege movements over institutions;
- 4 that within the organisation of radical media there appears an emphasis on prefigurative politics. (Downing, 1984: 17)

Downing was writing before the radical transformation of the Communist countries after 1989 and his arguments against the Party and the State are less urgent today. Neither does Downing offer an historical perspective that stretches back further than the 1960s: the anarchist presses of the US and Europe and the varieties of radical (and Radical) newspapers before them remain untouched, their 'alternatives in principle' unconsidered. Downing also ignores zine culture and the Party newspaper. In his extensively revised edition of this work, Downing (2001) ranges much more widely through history and culture, drawing richly for example on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political cartoons in Britain, German labour songs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and nineteenth-century African American public festivals. There is not space here to engage with all these manifestations of radical media that take us well beyond the print and radio media which were Downing's earlier concerns. It is worth, however, examining Downing's updated theoretical perspectives as they proceed from and inform his historical instances. Downing stresses features of his earlier model, particularly the emphasis on multiple realities of oppression (once more he draws on anarchist philosophy, an approach I also find valuable and to which I return throughout this book); organizational models that suggest

prefigurative politics; and the privileging of movements over institutions. This last informs his entire approach to the extent that he considers radical media as the media of social movements. As in his 1984 work, this means that single-person or small-group ventures such as fanzines and zines are ignored, as are what some (Downing, amongst them?) might term 'weaker' forms of alternative media such as the personal web page. His approach is reflected in his choice of terminology: he prefers 'radical alternative media' which, he argues, is a more precise term than 'alternative media' ('alternative media is almost oxymoronic. Everything is, at some point, alternative to something else': Downing, 2001: ix). For me his designation signals an interest in considering media as radical to the extent that they explicitly shape political consciousness through collective endeavour (after all, 'rebellious communication and social movements' is the subtitle of his revised work). As we have seen, Downing is now open to a far wider range of media than he was in his 1984 edition, yet his model remains limited by his emphasis on social movements. His nuanced arguments draw on a richer, more subtly layered account of radical media than his earlier work. He brings together considerations of an alternative public sphere, counter-hegemony and resistance, the place of the Gramscian organic intellectual in such media, the role and nature of audiences – all of which I also examine here for the same reason: to move away from the futile 'hunt for sole [social] agents' (Downing, 2001: 98) and to place radical and alternative media as complex 'agents of developmental power, not simply as counterinformation institutions, and certainly not as a vapid cluster of passing gnats' (2001: 45). Downing acknowledges that his earlier binarism (between radical and mainstream media) and 'antibinarism' (seeing in radical media a way forward beyond the then dominant opposition between Western capitalist media and the Soviet model) prevented him from seeing more finely gradated positions, such as the possibility of democratizing mass media or the occasional, radical deployment of mass media. Yet his striving for a more 'impure', hybridized version of radical media is left unfulfilled by his focus on social movements. Hybridity and purity as problematics of alternative media are certainly accessible through an examination of new social movement media, but they can also be approached through media that accommodate themselves rather more cosily with mass media and mass consumption (as in my examination of Jody LaFerriere's personal web site, *The Big DumpTruck!*, in Chapter 3), where a celebration of the banal and the mundane replace political consciousness-raising. The limits of Downing's approach also extend to his coverage of artistic production as an instance of radical alternative media: he considers street theatre and performance art only as media

practices of social movements. This leaves no space for the performance art of, say, the Vienna actionists (Green, 1999), or the 'demotic avant-garde' that characterizes the work of British artist Stewart Home (as presented for example in Home, 1995). (Though Downing does make an important point when he reminds us that by considering art, media and communication together we 'do not fall into the trap of segregating information, reasoning and cognition from feeling, imagination, and fantasy' 2001: 52.)

There are resonances with Downing's principles of 'rebellious communication' in the Radical reformist papers that flourished in England from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Amongst these we find a redrawing of technical and professional roles and responsibilities, and social and cultural transformations, such as: (1) clandestine, underground distribution networks; (2) 'pauper management'; (3) journalists seeing themselves 'as activists' rather than as professionals'; (4) an interest in 'expos[ing] the dynamics of power and inequality rather than report[ing] "hard news"' (Curran and Seaton, 1997: 15); (5) developing a close relationship with readers – to the extent where many papers were supplied with reports written by readers (such as those by 'worker correspondents' – *Workers' Life*, 1928/1983 and 'reader-writers' – Atton, 1999a); (6) close links with radical organizations, highlighting the value of 'combination' and organized action; and (7) the key role of radical media in a working-class public sphere (Eley, 1992). At this time 'the militant press sustained a radical sub-culture' (Curran and Seaton, 1997: 20). Similar parallels may be found in the anarchist presses of the turn of the century (Hopkin, 1978; Quail, 1978) and of the 1990s (Atton, 1999a), where they also resonate with a larger, non-aligned network of social movement publications centred on radical environmentalism (Carey, 1998; Searle, 1997). This is not to ignore the historical and cultural contingencies of these practices, nor to homogenize their political content or their aims. Alternative media – like any forms of cultural production – and their creators are positioned, 'enunciated': 'we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific' (Hall, 1990: 222). Social relations, forms of technology and styles of discourse (for example) and their combination are likely to be 'available' for transformation within alternative media at particular places and times. Whilst the bracketing-off of processes (and even content) might afford us conceptual clarity, the better to look closely at what we mean by 'alternative media', we must not forget to recouple them with history and culture when dealing empirically.

