

## Alternative media: a viable option for Southern Africa?

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### Introduction

What are “alternative media” an *alternative* to? That is the question. For the answer, we attempt a historically and culturally based definition of alternative media. We then give some case studies to illustrate the efficacy of such media forms, apart from highlighting the problems associated with them. We conclude that alternative media emerge to deal with specific ideological projects and, as such, must be viewed as satisfying a specific need at a specific point in time.

### A conceptualisation of alternative media

The concept of alternative media is related to normative media theory. According to Fourie (2001, page 269), normative media theories are those ideal views from different perspectives and within different conditions about the role of the press in society. Among those normative theories which underpin the conceptual basis of alternative media are the *development media theory* and the *democratic participant media theory* (in McQuail 1987).

More often, alternative media serve a specific ideological or political purpose. This is largely because they seem to correlate with some socio-political dissatisfaction among groups of people. Wigston (1994), in reflecting on community radio, points out that “community” implies a grassroots approach to the operation of the station within a specifically identifiable group of people, with an implied criticism of mainstream media, brought about by the marginalisation of that particular group. It is for this reason, for example, that we can speak of an “alternative press” emerging during the apartheid regime in South Africa (Tomaselli & Louw 1991), with specific ideological-political needs to satisfy. Within the broad category of “alternative press” can be discerned such other “alternatives” as the “progressive-alternative community press” and the “right-alternative press” (Tomaselli & Louw 1991, page 6). This illustrates the variety of alternative media systems and their historical specificity.

By way of definition, then, an alternative medium is one that answers to the following features:

- Individual citizens and minority groups have rights of access to media and rights to be served by media according to their own determination of need.
- The organisation and content of media should not be subject to centralised political or state bureaucratic control.
- Media should exist primarily for their audiences and not for media organisations, professionals or the clients of media.
- Groups, organisations and local communities should have their own media.
- Small-scale, interactive and participative media forms are better than large-scale, one-way, professionalised media.
- Certain social needs relating to mass media are not adequately expressed through individual consumer demands, nor through the state and its major institutions.
- Communication is too important to be left to professionals (in Lewis 1993, page 13).

### Alternative media in history

Marie Trigona (2004) notes that alternative media tend to emerge during “spectacular” happenings. The historical contextualisation of alternative media is clearly illustrated in the cases of Bolivia and South Africa. In Bolivia, for example, community radio emerged largely to uplift people's cultural values in the face of oppression. As O'Connor (1990) puts it, community radio is a *sine qua non* of cultural resistance, particularly in times of military

control *vis-à-vis* union activity. In such times, he argues, community radio forms a “network of resistance against the approaching armed forces, broadcasts decisions made at public and organisational meetings and allows union leaders and members, women and students to offer advice, encouragement or criticism” (O’Connor 1990, page 104).

In South Africa, the “alternative press” emerged to perform specific ideological-political functions. As Johnson (1991, page 24) observes, the following four basic considerations could define a publication as “alternative” within the context of the apartheid past:

- That it is ‘non-commercial’, in the sense that the profit-motive is not the primary criterion for its establishment;
- That its *raison d’être* is the fulfilment of a role within resistance in South Africa;
- That it sees the established commercial media as not fulfilling needs or reflecting the aspirations of the majority of South Africans; and
- That it is aimed at an audience of which a significant proportion is black.

It is clear, then, that alternative media serve as ideological apparatuses, exist in specific cultural and historical contexts, and respond to specific social, political, economic and cultural challenges. It must be pointed out that alternative media, as forms of democratic media, have tended to emphasise the notion of “community participation” (Berrigan 1979, pages 8-9; Rahim 1996, pages 127-133).

#### **Alternative media in the age of globalisation**

The historical contextualisation of alternative media can also be located in the 1990s, as a form of organised civil-societal response to the unleashing of global influences on Southern Africa. The key features of globalisation included the liberalisation and deregulation of media markets in the sub-region. In most cases, the resultant privatisation of media outlets stressed *profit* at the expense of *people*. As a consequence, there was a steady marginalisation of the voices of grassroots communities from mainstream media. Among such groups were women, the poor, the disabled, etc. Conceivably, such marginalisation would result in such groups forming fulcrums of resistance and affirming their identities within the context of alternative media. In fact, according to Reddy ([Sa]), “the media are listed as one of ten major obstacles to women’s advancement.”

