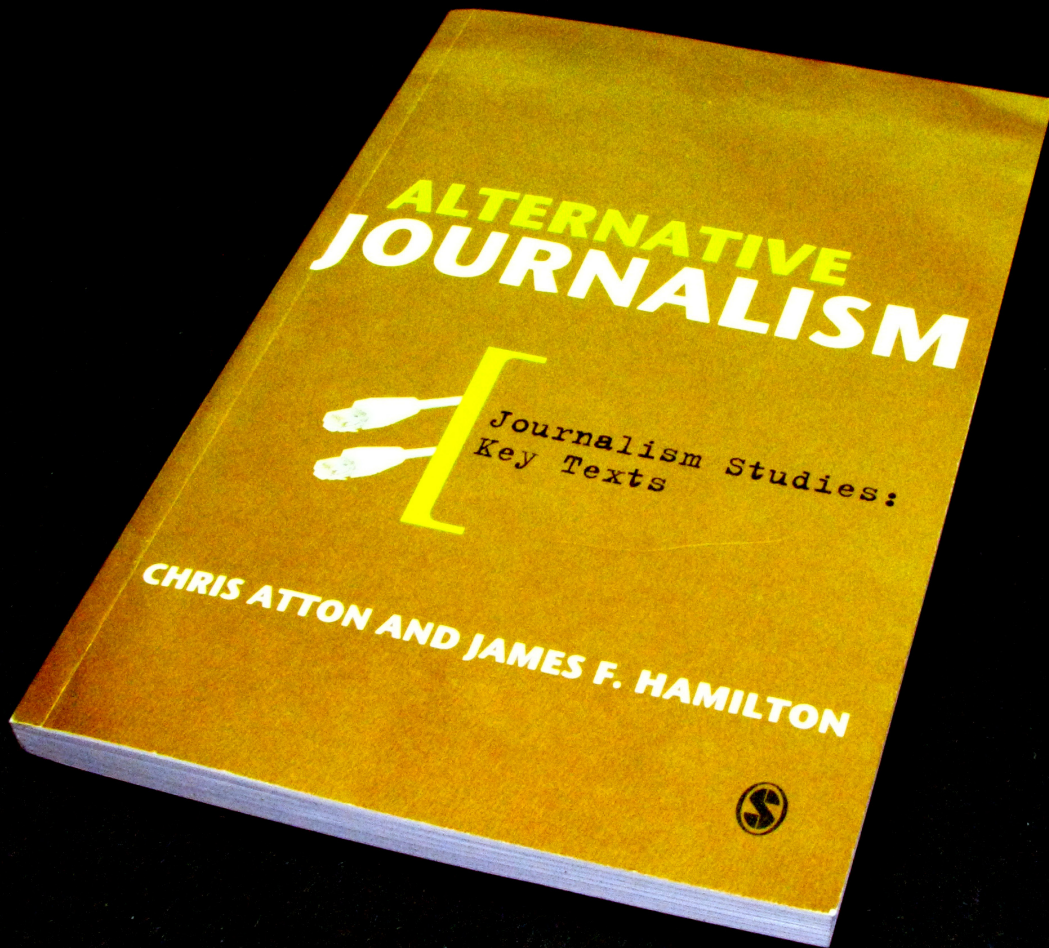


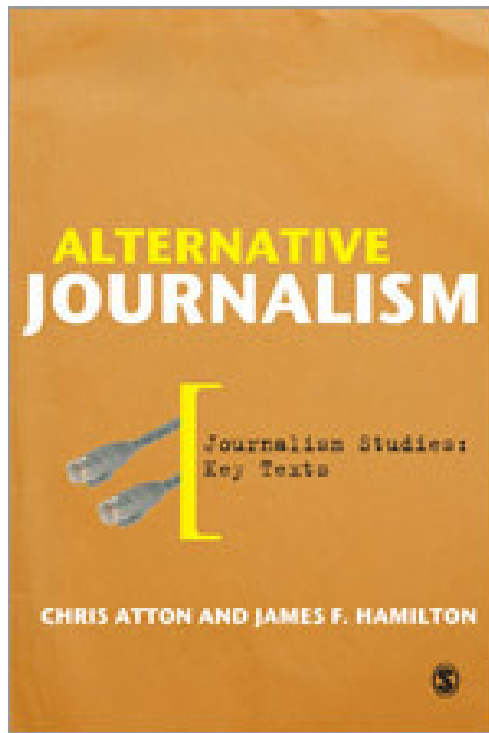
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**The** ColdType **READER**  
**EXTRA/1**



**WHY ALTERNATIVE  
JOURNALISM MATTERS**

An excerpt from the new book by **Chris Atton** and **James F. Hamilton**



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# WHY ALTERNATIVE JOURNALISM MATTERS

CHRIS ATTON AND JAMES F. HAMILTON

**E**ven for those who engage in it, alternative journalism can be infuriatingly vague. Is it restricted to newspapers and magazines, or can it include radio and television stations, blogs and social networking sites, pamphlets and posters, fanzines and 'zines, graffiti and street theatre, independent book publishing and even independent record production? How does it relate to citizen journalism, citizens' media, community media, democratic media, emancipatory media, radical media and social movement media?

Despite the immense range, what these and more examples have in common is a dissatisfaction not only with mainstream coverage of certain issues and topics, but also with the definition of news, conventions of news sources and representation, the inverted pyramid of news texts, the hierarchical and capitalized economy of commercial journalism, the professionalism and too-often elitism, the professional norm of objectivity, and the subordinate role of audiences. Alternative journalism tends to be produced by non-professionals



**Practitioners of alternative journalism also seek to redress what they consider an imbalance of media power in mainstream media, which results in the marginalization (at worst, the demonization) of certain social and cultural groups and movements**

who typically have little or no training or professional qualifications as journalists, and who write and report as citizens, as members of communities, as activists or as fans. As well as being homes for radical content, projects of alternative journalism also tend to be organized non-hierarchically or collectively, and almost always on a non-commercial basis. They hope to be independent of the market and immune to institutionalization. Practitioners of alternative journalism also seek to redress what they consider an imbalance of media power in mainstream media, which results in the marginalization (at worst, the demonization) of certain social and cultural groups and movements. Alternative journalism, then, becomes both a comparative term and a broader term. Within it we may place not only the journalisms of politics and empowerment, but those of popular culture and the everyday. Alternative journalism may be home to explorations of individual enthusiasm and subcultural identity just as much as to radical visions of society and the polity.

An account of the emergence of alter-

native journalism must begin by noting a supreme irony. Although disparaged today (and often for good reason), the development of what we refer to today as the ‘dominant’ or ‘mainstream’ mode of journalism was initially a critical (dare we say ‘alternative’?) response in its day to an earlier dominant. Such an irony helps explain how a committed socialist such as Welsh cultural critic Raymond Williams recognized ‘the achievement of the bourgeoisie in the creation of the modern press [... as] a major historical break-through’ of great significance.

The achievement was twofold. First, the modern, commercial press provided new forms of political resistance. Together with other changes, bourgeois journalism helped validate plural, secular and individual routes to knowledge; solidify a challenge to the authority of divine rulers and institutionalized clergy; and challenge the monopoly of knowledge enjoyed by court and church (although such a ‘monopoly’ was never total or conclusively challenged.) As the seventeenth century merged into the eighteenth, it gradually became accepted that authoritative claims to knowledge could be gained through bourgeois journalism, by virtue of its writers’ own observation, reasoning and argument. Assessments of the power and abilities of a certain class of readers rose similarly, in that passionately argued cases and detailed descriptions of events addressed readers as capable of evaluating claims and evidence for themselves and of drawing their own conclusions. While acknowledging the often severe limitations on who was allowed to participate, determining what was plausible if not true became a comparatively more public process of debate.

Second, forms of political resistance to this bourgeoisie were embodied by early-19th century independent radical newspapers as the ‘popular press’ of their day in the sense of, as Williams put it, ‘staking a new claim, articulating a new voice, in a situation in which otherwise there would



**The roots of the current disdain for the ‘mainstream press’ can be found in the collapse of the opposition between independent-radical and establishment, fueled by industrial and commercial expansion throughout the 19th century**

have been silence’. By contrast, ‘established newspapers’ of the day addressed a narrowly defined readership composed of business and political leaders.

This uneasy partitioning was not to last. The roots of the current disdain for the ‘mainstream press’ can be found in the collapse of the opposition between independent-radical and establishment, fueled by industrial and commercial expansion throughout the 19th century, which made it possible to dispense with authoritarian repression of the independent radical papers in favour of the techniques of absorption and incorporation. To secure greater business success, the commercial press adopted long-standing popular forms of chapbooks, ballads and pamphlets as well as selected ‘radical social and political attitudes’. The consolidation of the newspaper business into groups and chains and the securing of advertising revenue at a scale unimaginable only a short time previously gave the commercial-popular a productive capacity that moved it to a level entirely different from the radical-popular.

As a result, again in Williams’s words, ‘the control of popular journalism passed into the hands of successful large-scale entrepreneurs, who alone now could reach a majority of the public quickly and attractively and cheaply, on a national scale, but who by their very ability to do this, by their control of resources, were separated from or opposed to the people whom this popular journalism served’. The result of this extremely complex process was that ‘what had once been popular, in the political sense, was absorbed or deflected into “popular” in quite other senses’, with ‘market journalism replac[ing] the journalism of a community or movement’. Thus, alternative journalism was not simply repressed or stamped out, although clear and sustained efforts were made to do so, but marginalized, selectively incorporated, and rendered irrelevant in part because it lacked then and lacks today the resources of the commercial-popular but perhaps



## WHY JOURNALISM MATTERS

more importantly because it is now seen as specialized, idiosyncratic and, again in Williams's distinctive formulation, 'sectarian and strange'.

The emergence of the commercial-popular press helped instigate its own resistance, in the form of what we would recognize today as alternative journalism (although this term was not used at the time). The many oppositional presses of the nineteenth century were rooted in differing mixes of labour, foreign-language, suffrage and human rights interests. Despite their political opposition, however, the various oppositional presses relied upon the conception of bourgeois journalism used by the dominant. Until comparatively recently, bourgeois journalism itself was never the main target for challenge. Rather, it was the coin of the realm for legitimate public discourse and debate, regardless of the purpose or cause. The establishment and increasing institutionalization of objectivity and of professionalization as necessary features of 'legitimate' journalism were accepted by the dominant and the oppositional, but with the former always much better placed to attain it than the latter.

The extent to which this was the case is suggested by efforts at the beginning of the twentieth century to establish radical counterparts to commercial newspapers by mirroring all commercial aspects, except for perspective. Examples include the early 20th-century socialist U.S. newspaper the *Appeal to Reason* and the English suffrage newspaper *Votes for Women* of roughly the same era. The effort to use commercial tools to challenge dominant society remains current today, as can be seen in recent assessments of the anaemia of the alternative press based on its small size, meagre capitalization and resulting assumed ineffectuality.

However, a faith in using unchanged the tools of the dominant to challenge that very same dominant began to fragment further into the 20th century. Alternative journalism came to mean not only challenging the



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dominant social order politically, but also challenging and remaking the very bases of bourgeois journalism itself. The work of Darwin, Marx, Freud, romanticism, surrealism and others refuted claims of human rationality as well as the truth of direct appearances by focusing on forces beyond the control and direct observation of individual humans (such as evolution, material conditions, and the unconscious), which they claimed to be the real shapers of human lives and actions. Such criticisms were part of a more politicized critique not only of empiricism and objectivity, but of professionalization. Hierarchical, commercial bureaucracies were seen increasingly as beholden to the interests of their advertisers and, through them, to the social and political elite, and thus as unresponsive to the full range of readers' concerns. By contrast, radical republicanism, socialist workerism, anarchism and various other forms of collective and egalitarian organization were seen as more viable ways to organize journalistic work.

Criticisms of bourgeois journalism became more global in the wake of decolonization projects of the 1950s and 1960s, joining a much broader critique of Eurocentrism. By this is meant the argument that the suppositions and assumptions underlying not only capitalism but the dominance of Western countries (until recently) in the affairs of the world were directly implicated in the misery experienced by the majority of the world's peoples. The critique of Eurocentrism became the basis for such varied and mixed positions as a critique of colonialism (that the expansion and fortunes of Western societies were built on the back of subjugated and exploited non-Western populations); of capitalism (that European-derived knowledge provided the means and the rationale for dominating people); of patriarchal society as unchallengeable authority (particularly in the form of professionalization and bureaucracy); of racist society as a society in which large segments of the population are systematically and

actively disenfranchised and marginalized; and of mass culture and consumer society as hastening both the mass diversion of attention from issues of immense importance and the exhaustion of resources of the natural world to the point of global catastrophe.

In the wake of such criticism, not only were the claims of bourgeois journalism called into question, but new narrative forms were formulated and developed. The insufficiency of empiricism and naturalism (claims that one could aspire to neutral descriptions of things as they really are) suggested in turn that deeper realities could be apprehended only through seemingly unnatural means of representation. For example, the refusal to accept the long-standing distinction between fact and fiction paved the way for the rise by the 1950s of the ‘documentary novel’ and by the 1960s of the ‘new journalism’ as a non-fictional and authoritative means of representation that relied upon techniques pioneered in ostensibly fictional prose. Such challenges were also launched in other parts of the world. For example, the *crónica* of Latin America emerged in the 1960s in the wake of North American new journalism, blending in Bielsa’s words ‘very extensive popular cultural traditions, from song to television programs’. Receptive, non-professionalized organizations such as the underground presses of the 1960s proved to be fertile ground for the development of alternative modes of factual writing, with variations continuing to be practiced in the service of a variety of new social movements today.

Professionalized elitism was set aside in the popular correspondents’ movement in revolutionary Nicaragua during the 1980s. The movement was enabled by institutional support from oppositional political parties, open access to various outlets and the availability of training, the last of which was crucial for people who had typically ended schooling at the age of eight or nine. And largescale organization and capitalization was set aside in the dissident



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media of 1970s Iran. Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi note how so-called ‘small media’ (not only photocopied leaflets and audiocassette tapes but also their grassroots composition and circulation) helped to ‘foster an imaginative social solidarity, often as a precursor for actual physical mobilization’. In addition to critiquing professionalism and institutionalization, Eastern European *samizdat* also broadened the sense of what constituted forms of ‘journalistic’ political engagement beyond traditional reportage. More available means of reproduction included typewriters and carbon copiers, mimeography, photography and hand-copying. And as exemplified by *samizdat* in 1970s Poland and pre-1989 Czechoslovakia, emphasis was placed on worker correspondence instead of professional journalism, and on such non-journalistic forms as novels, short stories, poetry, plays, literary criticism, historical and philosophical essays.

Central to the empowerment claimed today by alternative journalism is the opportunity for ‘ordinary’ people to tell their own stories without the formal education or professional expertise and status of the mainstream journalist. This approach is relevant not only to politicised alternative media, but to cultural media such as fanzines and zines. Although some features of alternative journalism have not simply broken with mainstream practices, they have often sought to radically redefine them. Though alternative media have found different ways of doing journalism, their work may draw on existing forms (such as tabloid journalism) and methods (such as investigative journalism). Atton argues elsewhere that the use of tabloid features such as colloquial language, humour, the apparent trivialization of subject matter, and the brevity of texts presents radical opinions in a populist manner that subverts the existing models of tabloid journalism, which are typically employed to maintain conservative news agendas. These radical forms connect historically with early, radical-popular forms

## WHY JOURNALISM MATTERS

of journalism, which emphasised a kind of communicative democracy based on a media commons rather than on a segregated, elitist and professionalised activity.

Today, the most prevalent function of alternative news is to fill the gaps that its reporters believe have been left by the mainstream media. These gaps are due in part to the increasingly conglomerated nature of commercialised news production, where centralisation and bureaucratization result in a standardized and limited repertoire of news across the range of media platforms. It is also due to the professionalized nature of journalism, where newsgathering and assessments of newsworthiness are routinized to such an extent the news production relies on repeated formulas. These formulas include story structures (such as the inverted pyramid), sourcing routines that emphasise elite groups in society and news values that privilege events over explanation.

The Internet has made possible two complementary practices that challenge these routines and formulas. First, alternative media sites are able to monitor news output from an immense range of providers, including commercial organisations and other alternative media projects. Second, this monitoring can be undertaken by large numbers of people, who are then able, in Bruns's words, to 'analyse, evaluate, and discuss the information'. In contrast to the gatekeeping that is traditionally the preserve of the professional journalist, Bruns calls this process 'gatewatching'. An alternative news network such as the global Indymedia project gatewatches the output of both mainstream and other alternative media and re-presents selections from that output in ways that encourage comparison and criticism.

Furthermore, the participation of large numbers of activists and enthusiasts contributes to a journalism that is open-ended and multiperspectival. Internet-based projects such as Indymedia and the technology news site Slashdot have developed a multi-



**The publication of multiple voices promotes a very different notion of the place of news in the formation of public opinion from that of the mainstream media**

perspectival journalism that brings together breaking news, eyewitness reporting and commentary, with the alternative journalist both reporter and activist, what Bruns coins 'producers'. The multiple reports (often of the same event or issue) are made possible by editorial practices that are very different from the hierarchical practices of mainstream media. Most Indymedia operate a practice of open publishing, where all submissions are published. By contrast, Slashdot's editors decide which stories to publish, though there are sites inspired by Slashdot (such as Kuro5hin and Plastic) where registered users can suggest changes to stories and can vote on which stories will be published on the site.

Despite these differences, the publication of multiple voices promotes a very different notion of the place of news in the formation of public opinion from that of the mainstream media. Instead of news, commentary and opinion being presented within a limited set of frames – such as the political viewpoint of a single news provider or the liberal ideology of the journalist as gatekeeper – Heikkila and Kunelius argue that public deliberation should begin with a journalism that 'underscores the variety of ways to frame an issue', rather than presenting an issue already framed in a single, particular, and exclusive way.

This view is not shared by all participatory news projects, however. Wikinews encourages multiple contributors and – like its Wikipedia counterpart – allows any user to edit its content. However, Wikinews also seeks to reduce the multiple perspectives of its contributors into a single, coherent narrative. It encourages factual reporting and suppresses commentary and opinion, with an emphasis on the neutral point of view resembling the objectivity of mainstream journalism as does its unidirectional flow from writer to reader. Because commentary and discussion of the news is forbidden, there are none of the multiple conversations that characterise Indymedia and Slashdot.

A social networking site such as MySpace or the consumer-generated content in Amazon's review sections present a different notion of participatory cultural production, one where opinions, experiences and tastes are instances and extensions of everyday life rather than expressions of engagement in political life and the public sphere. Whether such writers see themselves as journalists, political activists or subcultural or counter-cultural commentators, contributors to MySpace or amateur reviewers on Amazon are superficially similar to fanzine writers, insofar as they are amateur critics and commentators on popular culture. However, fanzine writers work within a framework that is entirely independent of the mainstream media, unlike contributors to MySpace or Amazon, who write in a setting not of their making, one that is carefully controlled, even policed.

Fanzine writers share much with their professional counterparts, the cultural journalists. A significant similarity exists between the fan as amateur writer and the professional writer as fan. This says much about expert culture in popular musical criticism, for example, where knowledge and authority proceed not from formal, educational or professional training but primarily from autodidactic, amateur enthusiasm. Once again, we see the privileging of the 'ordinary' voice. In the case of fanzines, however (and their online counterparts, ezines), these ordinary voices tend to be self-selected, rather than sought out and encouraged as in the alternative local press.

Fanzine journalism also shares with its professionalised counterpart a perspective based on consumption, but it often arises because the objects of their interest (football, film, comics and popular television series, as well as popular music) are ignored by mainstream journalism. This might be due to the novelty of the performer or genre (fanzines often draw attention to new and emerging cultural activities) or because they have become unfashionable.



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Fanzines also challenge critical orthodoxy; they may arise because their writers believe that 'their' culture is marginalised or misrepresented by mainstream tastes. Unlike the local alternative press, fanzines offer opportunities to create, maintain and develop taste communities across geographic boundaries. They are less interested in reaching out to broader audiences, preferring to cultivate and consolidate a specialist audience. This consolidation often employs similar methods to mainstream cultural journalism such as interviews and reviews (or match reports, in the case of football fanzines). Fanzine writers, however, tend to write at much greater length than the 'capsule' reviews that are now common in newspapers and specialist, commercial magazines. In some cases, particularly in ezines, a kaleidoscopic approach is obtained by publishing multiple accounts of the same event or product, just as Indymedia does with accounts of protests and demonstrations. The credibility and authority of a music fanzine often enables it to obtain interviews from artists directly, bypassing public-relations professionals.

The fanzine is dominated by comment and opinion. Editorial comment and personal columns are common, as are satire, jokes and cartoons. Newsgathering is a different matter, however. Fanzines often have erratic publishing schedules; this infrequency militates against the timely reporting of news. The move of many fanzines to the Internet has enabled them to take advantage of increased periodicity and hyperlinking to develop news strands as standard. Atton's study of online British football fanzines identified three typical approaches to news: stories reproduced verbatim from professional news media; stories summarized from the professional media; and original journalism. The latter was in the minority and usually embedded in interviews. Hard news stories were usually sourced from commercial news providers. Unlike local alternative journalism, there was no evidence of original, investi-



## WHY JOURNALISM MATTERS

gative reporting. Instead, the fanzines drew mostly on local and national mainstream media, as well as press releases from the football clubs.

In its ideal form, the blog combines the individual approach often found in fanzines with the social responsibility of local alternative journalism. Bloggers present their narratives, news and commentary from the perspective of the individual. Blogs may describe the everyday minutiae of the writer's life, or may function as journalism, and therefore may be understood as comprising a number of practices. These include the publishing of personal diaries by professionals (such as journalists and politicians); amateur investigative journalism, comment and opinion (such as American Matt Drudge's Drudge Report and the British blogger, 'Guido Fawkes') and eyewitness reporting by observers and participants. Amateur blogs have been credited with breaking news in advance of mainstream news organisations: for example, Trent Lott's resignation as the US Senate's majority leader in December 2002 followed his blogged comments expressing implicit acceptance of racism of the Old South.

This journalism focuses less on the journalist as professional expert and more on new ways of thinking about and producing journalism, although again there is no hard-and-fast line between them. The blog has become both an alternative and a mainstream practice. As Lowrey points out, the use of blogs as part of professional journalism 'repairs' the perceived vulnerabilities of professional journalists. If considered as occupational rivals, bloggers continue to press professional journalists to reassess and retool what they do. However, the incorporation of the blogs into news organisations and the use of bloggers as sources are not the only possible strategies. As Lowrey continues, 'the journalism community may try to redefine blogging as journalistic tool, and bloggers as amateur journalists or journalism wannabes (rather than as a unique occupation)'.



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'Active witnessing' (Nick Couldry's apt term) is particularly found in the journalism of new social movements, where subjective testimony and eyewitness reporting dominate. An illuminating instance of this practice is a video report produced for Undercurrents by 'Jen', an activist for the Campaign Against Arms Trade. Her piece presents her as advocate for arms control, an activist campaigner, a commentator and an investigative reporter, emphasising the hybrid nature of much alternative journalism. Here, explicitly partisan accounts are constructed from a personal, ideological commitment that deals with the emotive and the rational through a radicalisation of journalistic technique. Jen isn't a professional journalist, nor does she pretend to be. Her interview with Robin Cook (then Foreign Secretary for the British government) is opportunistic, unplanned, hurried and brief. Postgraduate journalism students we've encountered who've seen her report reach a striking consensus regarding Jen's lack of conventional journalistic expertise, which they typically find worrying and at times embarrassing.

But we must not consider this example from Undercurrents as typical. The value of acquiring conventional training in journalism has been recognised by many alternative media projects and journalists. The writing styles in US publications such as CovertAction Quarterly and Z Magazine strongly resemble those found in investigative journalism within the mainstream. In the 1990s Undercurrents offered camcorder training to activists and strove to produce broadcast-quality footage. At the same time British alternative political newspaper Squall was staffed by activists who had or were undergoing journalism training (say, at night classes), and some of their reporters and photographers produced work that has accorded so well with professional standards that it has been published in more mainstream publications (such as Gibby Zobel's work in the Big Issue and the Guardian).

Despite Undercurrents' desideratum of broadcast-quality footage, it also celebrated 'underproduction' by, in Harding's words, turning 'your weaknesses (few resources, little experience) to an advantage by keeping your feature simple but powerful'. Squall, on the other hand, was more interested in 'talking to the bridge' and celebrated the diversity of its readership (which included British Members of Parliament). The paper operated its own house style in order to preserve standards. The radical news sheet SchNEWS, produced weekly in Bristol, also has a house style of its own. In its use of pun-filled headlines (such as 'Terror Firmer', 'Chinese Horrorscope', 'Water Disgrace!') and its colloquial and irreverent copy style, SchNEWS might be considered the British tabloid of alternative journalism. It takes the ethic of active witnessing and places it in a framework derived from right-wing newspapers whose ideologies could not be further from its own. In so doing it inverts the hierarchy of access to the media at the same time as it subverts tabloid conventions that are normally used to communicate familiar prejudices such as racism and homophobia.

The representation of, for example, ethnic minorities and of gays and lesbians is rarely an ethical issue for alternative journalists, since they are already operating within a morally 'progressive' environment where discriminatory practices largely do not arise. Where biased representation may arise is, ironically enough, as a result of a politically progressive notion of free speech. Some alternative media projects have relinquished what has been an abiding ideology of no platform for fascists/racists/homophobes in favour of an open-platform approach. This is part a libertarian impulse, and part a capability of open publishing software used by Internet-based media such as Indymedia. Intended to encourage activist reporting and democratic access to the media, open publishing has been used by racists to post offensive material to Indymedia sites, signaling how a



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technical advance has developed into the political problem of how to support free speech without aiding hate speech.

There seems to us to be no reason why persistent questions about organisation (internal and across networks), economics, participation and access should cease to be relevant to alternative journalism in the foreseeable future. Voluntary labour, low levels of funding and demographic constraints often prevent alternative journalism projects from achieving stability and longevity, which become particularly relevant for political projects that depend on continuity and consistency to develop the most appropriate strategies and skills. Indeed, an emphasis on collective and non-hierarchical consensus decision-making as a kind of prefigurative politics might simply delay the further development of alternative journalism, requiring its practitioners to sustain projects for even longer, if only to establish stable norms and conventions of practice.

One can push questions further about the future of how alternative journalism is organised. Sceptics might argue that the general tendency within alternative media projects towards radical independence can only lead to alternative journalists remaining isolated and thus marginalised. Such a development would take Comedia's argument concerning the ghettoization of alternative journalism even further, asserting that alternative journalists will become increasingly isolated from each other, their audiences fragmented, and wider publics largely ignorant of what from the 'outside' might well appear incoherent and directionless. Such potential consequences would be especially damaging to alternative journalism that is wedded to the activities of social movements. After all, what is the use of radical projects of representation, reporting and commentary if they advance neither the internal goals of a movement nor its wider, increasingly global, goals? If alternative journalism is above all concerned with contesting and rebalancing – if not democ-

## WHY JOURNALISM MATTERS

ratizing – media power, then it must do so by engaging with broader projects of social transformation. It appears unlikely, however, that we would ever see such a merger enacted in anything but the most general terms: the terrain of alternative journalism is itself far too contested, its practitioners often too transient, to produce any enduring and articulated response.

Seen differently, however, the improbability of a unified policy or practice defining alternative journalism is likely to be its most valuable characteristic. As a counterbalance to the pessimistic picture, two more optimistic possibilities lie somewhat paradoxically in what we have already identified as problems: fragmentation and separatism within alternative journalism, and the challenge of transforming alternative journalism from a marginal practice to a meaningful form of public communication. First, one of the strengths of alternative journalism is its resistance to homogenization. Rather than consider alternative journalism as irredeemably weakened by diversity and difference, we should consider it as beneficially fluid and mobile, a result of continual and open questioning among its practitioners of what alternative journalism is and what it could become.

A second optimistic possibility emerges by recognizing how alternative journalism has formed in many ways the wellspring of mainstream journalism. Practices that we think of as experiments in alternative media, such as the blog, now enjoy immense popularity throughout the mainstream as well. The popularization and acceptance of hitherto experimental forms of journalism could be seen as a form of absorption and depoliticisation, but it could just as defensibly be seen as evidence of a successful challenge. Broad swathes of the public have become media-literate in their use of what otherwise might have remained radical forms of communication. In short, the radical has both changed and been changed by the mainstream in a struggle over the practice of journalism and its relationship to



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democratic participation.

A key factor is the ability of audiences to find alternative sources. Uneven awareness of and access to alternative news sources are likely to lead to a further fragmentation of audiences than we are already seeing within alternative media and in the wider, multi-channel world. Signposting, an activity increasingly the province of online content aggregators, is an integral part of enabling media literacy, but one increasingly reliant on alternative journalism projects working together in a formalized manner. Even within the alternative media of special interests such as gay and lesbian journalism or environmental activism, there appears to be far too antagonistic a range of ideologies, aims and practices for any systematic signposting or aggregation to have emerged.

Additional challenges to commercial-popular journalism are likely to persist, yet the relationship between alternative and mainstream journalism is not a one-way street. Neither are borrowings, transformations and interminglings always to the benefit of alternative journalism. If the blog has done something to offset the democratic in the media by demonstrating how mainstream journalism might otherwise be practised, we should remember that, as Lowrey has argued, the blog has also been used by professional journalists to regain the trust of a disaffected public.

The rise of user-created content and citizen journalism presents a current challenge to professional news organisations, and one that is likely to persist. The challenge has been dealt with by the incorporation of this content (and implicitly its techniques) into the routines of professional journalism. Incorporation is particularly frequent in breaking television news, where news organisations find it impossible to obtain images from anything but amateur sources. However, such a strategy and use of ‘consumer content’ is closer to the routines of vox pops than it is to that of the deprofessionalised, politically engaged alterna-

tive journalist. It is only the content that is being incorporated, not the philosophy or point of view of the citizen (except in the most banal way).

One should keep an eye on blogging to see how this process will play out. The blog has become incorporated into the everyday practices of professional journalism. In the UK, PM, one of BBC Radio 4's major news and review programmes, maintains a blog which acts as forum for its listeners' discussion of the programme's stories, is used to promote the programme and, significantly, invites listeners to discuss ideas for features with the production team (these are broadcast weekly in a special edition of the programme called iPM). We might, of course, see this as a cynical attempt to recuperate radical forms of representation for the purposes of marketing, to take emerging forms of alternative journalism and rework them in order to add a contemporary sheen to dominant practices, thus demonstrating that established news organisations are sensitive to popular cultural change.

Such developments are made possible by larger-scale limits and pressures. The case of the internet raises the more general issue of technology and corresponding degrees of access. More widely available technologies of reproduction and distribution – when practiced within an alternative journalism that emphasises the values of openness and broad participation – have done much to enhance access. When assessing this development, one can suggest a paradoxical relationship between the level of technological sophistication and the expansion of access – that the greater the technological sophistication, the more generally available and usable the technology becomes.

All this is to say that the goal of radical-popular forms of alternative journalism must be to make available to all who wish to contribute to or make use of alternative journalism the technical means and skill of doing so. A present capability we see little change in is the continued broadening of means of composition and distribu-



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tion. However, their potential will live up to the intentions of a radical-popular alternative journalism only if they become increasingly neutral with respect to technical training and resources. Current limitations in need of continued attention include the still often difficult matters of software coding and the management of computer networks, but even more importantly the widely variant knowledge of touch-typing and, further, of basic literacy in the form of reading and writing. With this in mind, the increasing availability and use of video and audio recording as podcasts and vlogs is a promising trend in regards to present barriers of basic literacy, because they rely on gestures and speech instead of difficult-to-learn (and thus comparatively easy to control) skills of alphabetical composition and reading which require years of intensive training. Given the present and growing use of audio and video recording, and the accelerating commercial imperative of developing consumer-grade recorders and broadened digital bandwidth, such a trend will very likely accelerate for the foreseeable future.

Yet one must also keep in mind the geopolitical unevenness of commercial developments, as important as they are. As increasingly diasporic and distributed social movements rely more and more heavily on digital efforts enabled by the Internet and the commercial computer industry, access to infrastructure – both in the form of networks and of hardware and software – remains a key problem to negotiate. Among the key points to note is the gulf between internet capabilities in the West and, for example, many parts of the African continent. No matter the digital means of alternative journalism available in the West, those same means will continue to play at best a marginal role in many areas of the world for the foreseeable future, and will probably be limited to intellectuals in urban centres, tied as they are to current patterns of commercial infrastructural development.

Taking into account the matters of tech-



## WHY JOURNALISM MATTERS

nology and infrastructure as well as of citizen journalism discussed above, the current challenge to commercial news companies posed by user-created content and the rise of so-called ‘citizen journalism’ will also continue. We have already noted the efforts that commercial news companies are making to steer user contributions into professionalised forms that simply mimic ‘eyewitness’ accounts typical of traditional news. Despite these efforts at incorporation, the commercial necessity of user-created content will continue as the major challenge not only to individual media companies but to the very structure and viability of media industries as currently conceived. