

## The Future of Alternative Media?

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### Abstract

Alternative media, which have historically been created in explicit opposition to the mainstream, are increasingly drawing from mainstream practices to gain visibility in a crowded media market. However, the nascent field of alternative (or community) media scholarship has not fully embraced the intrusion of mainstream practices nor has scholarship added meaningfully to the debates surrounding future growth possibilities of alternative media within this competitive framework. The paper will apply previous hypotheses and research from the field of alternative media scholarship to a small sample of alternative blogs in New Zealand. The methodological aspects of producing these blogs and their resulting content will be explored against present research in an effort to conceptualize future media formats for the alternative press.

**Keywords:** alternative media

Mainstream media are paradoxically both growing and shrinking. The pervasiveness and visibility of mainstream media have exploded. Mainstream media can be found in almost every social and private setting within the developed world. However, the number of large, mainstream media outlets is also continually declining. This reduction is due to either consolidation within a larger, parent corporation or simply closure due to a lack of revenue. This frenzied mix of conglomeration and bankruptcies has led several mainstream media outlets to draw heavily from what was once considered strictly alternative media. Blogging in particular has been heralded as a potential challenge – and possible support – to mainstream media newsgathering. Alternative media, such as current affairs or news blogs, have grown exponentially over the last thirty years. Much of this astronomical rise is due to the expansion of the Internet.

The Internet has allowed for a much wider range of opinions and facts to be seen and heard. This range obviously includes positions that have been traditionally outside of mainstream media. Alternative media are often created in “explicit opposition” (Downumt & Coyer, 2007, p. 1) to mainstream media. Alternative media, in fact, can be defined by their level of subversion from the mainstream (Albert, 2006b; Downing, 2001). This subversion is rooted in a strong desire for societal change from the status quo perpetuated by mainstream media. When one considers communication as “the creative making of a social order” (Hamilton, 2000, p. 361), then the importance of alternative media is clear. Social relations are created, confirmed and exercised within communication processes. Relationships are created and societal

boundaries are laid. Mutual understandings begin through effective communication. Such interconnected development is absolutely central to a thriving social network. The importance of media and communication to such a society can not be understated (Carey, 1989).

A thorough examination of potential challenges to future alternative media is needed precisely because alternative media are so central to democracy. This paper will draw upon present research to suggest several possible conceptualizations of the future for alternative media. This work will apply various hypotheses and research to a small sample of popular New Zealand blogs in order to gauge the present state of alternative media. It is suggested that alternative media will need to rely on cohesive portals of information and visual material for future success. They will be increasingly politically subversive with very few differences between consumers and producers. Alternative media will place a greater emphasis on local news and integrate social networking into every story. This research also suggests that unique, small-scale funding opportunities will predominate the future of alternative media. Producers of alternative media will see a further flattening of responsibilities but there will also be reduced thresholds for success.

### **The Present Media Landscape**

Mainstream media are paradoxically both growing and shrinking. The pervasiveness and visibility of mainstream media has exploded, "driven primarily by the needs and pressures exerted by an ever-expanding, globally triumphant capitalist economy" (Dowmunt & Coyer, 2007, p. 4). Large corporate entities have amassed networked film, radio, newspaper and magazine businesses that can reach every human being in the developed world. Yet, while mainstream media have grown in visibility and potential reach, they have also reduced in number and in readership. Newspaper revenue in the United States fell 19.26 percent for the third quarter of 2008. This drop was met with a 30.85 percent decrease in classified advertising in American newspapers (Riley, 2008). In Britain, fifty-two publications folded in the last year – most of which were local newspapers owned by Trinity Mirror (Greenslade, 2009). Such declines have meant a constant threat of redundancy within the mainstream media industry. Very few cities across the globe can boast more than one major daily newspaper. The 150-year-old newspaper, Rocky Mountain News, recently was closed by the E.W. Scripps Company, who cited multi-million dollar annual losses (DeBruin, 2009). The threat of replacing the relatively few remaining city newspapers with a larger regional paper remains omnipresent in media discussions.

The reduction of newsrooms across the globe is due to a lack of profits within the news industry – at least at the levels expected by the multinational, conglomerated corporations that own mainstream media. News editors reporting back to disgruntled shareholders must find cost-cutting measures somewhere within the

industry and that typically comes in the form of job losses. Such employment decisions are made that much easier when new technological advances are introduced that can increase efficiency and productivity. Within the United States, media productivity, or output per hour, increased by 21 percent from 1997 until 2006, while the number of employees within the field of print media, dropped to 615,000 from 815,000 during that same time period. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics surmised that computerization and the expanding use of the Internet has eliminated many of these media jobs (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). As Fuchs (2009) argues, "there is an economic interest in the substitution of living labour by technology to decrease the investment and reproduction costs of capital and its turnover time, which in the ideal case increases profit" (p. 382). The present conglomeration within the media industries is itself representative of an essential component of capitalism (Knoche, 2007).

This frenzied conglomeration has led several mainstream media outlets to draw heavily from what was once considered strictly alternative media. Independent media are no longer completely uncontaminated with capitalist funding and the overlap between mainstream and independent media content is shifting. This is perhaps most readily seen in documentary filmmaking. Radical documentaries continue to gain popularity in commercial theatres. Michael Moore, an ardent critic of mainstream capitalism became the first feature-length documentary artist to earn more than \$100 million in box office theatre receipts for a single film (Box Office Mojo, 2009). In fact, six of the top ten documentaries made since 1982 could all be labelled as progressive critiques on capitalism in some form (*Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Sicko*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Bowling for Columbine*, *Religulous*, and *Super Size Me*). Yet, it is still clear that the interrelationships found between mainstream production houses and radical content providers remain uneasy. In 2004, a widely-reported example of such tension occurred when the Walt Disney Company blocked its Miramax division from distributing *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Rutenberg, 2004).

In relation to news, there are examples of mainstream media drawing content from alternative news sources. Current event blogs have been found to be extremely influential in political reporting (Bahnisch, 2006; Mayfield, 2004; Trammell, 2006). Mainstream news coverage of issues has, at times, been driven by political news blogs. For example, the frenetic mainstream media coverage of several high-level resignations, such as news executive Eason Jordan from CNN (Seeyle, 2005), Senator Trent Lott from the Senate Majority Leadership position (Bowman & Willis, 2003), and Dan Rather from the CBS news anchor desk (Glaser, 2004), were driven by alternative political blogs.

Drawing from these examples and countless others, blogging has been heralded as the beginning of the end of journalism's sovereign reign (Rosen, 2005). This new alternative form of "amateur journalism" (Lasica, 2003) has been argued as the long-awaited answer to journalism's longstanding weaknesses (Regan, 2003). Yet, mainstream media are still the dominant means of information dissemination in the

world, but most of this content is now increasingly accessed online. Newspaper advertising revenue has plummeted while revenues from Internet advertising continue to rise. The Advertising Standards Authority reported that advertising revenue across all mainstream media (defined as newspapers, television, radio, magazines, outdoor, cinema, addressed mail, unaddressed mail and interactive media) in New Zealand dropped from \$2.335 billion in 2007 to \$2.317 billion in 2008 (Advertising Standards Authority, 2009). However, Internet advertising rose almost 43 percent from \$135 million in 2007 to \$193 million in 2008. Most individuals still get their information from mainstream media even as the format of delivery and the number of mainstream outlets are both changing. The most popular websites overall continue to be large, corporate search engines (Google, Yahoo!, Baidu in China, Windows Live) or sites dedicated to social networking, such as Facebook. But, the BBC, CNN and The New York Times still remain top news sources online (Alexa, 2009). Given that most people continue to draw their information from mainstream news, whether online or off-line, there are persistent and important questions as to the quality of information that citizens receive from mainstream media. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, an organization that was created in the United States, was one of the first large-scale independent media that aimed to examine and critique mainstream media as well as support independent media. That organization recently argued that over just the past few years, mainstream media were directly responsible for leading Americans into “an aggressive war with evidence based on lies, overlooking an asset bubble whose predictable deflation devastated our economy, (and) failing to raise alarms about the erosion of key civil liberties” (Naureckas, 2009).

These perspectives echo Herman and Chomsky's (1988), landmark *Manufacturing Consent*, which argued that American media conform to a propaganda model whose “societal purpose” is to “inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state.” Perhaps because of such growing concern surrounding mainstream media, alternative media have grown exponentially over the last thirty years – particularly on the Internet. Raymond Williams argued that new media technologies could be used “for purposes quite different from those of the existing social order” (Williams, 1974, p. 136) and indeed, alternative media have exploited new media technologies with an aim to radically subvert the ““hierarchy of access” (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976). The development and growth of alternative media continued upon a relatively stable trajectory until the invention of the Internet, which led to an alternative media explosion.

### **Alternative Media**

Defining alternative media has been a problematic exercise for academics. Some have argued that, in essence, those who say they are alternative media simply are alternative media (Albert, 2006b). In defining themselves as alternative, they actually create the parameters of what alternative media eventually look like. Downing (2001) has argued that the term is actually "oxymoronic" (p. ix) given that everything is an alternative to something else in the world. Others have argued that the word alternative places too much legitimacy on the mainstream media by denoting somewhat of a secondary stature to a far more central – and therefore more important – mainstream press (Braden, 2007). Some prefer labels such as 'independent' media, others believe that 'radical' media is a much more apt description (Downing, 2001). Still other researchers and practitioners have called for alternative media to be labelled as 'activist' or 'citizens' media, or possible 'tactical' or 'autonomous' media. Related terms are 'participatory' or 'community' media. Each of these conceptualizations attempts to capture what is unique about media that exists outside of corporate entities and each puts a unique emphasis on a different facet of alternative media.

Some have argued that alternative media should be defined according to their scale in the marketplace of ideas (Downumt & Coyer, 2007). Alternative media are smaller than mainstream media. They invite participation in the creation of content and reciprocal communication. They are often free of some of the bureaucratic processes or commercial responsibilities that constrain mainstream media. They are independent of other social institutions (Albert, 2006b).

Pulling away from organizational influences, other scholars urge that definitions of alternative media must stress the ideological opposition or challenge to mainstream media. Alternative media are created in "explicit opposition" (Downumt & Coyer, 2007, p. 1) to mainstream media. Whatever the label, be it 'radical' or 'alternative,' some researchers argue that it should be defined by its level of subversion from the mainstream (Albert, 2006b; Downing, 2001). Accordingly, an often cited definition of alternative media, suggests that it "challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power" (Curran & Couldry, 2003, p. 7). Couldry (2003) argues that these challenges are intrinsic to the purpose of alternative media given that almost all of us are outside of mainstream media. One definition of alternative media puts that point of exclusion at the centre of its defined meaning: alternative media are best conceptualised as simply the media "produced by the socially, culturally and politically excluded" (Downumt & Coyer, 2007, p. 5).

Atton (2004), a leading scholar in the field of alternative media research, offers the following definition of alternative media: it is a "range of media projects, interventions and networks that work against, or seek to develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of 'doing' media" (p. ix). This is a far-reaching definition that allows for an expansive assortment of expression. As other research in

this area will clearly demonstrate, alternative media are not simply magazines, newspapers and radio stations. Atton (2004) understands this and incorporates such diversity into his definition. He goes further to argue that alternative media should be fundamentally grounded in the cultural forms of an independent media outlet and also possess some, if not all, of the following attributes: rely upon modern, evolving technology; de-professionalized organizational norms and roles; horizontal communication patterns; cultural or political radical content; compelling aesthetic form; innovative and independent distribution practices (Atton, 2002). In keeping with a more open and fluid definitional framework, Dowmunt and Coyer (2007) write that alternative media should be defined as generally on a smaller scale, "more accessible and participatory, and less constrained by bureaucracy or commercial interests than the mainstream media and often in some way in explicit opposition to them" (p. 1). Such a loose framework allows for a wider and more comprehensive range of analysis.

When one considers communication as "the creative making of a social order" (Hamilton, 2000, p. 361), then the importance of alternative media is clear. Social relations are created, confirmed and exercised within communication processes. Relationships are created and societal boundaries are laid. Mutual understandings begin through effective communication. Such interconnected development is absolutely central to a thriving social network. The importance of media and communication to such a society can not be understated (Carey, 1989). With so much at stake, alternative media is fundamental to the "articulation of a social order different from and often opposed to the dominant" (Hamilton, 2000, p. 362). If scholars and practitioners shift their focus away from media, and toward communication (Sparks, 1993), then the potential strengths of alternative media become obvious.

It is essential, however, that we don't conceptualise the division between alternative and mainstream media as a mutually exclusive binary. Certainly, media outlets can possess some of the attributes outlined by Atton (2004), but also have attributes that better define them as mainstream. It is important that these definitions are not fixed, and that scholars are cognizant of the inherent subjective flexibilities within modern culture. What defines a media as alternative within a particular moment of culture and time, might be labelled mainstream within a different cultural time and place (Dowmunt & Coyer, 2007).

The pervasiveness of mainstream media has led to some practical doubts that alternative media can ever be truly autonomous, given that they are intrinsically far less powerful. However, alternative media thrive when born out of very individualistic, unique political and cultural events and issues. Many alternative media can be short-lived given a lack of advertising support, but when called upon, alternative media serve an interdependent function with social movements in pushing social change. They do not exist in a vacuum. They are always "media plus organisation" (Stoney, 2005). This places alternative media within a very specific space and time within culture. They exist within that context to the degree that each definition of

alternative media, and indeed each example of alternative media, is also a unique theory of political change (Downmunt & Coyer, 2007). Alternative media are intrinsically part of the process of social change (Albert, 2006b).

As part of that process, alternative media tend to exist within two organizational frameworks: participatory or hierarchical. Mainstream media operate almost exclusively within the latter category, but alternative media have also co-opted this professionalised format as well. When an organization operates under a passive model of instruction, the “agents of resistance,” or the actual receivers of the media message, can be artificially distanced from those who are “directing them” (Atton, 2002, p. 103). This prescriptive method of alternative media communication is evident within modern forms of alternative media and can best be explained by the mass culture approach to alternative communication. Through professionalised norms and processes, it is far more likely to ‘reach’ a more substantial number of people and, therefore, be more effective. However, readers can also feel rather discouraged and disconnected from those who dictate behavior from an elite and hierarchical position.

Yet, these elite, movement intellectuals can also help to “articulate the knowledge interests and cognitive identity of social movements” (Eyerman & Jamison, 1995, p. 450). They serve an ideological ‘point person’ for members to connect with on a personal level. When such a person emerges from within the social movement itself, then they become more of a “facilitator, interpreter, and synthesiser, rather than ideological leader” (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991, p. 116).

There can also be a lateral form of organization and communication that includes “multiple experiences and concerns” (Downing, 1984, p. 19) that is in direct opposition to the mass culture approach. This model of alternative media aims to create an alternate “value system” (Rau, 1994, p. 13) from a community of engaged participants. Eyerman and Jamison (1991) call this process of identity creation within a unified membership, ‘knowledge production.’ In his examination of the alternative publications, *Green Anarchist* and *Do or Die*, Atton (2002) found that the interspaced writing from movement intellectuals and reader-writers on the same page, “offers a challenge to intellectual discourse as well as the opportunity to discuss the ideas in that discourse to an extent unknown in the mainstream media” (Atton, 2002, p. 111).

More voices within alternative media implicitly democratises the content. It removes the “hierarchy of access” (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976) that is endemic to mainstream media reporting processes. Alternative media that welcome a diverse range of input are “transformed into an egalitarian, devolved communicational tool for theory and for action” (Atton, 2002, p. 111). This input can range from unsolicited letters or writings or videoclips that are selected and included within an alternative publication. Egalitarian input can also be actively solicited on the part of the alternative media outlet in the form of ‘native reporting.’

The concept of native reporting, principally seen in alternative media, emerged from the mainstream press. Robert Chesshyre, traditionally a journalist for British papers, such as *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *The Daily Telegraph*, wrote that when he first came home to the United Kingdom after working as a correspondent for the *Observer* in Washington, D.C., he “had to learn again the native idiom” (Chesshyre, 1987, p. 13). Embedded within such a comment is that there is a localness embedded within everything we do. A sense of familiarity exists within textual or visual language that places us within a geographic location. We understand this language because we contribute to its creation. This is one of the central arguments toward including readers/writers as contributors to alternative media. Otherwise, the creators of content that might be intended as emancipatory in nature, might actually be acting much more like colonists. This moves the message creator away from the center of an engaged, active debate and informed discussion toward a colonizing perspective whereby the creator is “placed either above or at the centre of things, yet apart from them” (Spurr, 1993, p. 16). Native reporters can actually document their own reality and become empowered by the process. This first-hand information also elevates the knowledge and discussion within the larger community as it is more relevant and far more informed than an elitist perspective from outside the close network of community relationships. This process also pulls “power away from the mainstream back to the disenfranchised and marginalized groups that are the native reporter’s proper community” (Atton, 2002, p. 115). Native reporting validates the identity of communities that are increasingly overlooked in conglomerate, mainstream news. Yet, confusion and disorganization can also be a potential negative influence of native reporting and egalitarian forms of organization. Ideological focus can quickly be lost when there are a multitude of inputs all sharing attention (McKay, 1998).

As this review illustrates, simply defining what alternative media are has been a struggle in mainstream media scholarship. Perhaps, understandably, very few theorists have contemplated how alternative media, and in particular, alternative news media might function in the future. However, this is an essential question if media scholarship is to continue advancing toward a more holistic understanding of media structure and practice, given the increasing role alternative media will have in the media landscape of the future.