Within the context of globalisation, then, alternative media become a means of organising people to initiate localised and particularised responses to forms of marginalisation brought about by the often unintended consequences of the liberalisation, commercialisation, privatisation and internationalisation of mainstream media in the transitional Southern African societies.

#### **Case studies of the transformative power of alternative media**

To start with, here is an example of an alternative media initiative in the 1970s. Within the context of community communication as an alternative media system, Berrigan points to the so-called Audio Cassette Listening Forums (ACLF) Project conducted during 1977-8 in Tanzania. These forums involved the use of audiocassette recorders to reach and involve rural women. The overall aim of the project was to “provide a development programme that enabled women to recognise the importance of their role and at the same time encourage implementation of self-determined action plans primarily related to health and nutrition” (Berrigan 1979, page 48).

In practice, the ACLF evolved into Freire's model for 'dialogical communication', the goal of which was to “stimulate critical, self-generated opinion messages from the populace so that messages would flow in two directions. The government, the people 'in control' were to become responding as well as a directing body. The dichotomy between those who possess knowledge to 'extend' and those who 'do not know and must be taught' is thus

eliminated. The emphasis of development was changed from one which concentrated on economic growth to one which centred on 'people participation' in all aspects of development" (Berrigan 1979, page 29).

The second case study is the so-called "radio listening clubs" project implemented by the Panos Institute Southern Africa in Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe from 1996 onwards. This model involved rural women organising themselves into "radio listening clubs", whereupon the Panos Institute trained the women in basic radio production and provided them with radio cassette recorders. The women then engaged in community discussions about their community needs and problems. These discussions were taped and forwarded to a producer at the partner radio station. The producer listened to the tapes, solicited for answers from relevant policy-makers, and edited the women's questions together with the policy-makers' responses into a programme. The programme was then broadcast to the rest of the country. The women would listen to this programme and, if they so wished, would engage in more discussion about how their issues had been dealt with.

The fact that the women are involved as *producers* means that this production is an alternative to the otherwise top-down, professionalised system of media production typical of mainstream media in general.

Kitty Warnock (2001) conducted an evaluation of these clubs in Malawi and Zambia to establish their efficacy. She found that the clubs do "empower" their members. This empowerment was defined by the respondents in a variety of ways, such as (i) material gain, (ii) self-confidence, (iii) communicative ability, (iv) community solidarity, etc.

A third case study is community radio. The phenomenon of community radio existed as 'pirate' radio prior to the 1990s. This was the case with Bush Radio which operated as an illegal, 'pirate' radio during the apartheid regime, until it was granted a licence after the 1994 democratic elections. The performance of the sector has received a mixed verdict. That verdict can be analysed in three ways: conceptually, structurally and operationally.

Conceptually, community radio has undergone some paradigm shifts. Myers (2000, page 90) defines "community radio" as "small-scale decentralized broadcasting initiatives which are easily accessed by local people, actively encourage their participation in programming, and which include some element of community ownership or membership." This definition is less rigid than that offered by the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC). While recognising the central role of the community in "owning" community media initiatives, this definition opens up possibilities for a motivator to set up a community radio project and seek to introduce into it notions of community ownership, management and programming. This definitional *elasticity* recognises the place of enterprising individuals who are sufficiently motivated to initiate small-scale, community-located media initiatives. Such individuals may not be moved purely by commercial considerations. Increasingly, *alternative* definitions of community media are coming to the fore. Take, for example, the Zambia Community Media Forum (ZaCoMeF). It defines "community media" as those interest or faith-based initiatives which serve a specific group or geographical area, are accessible to all and actively encourage and support community participation (ResearchSEA 2006). Such conceptual contestations will redefine the realm of alternative media. It was partly because of the almost intractable insistence on a working definition of community radio as radio that is *owned, controlled and programmed by the community it serves* that some participants walked out of the sixth conference of AMARC held in Senegal in 1995 (Valentine 1995, pages 8-9).

Structurally, ownership of community radio has become less rigidly defined. It is possible for an individual to start a community radio initiative and introduce into its ownership structure community elements. This is evident in the cases of Bush Radio in South Africa and Breeze FM in Zambia, where "community participation" is factored into a range of structural and

operational issues, such as governance and programming. In some such cases, community members have been known to treat the radio project as “their own”. This is confirmed by Mike Daka (2006), initiator of Breeze FM in eastern Zambia, who gives the following anecdote:

More often, people in the community will come up to me and say: “Mr. Daka, thank you very much for bringing us Breeze FM. You brought it here, but it is no longer yours. It is ours.”

This anecdote shows some unsolicited community appreciation for a project that appears to have become rooted within the community and is thus reinforcing the notion of “community ownership” in ways that are more fundamental than legal ownership. This “private-community” partnership allows for some entrepreneurial contribution towards the community radio initiative. This “neo-community radio” approach may offer the most practical model for the business sustainability of such grassroots media.

Operationally, the performance of community radio stations across Southern Africa has largely been problematic. The observations that follow are based on a study conducted by this author on four community radio stations in Zambia, namely Chikuni Community Radio, Mazabuka Community Radio, Radio Lyambai, and Yatsani Radio (Banda 2003). To begin with, the study suggested that community media initiatives must be approached with caution because their claims to most of the attributes of community broadcasting may not necessarily represent the reality of their operations. This is particularly so with regard to the more *institutionally*-inclined Catholic model of community radio broadcasting. The nature of the hierarchy of Catholicism imposes special constraints on the independence of “community” radio under diocesan jurisdiction.

Secondly, the initiators of such community broadcasting projects are eager to show that they are in fact living up to the ideals of community radio. Some members of the community *do* bear testimony to these assertions. However, the extent to which this is truly the case is doubtful. There is evidence about the many difficulties confronting such initiatives – ranging from their perennial dependence on donor funding, right through to their poor management structures and practices. Other problems include the lack of democratic structures that can effectively represent the communities of interest or place that these initiatives purport to serve.

These trends are typical of all other community radio initiatives in Zambia, and beyond. They represent what one can characterise as *religious* models of community radio broadcasting (e.g. Catholic-initiated *Yatsani Radio* and *Chikuni Community Radio Station*); *private* models of community radio broadcasting (e.g. privately-initiated *Radio Lyambai*); and *donor-state-community* models of community radio broadcasting (e.g. *Mazabuka Community Radio Station* initially started by a donor (UNESCO), in conjunction with the Government of Zambia, and then turned over to community ownership and management).

A fourth case study is located in the experience of new information and communications technology (ICT), particularly the Internet. In a study of the political role of “web-blogging” in Johannesburg, Goldfain and Van der Merwe (2006, page 120) concluded that, although blogs are not well established in South Africa, their function is “to provide citizens with an alternative source of news, add more perspectives to the events and issues of the day, and initiate conversation.” A “blog” (a periodic and often continuously updated website that posts the thoughts and observations of a single writer and often the responses to those observations) serves as “an aggregator of information that encourages dialogue and participation in a society that is flooded with information dispersed by authoritative voices. It is a media platform and has the potential to give minorities a voice.”

Clearly, web-blogging, as an alternative media form, will have to contend with low levels of Internet penetration and usage in Africa. For example, the total number of African Internet users is around 5-8 million, with about 1.5-2.5 million outside of North and South Africa (African Internet Status 2002).

However, it is patently clear that the possibilities of web-blogging as an alternative to traditional media are becoming increasingly recognisable within Southern Africa.

### **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to conceptualise alternative media in terms of the ideological projects they seek to accomplish, not least the empowerment of women, racial harmony, political liberation, etc. Alternative media embrace a mix of media forms which emphasise the centrality of people, rather than of profit. Such media seem to emerge at specific historical moments and, as such, respond to specific challenges.

We have argued, for example, that 'pirate' radio in South Africa emerged in response to the repression of the apartheid regime. We have also noted that the historical moment of globalisation presented its own set of unique circumstances that accounted for the emergence of alternative media, especially community broadcasting.

We have noted a number of cases in which alternative media - using both traditional and new media platforms - have been deployed. The example of the Audio Cassette Listening Forums (ACLF) Project in Tanzania, implemented in the late 1970s, has been given. Also cited has been the introduction, in the 1990s, of radio listening clubs in 4 countries. A third case study has focused on community radio. It has been concluded that this phenomenon has encountered a multitude of problems. However, there are "hybrid" community radio stations, such as Bush Radio and Breeze FM, which are demonstrating how a combination of a strong entrepreneurial base coupled and a vibrant community engagement can contribute towards sustaining community radio initiatives. We have also considered the possibility of web-blogging as an alternative medium.

The viability of such media as an option in the current media mix lies in a number of factors, not least their accessibility, a robust reconceptualisation of alternative media, the willingness of the purveyors of such media to change with the times, etc.

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