Downing's principles also have relevance to the products of 'zine culture' (Duncombe, 1997). This invites further theoretical consideration

regarding the radicality of process over content, a consideration which encourages us to account for alternative and radical media with content that is not explicitly political or that has an avowedly non-political content, where the processes of production enable the 'position' of the media and its producers to be radicalized.

Beyond the Political: attitude versus position in alternative and radical media

The separation of attitude and position has been explored by Stephen Duncombe in his work on American zines. For him, it is not the simple content of a text that is evidence of the radical nature of a zine. The content of many zines is hardly politically or socially transforming in itself. Their value proceeds not simply from their content – that is, not from the work's 'attitude toward the oppressive relations of production that mark our society, but [from] the work's position within these relations' (Duncombe, 1996: 315). This draws on Walter Benjamin's idea of 'the author as producer' (Benjamin, 1934/1982) which Duncombe goes on to apply to the production of zines. He finds three characteristics that distinguish the production of zines from that of mainstream magazines and that exemplify their position within 'the oppressive relations of production' rather than simply their attitude towards them. First, zine producers are amateurs; second, their product is cheaply produced and promoted by multiple-copying at no profit; third, the distinction between producer and consumer is increasingly blurred.

In his original text, however, Benjamin's analysis goes further than Duncombe takes it. Benjamin argues that an author's works must have 'an organizing function, and in no way must their organizational usefulness be confined to their value as propaganda' (Benjamin, 1934/1982: 216). The development of the zine has encouraged many readers to produce their own publications. Zines developed as vehicles of personal expression; a network of zines arose where horizontal communication between editors and readers became perhaps as important as the production of the zine itself. The very format of the zine – with design and production values that owed more to the copy shop than the printing press – encouraged readers to become editors themselves. As Duncombe notes, 'emulation – turning your readers into writers – is elemental to the zine world' (1996: 123). He draws on Benjamin for support: culture 'is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, readers

or spectators into collaborators' (quoted in Duncombe, 1997: 127). Once again, we can find resonances beyond the immediate genre. An extreme example of this may be found not in the zines of the 1980s (which are Duncombe's focus) but from the counter-culture of the 1960s: an issue of the New York underground paper *Other Scenes* once offered an entirely blank set of pages for readers as a do-it-yourself publishing project (Lewis, 1972).

Zine culture indicates how radicality can be further located within production values and cultural values. Hebdige extended Kristeva's understanding of 'radical' to account for the punk fanzine's interest in 'the destruction of existing codes and the formulation of new ones' (see Hebdige, 1979: 119). Here is an artefact expressive of a subculture (some argue it is constitutive of a subculture: 'Zines are punk,' declared an anonymous editor of *Hippycore* – Rutherford, 1992: 3). The punk fanzine stands for much more than an aesthetic preference; the radical bricolage that characterizes the visual language of punk fanzines (Triggs, 1995), its graphics and typography can be seen as 'homologous with punk's subterranean and anarchic style' (Hebdige, 1979: 112). Its use of the photocopier as a liberating agent for the tyro editor became central to the 'copy culture' that grew out of punk over the next two decades (*New Observations*, 1994).

Towards a Model of Alternative and Radical Media

Any model must consider not simply the differences in content and medium/carrier (and its dissemination and delivery) but how communication as a social (rather than simply an informational) process is construed. The question: What is radical about radical media? then becomes two questions: What is radical about the ways in which the vehicle (the medium) is transformed? and: What is radical about the communication processes (as instances of social relations) employed by that media? Dahlgren (1997) has observed that the focus of media research continues to move away from the 'classic steps of the communication chain', that is: (1) the sender and the circumstances of production; (2) the form and content of the message; (3) the processes and impact of reception and consumption. This is in significant part due to the 'awkward fit' of such steps with questions surrounding the production of meaning by media audiences. A model of alternative and radical media must account not

only for active audiences in the Fiskean sense of creating 'oppositional readings' of mainstream media products (Fiske, 1992a) but also for 'mobilized audiences' – as well as notions of horizontal linkage, reader-writers and extremely democratic organizational structures. Here the fit with dominant communication models becomes even more awkward.