### **Methodological Framework**

This research is exploratory but does rely upon the previous work done by leaders in the study of alternative media, such as Atton, Couldry and Downing. This research attempts to build a new, conceptual matrix that might better examine possible future directions of alternative news media. In line with the previous work of Gamson (1992), this is a deductive approach, which first begins with a loose,

preconceived idea of the elements that may exist and then slowly proceeds in an attempt to reveal further information that might not have been considered. These studies can be difficult to replicate and are quite labour intensive (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, they might also allow for a deeper level of analysis and understanding.

In hypothesizing future directions for alternative media, this research will juxtapose present predictions with the ten most widely read alternative news media blogs in New Zealand. These case studies will be explored to better understand how blogs might already be advancing alternative media in New Zealand. A New Zealand blog titled Tumeke! provides a list ranking of the local blogosphere, based on average daily unique visits, incoming links as provided by Technorati "Authority," the average number of posts per week and the average number of comments posted per week (Tumeke!, 2009). The top ten blogs listed based on August 2009 usage, were Kiwiblog, The Standard, Cactus Kate, Not PC, Red Alert, Public Address, Gotcha!, Dim Post, No Minister and Frogblog. Public Address was also recently awarded as the Best Blog in the 2008 Net Guide People's Choice Web Awards. These blogs were examined as a sample of the best, or most popular, blog content in New Zealand. The blogs were checked every day over the course of one month. Content was bookmarked and collated for evaluation at the end of the sample period.

### **Conceptualizing a Future Alternative Media**

#### ***Cohesive Portals of Information***

What alternative media might be or should be has been largely ignored within academia. Much scholarly research has detailed how alternative media operate, particularly within the present modern, networked, corporate media environment (Atton, 2006; Curran & Couldry, 2003). Any examination of what alternative media could become has largely originated from professional sources. Albert (2006a), from the independent *Z Magazine*, argued that alternative media must be more nationalistic, with synergies across local outlets, which facilitate national debates and yield a larger shared understanding. Within the United States, there are thousands of alternative media publications but no cohesive uniting force bringing together all that content and readership. Alternet is the rare example of what can be done when pulling across the alternative media spectrum. It receives more than 3 million monthly visitors and more than 7.5 million monthly page views (AlterNet, 2009). It is unlikely that these numbers represent unique users given that this was not reported in the website material. However, even 3 million repeat viewers represent a relatively significant amount. In comparison, *New York Times*, an extensive corporate news entity, generated 18.2 million monthly unique visitors to their website (Kioskea, 2009). Alternet claims to combine original

reporting with material from over 200 independent media sources, "including over 40 of the most compelling and insightful blogs" (AlterNet, 2009).

Outside of the success of Alternet, alternative media still tend to exist without any real connection between independent outlets. Alternet needs to be examined further as a model for future growth in alternative media. As more and more websites proliferate the Internet, networked portals that offer obvious pathways for content must continue to grow or most of this content will simply be overlooked. Successfully finding information online is already dependent upon demographic factors such as education level (Hargittai, 2002) and as more and more people flood the Internet for information, that information will simply need to be easier to locate. Silos of information will not be able to withstand the onslaught of content or the continued evolution of technologies. The cross pollination of the myriad technologies available are producing a proliferation of content in multiple platforms. Navigational systems need to be developed to wind users across the across these platforms to alternative media portals of information.

It is important to also consider that broad silos of information do not exist across all media. Radio is a notable example of how progressive groups and organizations do share programming and ideas across many different outlets. In the United States, Pacifica Radio Network distributes programming to stations across the country. It is the oldest public radio network, with over 100 affiliated stations and five non-commercial, independent listener-supported stations in Berkeley, Los Angeles, Houston, New York city and Washington D.C. The success of radio may be due, in large part, to a lack of competition for funding, given that radio stations across countries generally do not compete for listeners, however, it is still an important organizational framework to consider for contemplating future alternative media development.

A united federation, as Albert (2006b) suggests, would serve as a repository for free content that could be shared across alternative media outlets. The organization could facilitate mutual support alliances and also serve as an agency for those creating content (Albert, 2006b). This central organization could help to direct the growth of alternative media through targeted fundraising that could be dispersed across contributing members. While this model of organization poses some interesting opportunities for smaller alternative media outlets that might be struggling, its professionalised organization also poses fundamental challenges to alternative media that may have been created in opposition to those very same organizational formats. Many read alternative media "as an act of defiance, as a proclamation of alternativeness" (Atton, 2002, p. 128).

Yet, the convenience for users will likely supersede concerns about bureaucratic organizational tensions within alternative media outlets. Within this sample, only Public Access served as a portal of information drawing from a wide range of sources. Public Access describes themselves as a "community of New Zealand-centric weblogs" (Public Address, 2009). The site draws from eleven bloggers that have some tie

to New Zealand, whether that is in geographic location or in interest. There are also two contributing sites that are open to rotating guest bloggers. Therefore, Public Address does serve as a portal for alternative information, but it would be difficult to argue that this represents cohesion across a spectrum of alternative voices. Certainly, one cannot put a number on how much contribution equals a cohesive portal of information, but drawing upon the work of eleven contributors would likely not suffice. That being said, Public Address is a consortium of different opinions, which is the framework for future success in alternative media.

### ***Political Subversions of Mainstream Content Across Platforms***

'Tactical' media have explored the tension between alternative and mainstream through experimental media that are not only art, journalism or political activism, but, rather, as some measure of all three combined (Downmunt & Coyer, 2007). Tactical media thrive on the Internet because the opportunities to create content within this platform are open. Tactical media do not strive to be different from the mainstream. Rather, they aim to utilize mainstream practices to actually become part of the mainstream while simultaneously causing those who hold positions of power within society to reflect upon their own practices. RTMark is an excellent example of tactical media. They are alleged to be behind the Barbie Liberation Organization, which switched the voice boxes of GI Joe and Barbie in 1993 and then returned them all back to the stores to be later bought by unsuspecting Christmas shoppers. RTMark has also been tied to the controversy surrounding SimCopter, a computer game that had shirtless "himbos" (male bimbos) and fluorescent nipples as landing lights secretly embedded into the game. They were behind vote-auction.net, which purported to be "bringing democracy and capitalism closer together" and allowed people the ability to sell their presidential vote to the highest bidder. All of these examples rely on satire to cause reflection on the part of the viewer, but they all also use the practices within mainstream media to appear plausible to mainstream audiences and are all explicitly political.

Reader attention to such disparate media across a multitude of platforms will be intensely concentrated – particularly in media that are highly politicized. This well-defined political perspective will be fundamental to the growth of future alternative media outlets. Consumers of media content can and will be able to get factual evidence of events in seconds from almost any content producer. However, a trusted and well-defined political perspective will be increasingly valuable to consumers inundated with informational choice. These relatively few media outlets will be among a small number of 'success stories' in terms of mass audiences. The platforms of information will be available across on-line and off-line technologies and promoted simultaneously across multiple information outlets. MoveOn.org has already shown how a trusted and well-defined political message can unite users off-line. The organization created an alternative

distribution network for an anti-Bush Administration documentary that drew supporters into stranger's homes to watch the film. The organization happened on the Internet but the distribution of DVD's was through the postal service and the process of gathering individuals for the movie occurred on email and the telephone

Research has found that alternative media users draw extensively from mainstream media, even though they severely under-report their personal mainstream media use (Rauch, 2007). They source mainstream media so extensively to build their polemic stance about the righteousness of alternative media and the injustices found in mainstream content. "The category mainstream, of course, represents something of a myth or a straw man – but a necessary one for this community, since the superiority of alternative media must presume the inferiority of another" (Rauch, 2007, p. 1008). The stance of superiority builds a sense of identity within alternative media users who often feel aligned and largely removed from mainstream discourse. However, such a divided stance also serves to further politicize and distance those that exist within the ideology of one group from those that adhere to ideological tenets of another.

Politics will be central to how future successful alternative media sites identify themselves. Huffington Post, a blog which ranks at almost double any other blog competitor in relation to their Technorati Authority ranking (Technorati, 2009), generates content from a progressive perspective. Politics is one of Huffington Post's central category filters of content in organizing contributing information. Almost all of the blogs sampled for this study generate content from a political perspective, although some do not state their biases explicitly. Cactus Kate is the only non-political of the sites sampled here, describing herself only as a Scorpio interested in "working, drinking, sleeping, waking up, going home, Money, sport, travel, and luxury hotel chains." However, her apolitical self-descriptions do not equate with her polemics on political issues from a decidedly libertarian perspective. All other nine blogs sampled here stated their political ideologies explicitly within the site and write content on political matters. The Internet will continue developing as the central platform for alternative media and as content in general proliferates, sites that are more explicitly political will gain popularity to attract the attention of a broad market in search of unique information.

### ***Reduced Thresholds For Success***

Hamilton (2000) has argued persuasively that alternative media must have extremely low barriers to participation, which would include training and money. He has also argued that alternative media should not require significant capital expenditure and while some technology is cheaper than others, there are still large barriers to entry across media that are too often overlooked in alternative media scholarship. That being said, in relative terms, those barriers remain quite low. The recent success of Tavi Gevinson, a 13-year-old blogger of fashion, is a testament to how small those barriers can be and the potential possibilities

of online communication. From her bedroom, Tavi Gevinson wrote a blog, *Style Rookie*, which started a sensation in the fashion world. Within one year of the blog's inception, she was actively courted by the biggest names in fashion during New York Fashion Week; graced the cover of *Pop* magazine and was interviewed by Pixie Geldof for the magazine *Love*. It is because of the platform of the Internet that Tavi Gevinson was able to become so successful. However, it is also that same platform that reduced what counts as successful in the first place. Hers is an extraordinary example of potential possibilities, but most equate success on the Internet with a much lower benchmark of popularity given that the costs for entry into the online marketplace are so low.

The number of platforms to deliver information has grown exponentially. These platforms will continue to decrease their barriers to entry, which means a constantly rising influx of content creators flooding the Internet. Consumption of such media is already far outstripped by production. The competition is categorically fierce and only the very rare story manages to go viral and reach an audience of millions. There are simply more and more places to see media, which means that proportionally more work remains unseen. Every budding artist has a professional book or reel of creative media, but most of that content has only been seen by a handful of people. But, when the costs of production are so low, then what is the measure of success?

If 'breaking even' financially is the barometer of success then much of the alternative media created would be categorized as successful. For example, as Blau (2005) rightly illustrates, large music labels would consider the sales coming from many independent labels as failures because of the extremely high levels of capital required to operate a multi-national corporation. But lower sales figures from artists within small independent labels can still easily constitute an economically sustainable model of doing business given their relatively low overhead costs. Within the music industry, there are only four organizations (Warner Music Group, EMI, Sony BMG and Universal Music Group) that distribute about three-quarters of music worldwide, but the remaining 30 percent of music, created by independent record labels, can generate a proportionally higher rate of music output given the lower costs of promotion and creation. The same model of economic sustainability applies across all media. If the barriers of entry and costs of production are low enough, there will be lower benchmarks for success. These reduced thresholds for success will mean that many more alternative media outlets will be flooding the Internet.

It is difficult to know from this sample if these alternative blogs would consider themselves as a success because it is unknown how much time and effort and money were put into the creation of these blogs. However, one can assume that the largest expense, within the blogs sampled here, would be time spent in writing content. None of these blogs appeared to have paid other writers for content; there was no heavy reliance on visual content, which might suggest a higher cost for editing software; and one could assume

that the content from these blogs could have easily been written at one's home as no story was knowingly produced at a specific location. It is impossible to calculate the worth of one's time and expertise, but one could assume that given the relatively high number of readers, as evidenced by the Tumeke! rankings, these bloggers might likely consider themselves as successes in the alternative online community.

### ***Networking Integrated into Storytelling***

Outside of major search engines, networking sites such as Bebo, Twitter, Facebook and Myspace are among the most popular sites online. Any speculation about the future of alternative media must include networking. News is "about connection, conversation and community" (Vargas, 2009). A reader connects with the content, in whatever form that information delivery occurs. That information then sparks the beginning of a conversation within each reader's personal social networks, whether that is on or off-line. When a reader engages with that material, they are also joining a community of like-minded people. Arthur Miller, the famous playwright, once said that "a good newspaper is a nation talking to itself." The future of alternative media will expand this statement in ways that simply can't be predicted at this stage, but active networking between readers and with content will surely play a large role.

Information now travels at a nearly simultaneous speed. People learn of major news stories via Twitter feeds and Facebook status updates. Users can verify sources and perspectives almost instantaneously through the Internet. The unparalleled access to information means that transparency will become the most important tenet of quality media reports, not objectivity. Objectivity, the longstanding principle of journalism, will be subsumed by transparency (Weinberger, 2009). Alternative media are wedged within a unique moment in history to exploit this epochal undercurrent. Mainstream corporate newspapers and conglomerated broadcast networks have long relied on the credibility that their institution provided through their simple existence as credentialed authority. This model of transferring information from an authoritative and objective source to citizens proved so successful because of the nature of communication prior to the Internet. The barriers for information retrieval were extremely high. One could certainly pour through library archives or government documents housed in official warehouses, but the costs in time and money remained too high for most. The mainstream authority on information relied on the widespread assumption of objectivity to impart information to the masses. The Internet drastically changed how citizens now think about the information provided. The preponderance of information available to users means that transparency is now the most important quality of news information. Transparency allows readers to examine the arguments, assumptions and values embedded within messages. "transparency – the embedded ability to see through the published draft – often gives us more reason to believe a report than the claim of objectivity did" (Weinberger, 2009). News information can easily be traced through

heavily networked Twitter feeds or other online social networks. Alternative media must increasingly integrate the “connection, conversation and community” embedded within a user’s personal experience if they are to succeed.

### ***Increasing Reliance on Visual Material***

Technology will continue to develop along with broadband Internet access. Such changes will lead to a continued increase in visual communication. Digital cameras already document protest marches and then disseminate these moving images online. However, there is still a dominance of texting written information through mobile phones or email messages. This should likely decrease as audiences become more reliant on visual messaging. The importance of visual imagery to the mediated communication process has continued to develop within a culture that has become increasingly visual (Fetveit, 1999; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Media systems have gradually shifted over time away from text to visual communication (Dyson, 1997).

Visual images are central to how we “represent, make meaning, and communicate in the world around us” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 1). Indeed, scholars, industry executives and practitioners are increasingly conceptualizing visual imagery as an essential reproduction of informational cues that individuals use to construct their perception of social reality (Messaris, 1997). Visual communication, through photographs or video, are also “increasingly becoming a tool for an individual’s identity formation and communication” (van Dijck, 2008, p. 57). Gattegno (1969) argued decades ago that that sight itself is simultaneous, comprehensive and synthetic in its analysis. Visual imagery instantaneously affects how we perceive the message – even before we read a single word. The power of visual messaging coupled with drastic reductions in the cost of producing and receiving visual messages will translate to a more prolific use of visual imagery in mediated communication. Visual storytelling will be a standard in the future.

The use of visual storytelling varied widely in the sample examined for this study but remained largely textual in nature. Public Access has a multitude of producers, so there was a great level of variation across the site. However, there was little use of visual imagery overall. There were instances of video posts and images were used occasionally throughout public address, but it was not the standard in content. Cactus Kate, Not PC, Gotcha!, No Minister and Frogblog used images in many of their posts but relied principally on text and never used video. The Standard, The Dim-Post, and Red Alert had even fewer images online and, again, no video content. Kiwiblog had no visual content online other than in the banner and in the few advertisements that could be seen.

Such a reliance on textual information contradicts any notion of an increasing visual sphere – at least within the New Zealand blogosphere sampled for this study. However, Huffington Post, a blog which ranks at

almost doubles any blog competitors in relation to their Technorati Authority ranking (Technorati, 2009), serves as an example of blog content that has a high synergy between visual and textual information. The dominance of Huffington Post as a blog suggests that readers might respond well to visual stimuli. Large images dominant the opening page as well as several video stories. Huffington Posts' popularity could obviously be due to other factors as well, however, the predominance of visual content in this very successful alternative media website should be examined further. Yet, in the case of popular New Zealand blogs, any reliance on visual communication has yet to take place.

### ***Unique, Small-scale Funding Opportunities***

How will the future of alternative media be funded? There are many models available to alternative media today. Alternative publications, such as Salon, are experimenting with subscriber-based publications. Others, such as Ms. Magazine, have chosen to draw funding solely from non-profit organizations and subscriptions to create their publication. Still other alternative media have relied on grants from organizations such as Resist and Funding Exchange, which have been funding alternative media and social change efforts for years. Alternative media outlets also continue to depend upon a mix of public and private investment.

At the moment, the Internet is the most essential platform for attracting and collecting funds for alternative media. The Internet allows for the opportunity of many small donations of support to underwrite the growth of independent media. Moveon.org in the United States is an example of a very successful organization built upon the aggregation of small financial contributions. Because of such economic success, Moveon.org has been able to put forth their political positions onto the mainstream media agenda. Moveon.org built their relative wealth from donations slowly over time. However, the Internet also can fuel an extremely focused and rapidly escalating fundraising effort. This was the case for Jane Lucy, the campaign producer for [www.chickenout.tv](http://www.chickenout.tv), which is a website aimed at exposing the conditions of chickens raised for food. Within the space of 24 hours, the website raised £80,000 online, £3.4 billion in investment support and arguably changed the eating habits of Britain (SXSW, 2009).

All of the blogs in this sample were apparently self-funded with very little evidence of advertising support. There was no obvious funding from any non-profit organization, such as the Independent Media Institute. Given the relatively low barriers to entry and diminished thresholds for success, there may be little incentive for the alternative blogs in this sample to seek out external funding. As the competition for viewer attention continues to increase, the need for financial support will likely increase as well. Fortunately, the Internet platform will allow for contributions from anyone with an Internet connection. With such possibilities, it is likely that major funding sources may defer to a wider base of smaller donations and

instead, choose to spread their financial interests across many alternative media outlets rather than just a selected few.

### ***Further Flattening of Responsibilities***

Those who create the content will shape the future of alternative media. With very little financial restrictions and expanding platforms for dissemination, content producers, in many ways, are limited only by their own creativity. However, this free expansion of possibility also means that the categories and job descriptions that have defined and organized modern media creators will likely disappear. Some have argued that even income differentials, power, and decision making across all alternative media workers must equalize (Albert, 2006b).

It is difficult to fully understand the roles and responsibilities of bloggers who create alternative online media. Technological advances mean that the time and cost to produce content has substantially reduced, which has allowed many more avenues of input from a variety of content producers. However, there were not any explicit instances of naming another contributor to content produced for these blogs. So, it can be assumed that Cactus Kate and David Farrar, for example, conducted all of their own interviews and investigations as well as wrote their own content for their respective blogs, Cactus Kate and Kiwiblog. However, those who do attempt to create content are responsible for a much wider range of tasks, such as photography, interviews, reporting, web design, and server management. Without a wide network of sources to draw upon, the responsibilities that require additional time and funding, such as investigative journalism, will likely suffer in the future alternative media landscape.

David Simon, from *The Washington Post*, correctly argues that bloggers and other alternative media have not yet begun to fill the gap that newspapers are quickly leaving behind (Simon, 2009). Speaking specifically about *The Baltimore Sun*, Simon reported that an earlier murder involving a police officer was never covered in the mainstream or alternative press because there simply were not enough resources to investigate the story given that the local police were no longer obligated to name police officers involved in citizen shootings under new public information laws. So, while the numbers of official reporters continue to drop, the barriers to information can concomitantly rise. This suggests that the further flattening of responsibilities predicted here does not bode well for an informed citizenry. More responsibilities heaped upon news reporters that are already under severe time constraints means that some aspect of newsgathering will likely be lost. As newsrooms continue to cut their numbers, some have argued that bloggers and alternative media will help to replace the investigative abilities of a watchdog press (Lasica, 2003). However, such a shift in reporting would only be meaningful through a much stronger reliance on contributing members and readers of alternative media. This is certainly happening to much smaller degree

now, but if alternative media is to continue growing as a viable segment of the media then purposeful extensions of alternative media into explicit citizenry input will need to be made.

### ***Few Differences Between Consumers and Producers***

Many blogs use comments as a form of feedback for readers but few use this space as an egalitarian exchange between consumers of the content and the producers. Far from egalitarian relationships, many alternative blogs still remain static, one-way forms of communication. Hamilton (2000) suggests that alternative media should be interwoven throughout all of the facets of our lives. There should not be artificial divisions between consumers and producers. Rather, communication – and therefore media – should be explored and constantly negotiated. He readily admits that there are not many examples of alternative media that fit within these prerequisites. He particularly notes the strength of montage as an alternative media communication that can be used as a “means of critically reflecting on dominant social conventions that operated through commercially available media products” (Hamilton, 2000, p. 371). However, there are few examples within academic study that support any widespread usage of montage in alternative media.

Citizens media, as a term within academic research, was pioneered by Rodriguez (2001). Rather than exploring the practices and content of mainstream versus alternative media, Rodriguez argues that citizen media is far more active in its identity. Citizen media are actually part of a process. They are a constantly evolving expression that includes thoughtful, individual, reflections and analyses from those traditionally outside of mainstream representations. These individuals combine and begin to collate together to actually construct their citizenship. They do so through daily collective media action. These acts of citizenship empower those who participate and then incite action through activist media within a camaraderie of fellow citizens (Rodriguez, 2001).

Activist media encourages involvement on the part of readers (Waltz, 2005). This insistence upon action does not need to fall on solely ‘alternative’ ideologies. In fact, many activist media have very mainstream goals – such as urging others to vote in governmental elections. Autonomous media, on the other hand, actively try to reform mainstream media practices (Uzelman, 2005). They attempt to create new participatory avenues for people to engage with that are explicitly outside of the mainstream. The distinction between activist and autonomous media is not in the level of activism called for. Rather, the difference lies in the goal of working either inside or outside the system. Activist media can be seen as more reformist, while autonomous media should be viewed as more revolutionary (Downmunt & Coyer, 2007).

Whether activist or autonomous, an egalitarian and engaged network of communication will define the future of alternative media. A prominent example comes from a well-publicized MoveOn.org contest titled Bush in 30 seconds, which called for users to create a 30-second anti-Bush commercial and submit it to the organization's website. The contest proved to be wildly successful with thousands of entries and even generated mainstream media coverage. Each entry was given equal consideration and the resulting content was entirely user-generated. Future alternative media content will rely on users to increasingly act as 'foot soldiers' on the cyber frontiers. Content and reports will increasingly percolate up toward mainstream publication, rather than down from mainstream content, which is largely the case now. Such shifts in the directional flow of information could originate from an identifiable alternative media outlet or from readers who actively participate in collecting information.

While this will likely be the future scenario of alternative media, such an egalitarian co-existence was not found in the blogs sampled for this study. Rather, there was a largely one-dimensional flow of information without any evidence of meaningful information communicated to the blogger nor any calls to action toward users or commentators. There were some notable examples of identifying and highlighting information from commentators on alternative media blogs. For example, Frogblog, Red Alert, Not PC, Cactus Kate, Kiwiblog and The Dim-Post listed recent comments on the front page, giving prominent placement to content from users. Content was not highlighted to the extent of the blog owner, but placement on the first page does suggest some level of importance in relation to the original content producer. There was also a clear drive to link within the alternative media blogosphere by listing blogrolls on many of the sites sampled here. Only one site, Gotcha!, did not list a blogroll.

However, none of the bloggers here utilized the comment section for any meaningful level of communication with their readers. This may be due to the sheer amount of blog comments received. As comments continue to rise within a blog, the level of reciprocity may be likely to decline. But, the selectivity of comments without communicative exchange found here may reflect what Herring et. al. (2004) labelled the 'asymmetrical communication rights' between bloggers and the audience, whereby bloggers "retain ultimate control over the blog's content" (p. 6). Bloggers response, or lack thereof, to reader comments may also play an integral role in the manipulation of communication processes online. By only responding sporadically, if at all, to the multitude of relatively pithy comments, the bloggers' status remains eminently superior to those commenting and removes any possibility of a meaningful, communicative exchange. Such an unequal relationship will need to change in future alternative media that will rely on the input and information provided by users to create content.

As Wall (2005) correctly argues, comments now work to form more of a 'neighborhood bar' than a Habermasian public sphere. Given the multitude of asynchronous, largely sarcastic and often angry

comments online, one has to consider the function of these statements within the blogosphere. Certainly, the ability of ordinary citizens to post comments online is a radical departure from established mass media practices and the ability to post like-minded comments also may facilitate a sense of community online. Participating within a thread of commentary may resemble the previously predicted communication pattern that emphasizes viewers not only consume a mediated product, but also work to help create and construct the meaning of that product (Rheingold, 2002). However, one has to wonder what kind of community and what type of meaning is being created. By almost any definition, a self-assured, one-dimensional and oppositional fighting front does not equate to democratic debate within a public sphere. Future alternative media will rely on technological advancements that can separate comments into categories of instrumental importance for the topic at hand whereby purposeful commentary can be readily exchanged and developed by multiple users to create original user-created information.

### ***Greater Emphasis on Local News***

As the expanse of the Internet continues to unravel into the farthest reaches of the globe, the strength of future alternative media will be in their ability to detail the events within a specific place and time. This focus should be local, and at the grassroots level. Roy Greenslade, a prominent media commentator for several publications, perhaps most notably *The Guardian*, argues that "not since the Seventies have we had a genuine chance to imagine the possibility of a different business model for newspapers, a business model that doesn't involve making profits" (Slattery, 2009). Such a model would depend on a small framework of local content and local producers.

Local content is thriving in some areas of the present media landscape and declining in others. For example, community radio is increasingly "playing a crucial role in the democratic process by fostering citizen participation in public life" (Meadows, Forde, Ewart, & Foxwell, 2009, p. 155). Community radio helps to build local narratives that can be thought of within a complex pattern of 'local talk' that is central in creating public consciousness. However, the rise of community journalism within radio is not mirrored in local newspapers. Local newspapers are closing at an alarming rate (Greenslade, 2009). The globalized marketplace of information and possibly a decline in journalistic standards (O'Neill & O'Conner, 2008) has led to a decline in local sales. Local newspapers have continued to rely upon single sources (O'Neill & O'Conner, 2008) and depend very little on readers for information, opting instead to focus on stories with little consequence that require only simplistic newsgathering skills. Alternative media could easily fill such a gap with networked writers and readers that are eager to explore perspectives relevant to their lives.

All ten of the top New Zealand blogs were decidedly local in their focus. As the Internet continues to displace users across space and time, a need for centralized local content will dramatically increase and

perhaps the dominance of locality in popular alternative news blogs is emblematic of such a need. Online content overall continues to be dominated by content providers from developed countries, which often reflect values and languages that can be diametrically opposed to those who receive that information. Historically, the push and pull of information has depended heavily upon access to technology. The Internet is largely removing those barriers in the creation and reception of content. The result will be users who are clamouring for information pertinent to their own experiences. Local online news content of the future will largely be taken up by alternative news sources given the continued closure of mainstream local outlets. These local alternative sources of information will serve as reliable checks on local councils, police, education issues and legislation.

### **Conclusion**

The blogs sampled for this study showed varying adherence to the projections made in this research. This study argued that alternative media will need to rely on cohesive portals of information and visual material for future success. The popular New Zealand blogs in this sample did not operate within a larger portal of information (outside of Public Access) and there was almost no reliance on visual material. Content was largely politically subversive but still held wide differences between consumers and producers. There was an almost complete emphasis on local news but very little focus on social networking. There were infrequent opportunities to donate to these blogs. While impossible to conclusively measure through this methodological framework, there were presumably a wide range of tasks these bloggers were responsible for and also a likely reduced threshold of success.

These blogs may not have demonstrated all of the projections offered here, but it is suggested that if they are to be successful in the future, they will need to adapt new strategies to counteract an increasingly competitive alternative and mainstream media landscape. Some of the more popular alternative media outlets from the United States, such as The Huffington Post and Alternet, are already drawing upon many, but not all, of the projections offered in this study. Alternative media around the world need to quickly adopt before American alternative media far outpace other international alternative media in attracting reader support. The globalized marketplace of information online means that alternative media around the globe need to be even more proactive in their approach. New Zealand blogs may not have been able to draw as extensively from these suggested conceptualizations due to a host of reasons that deserve further exploration. Future research could examine the discrepancies between alternative media in relation to geographic origin and tease out the impact of cultural influences and differing levels of financial constraints.

It is clear that alternative media around the globe will continue to expand alongside future technological advances. The question that remains is to what degree they will do so. Mainstream media appear to be largely locked within traditional norms of objectivity, formulaic newsgathering and a reliance on elite sources. This might not continue into the future, particularly if alternative media grow to the potential outlined here. If alternative media focus on transparency and reader input in conjunction with the suggestions outlined in this research, they could feasibly gain a much larger share of the media landscape. Thus far, mainstream media have not shown any obvious move toward the kinds of storytelling suggested in this research, but these conceptualizations for future success are just as applicable to mainstream outlets. The future of alternative media should be strong provided they adapt quickly to technological changes and begin to draw upon the suggestions outlined in this paper.

An obvious limitation to this research is the small sample size. A more comprehensive examination of blogs would be more meaningful as a representative sample of alternative news blogs. Interviews with bloggers would also be beneficial in building research that better understands how bloggers manage their responsibilities and their own perceptions of success or failure within the alternative blogosphere.

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