A communications perspective on alternative media is useful as long as we are able to keep in mind that its value will, as Dahlgren argues, be best realized by cultural interrogation. As a set of communication processes within (sub)cultural formations, alternative media privilege the involved audience over the merely informed (Lievrouw, 1994); that audience partakes of the media from a social point of view, not merely as a 'public'. What we are calling 'alternative media' can be thought of as being organized along similar lines to Benjamin's desideratum. They typically go beyond simply providing a platform for radical or alternative points of view: they emphasize the organization of media to enable wider social participation in their creation, production and dissemination than is possible in the mass media. Raymond Williams (1980: 54) highlighted three aspects of communication as foci for this realignment: 'skills, capitalization and controls'. In an explicit echo of Williams, James Hamilton (2001a) has argued that to distinguish alternative media from the mass media the former must be deprofessionalized, decapitalized and deinstitutionalized. In short, they must be available to ordinary people without the necessity of professional training, without excessive capital outlay and they must take place in settings other than media institutions or similar systems.

The model I propose here deals with similar concerns: social relations stand to be transformed through radical communications processes at the same time as the media (the vehicles) themselves stand to be transformed (visually, aurally, distributively). In this model, roles and responsibilities are no longer discrete; there is much overlap and transformation of notions such as professionalism, competence and expertise. No existing communication model offers an easy fit with such transformations. Robert Darnton's (1990) reconfiguration of the communication chain as a circuit gets closer than does the classical communication chain to the features and relations that might illuminate the social processes at work in radical media production and reception. His model at least acknowledges technical and professional roles such as those of publishers, printers and distributors.

Perhaps Darnton's circuit is over-utilitarian: its focus is on roles and responsibilities rather than on processes, with cultural and social determinants given the status of mere influences. His model emphasizes the dominant and discrete roles of, for example, writers, publishers,

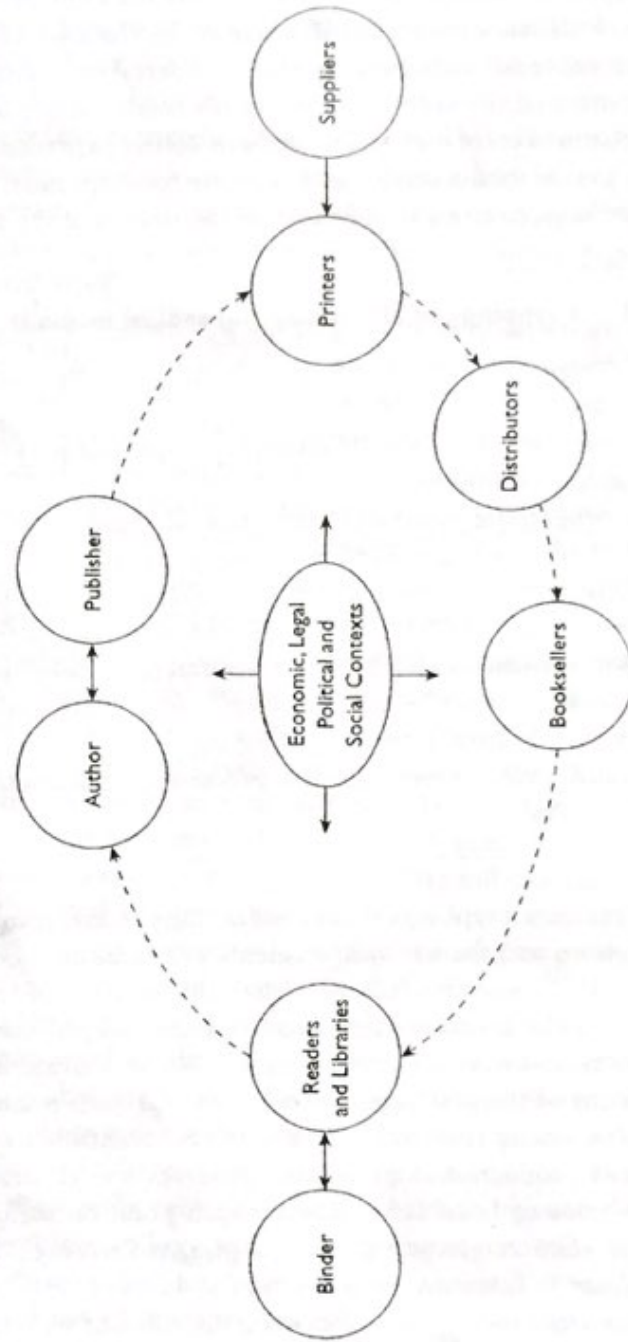



Figure 1 Darnton's communication circuit (after Darnton, 1990)

distributors and readers. In radical and alternative media these roles are often confused and conflated, at times to an extreme degree: in the case of a zine, the writer and publisher is typically the same person, as well as being its designer, printer and distributor. In the case of a collectively organized paper, all such duties might be undertaken at different times by every member of the collective. Darnton's roles provide a poor fit with the transformed roles and social relations (often experimental and shifting) that radical media invoke and promote (perhaps most remarkably in the reappearance throughout history of the notion of the reader-writer).

Box 1 A typology of alternative and radical media

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1. Content (politically radical, socially/culturally radical); news values
 2. Form – graphics, visual language; varieties of presentation and binding; aesthetics
 3. Reprographic innovations/adaptations – use of mimeographs, IBM typesetting, offset litho, photocopiers
 4. 'Distributive use' (Atton, 1999b) – alternative sites for distribution, clandestine/invisible distribution networks, anti-copyright
 5. Transformed social relations, roles and responsibilities – reader-writers, collective organization, de-professionalization of e.g., journalism, printing, publishing
 6. Transformed communication processes – horizontal linkages, networks

Box 1 presents a typology that draws on the preceding analysis of existing definitions and theory. In it, elements 1–3 indicate products and 4–6 processes. It is these six elements that form the basis of the model presented here. The broad division into products and processes does imply independence, however. The social processes will activate and inform the development of the products to the extent that each position in a communications circuit such as Darnton's will be amenable to radicalization in terms of products and processes, resources and relations. Using the model it becomes possible to consider each point on such a circuit as a dimension of communication, of social process ('writing', 'printing', 'distributing', etc.). 'Positions' becomes too fixed a term for them, since there may be overlap; for example, between the roles of writer, editor, publisher and distributor of a zine. As dimensions, roles and responsibilities can comprise a constellation of activities and relationships. An alternative publication might then be interrogated as to its radicality in terms of its

multi-dimensional character, a perspective that privileges the overlap and intersection of dimensions. Here are two examples.

First, a radical approach to distribution can entail making use of skills and sites belonging to groups and communities normally excluded from mainstream modes of distribution in an alternative public sphere (Downing, 1988), as well as making use of transformed notions of intellectual property (such as 'anti-copyright': Atton, 1999b). These in turn suggest forms of reprography that facilitate further production by 'readers' (such as the *Open Pamphlet* series from the US, printed so as to open out to A4 to facilitate photocopying) who themselves become hybrid printers, finishers and distributors.

Second, the position of a solitary agent who is writer, editor and printer should be explained not simply as the outcome of a dilettante interest in trying out new jobs or as a result of lack of resources (though it may be these as well), but from a perspective that transforms these positions in relation to established notions and standards of professionalism, competence and 'possibility'. At the same time the roles have the power to transform one another by their coming together (whether by mutual abrasion or a more 'liquid' interpenetration). Each dimension need not be limited to activities and relationships; it can also include the products of activities and technological transformations that lead to those products (aesthetics, reprographic technologies, innovations in distribution). Dimensions that intersect can generate counter-hegemonic strategies of ownership (ownership of capital and intellectual property), power relations within the media and its audience. Here we locate Downing's notions of lateral linkages and the empowerment of active audiences through those linkages (Downing, 1984, 2001) and those relations which engage with prevalent forces, especially regarding the status of creators and producers in comparison with equivalent roles in prevalent culture (the dominant public sphere versus the alternative public sphere).

Is it possible to make any comparative assessment of radicality across various instances of alternative and radical media? How do we construe a publication that tends to radicality in differing degrees in differing dimensions? What is our scale for measuring those degrees? For instance, a publication may be radical in its organization, but conservative in respect of those who write for it – one that employs only professional journalists yet in a collective decision-making organization. Within each dimension there is complexity: within a reprographic ('printing') dimension a radical use of reprographic technology (the photocopier by zine producers, for instance) may be present along with a new social relation (an amateur writer working also as a printer): this presents a transformed power relation in contrast to the prevailing professional culture of printing.

We need also to be alert to historical or geographical contingency: the absence of radicality in any dimension may not limit a medium's revolutionary potential: the dimension may not be 'available' for radicalization at that time or place, or in that culture. The authorship need not be concerned solely with political radicality, but equally or instead with cultural content. This encourages us to approach these media from the perspective of 'mixed radicalism', once again paying attention to hybridity rather than expecting consistent adherence to a 'pure', fixed set of criteria: '[i]f ... radical alternative media have one thing in common, it is that they break somebody's rules, although rarely all of them in every respect' (Downing, 2001: xi). Despite these difficulties, I hope that my model avoids homogenizing alternative and radical media as the media of radical politics, of publications with minority audiences, of amateur writing and production. It suggests an area of cultural production that – whilst it lacks the explanatory power of a totalizing concept – enables us to consider its various manifestations and activations as part of an autonomous field (in the Bourdieusian sense) that is constituted by its own rules.

Alternative Media as a Field of Production

How appropriate is it to consider alternative and radical media as a field? Bourdieu's (1993) field of cultural production does recognize a space for avant-garde artistic activities, which may comprise some aspects of alternative and radical media practice (independent record labels, mail art, artists' books). Fiske has suggested that the systems of production and of distribution within fan culture comprise a 'shadow cultural economy' (Fiske, 1992b: 33). For all that it may admit, the cultural field is perhaps too limited: it is after all concerned with literary and artistic values of production. This is despite the ability of Bourdieu's field of cultural production to encompass 'extremes' of creative activity. For Bourdieu, though, these take place within the sector of the field concerned with restricted production, to be distinguished from an opposing sector of large-scale production. One purpose in positing an entire 'oppositional field' – rather than attempting to accommodate contestation within any existing formulation – is that Bourdieu's field seems inhospitable to certain notions of radicality. Within alternative media production are numerous avant-gardes that confound the dichotomy of restricted/large-scale sectors. Mail art (Held, 1991) might be thought of as a democratized version of restricted

artistic production, where elite art practices (such as the limited edition and invitations to group exhibitions) are opened up to as many as wish to contribute (*Global Mail* is a zine devoted to calls to such 'open' exhibitions). In this arena at least, the value of the limited edition work of art is seriously eroded by its being opened up to producers/agents that are typically drawn from the public for large-scale cultural production. Restricted field practices are radically repositioned by being transformed under demotic conditions more usually associated with large-scale production strategies and techniques. We might also consider even the radicalization of plagiarism in such a 'demotic restricted field'. Bourdieu (1993: 128) sees plagiarism in large-scale production as an indicator of 'indifference or conservatism': in the hands of an avowedly working-class autodidact such as Stewart Home (a further example of the composite artist-author-editor-publisher) plagiarism is radicalized as a demotic avant-garde (for example Home, 1995). A demotic avant-garde appropriates and repositions capital and authority directly from high culture, radically re-legitimizing an artistic practice from that legitimate culture.

More recently, Bourdieu (1997) has proposed a journalistic field. It is difficult to see how alternative and radical media could fit into this formulation: as Marliere (1998: 223) has shown, the field itself is too undifferentiated, too monolithic 'to provide a realistic account of a plural and heterogeneous reality' of dominant journalistic practices, let alone alternatives to them. There may be some value in considering it as a field in its own right, as an oppositional counterpart to Bourdieu's dominant journalistic field. Again, though, the multi-dimensionality of the model suggests a conceptual space wider than journalism *tout court* – are zines journalism? What is the relationship of anarchist web sites and Internet discussion lists to journalism? The range of media products and activities available to the present model encourages a hybridized field that comprises cultural (artistic, literary) practices and journalistic practices and that admits of extremes of transformation in products, processes and relations between the two. In this chapter I have proposed definitional and theoretical models that privilege the transformatory potential of the media as reflexive instruments of communication practices in social networks: there is a focus on process and relation. The model does at least encourage interrogation across the range of production in this field, the better to place its constellations of products, activities, institutions, movements, moments and cultures in structured, explanatory settings. In what follows I shall examine in more detail those transformations, particularly those in the processes and relations that create the popular practices of what I am calling 'alternative media'. I shall begin by addressing alternative media approaches to the economics of production and the cultural products and formations that have arisen to realize them.

Note

1. Traber's terminology reflects his background in development and alternative journalism in the South; 'advocacy' and 'grassroots' are terms little used in British media studies, for instance. This twin role of the alternative press has also been noted by Elizabeth Fox (1997) in her survey of media and culture in Latin America, where she highlights the organizational and educational value of such media. The term 'grassroots' is more commonly used to define such media as are described in Tomaselli and Louw's (1991) studies of the alternative media in South Africa. These terms are used in the present study simply to clarify two trends in alternative media, the better to analyse one; there is no intention to imply sociopolitical similarities between the conditions of production in the South and those in Britain.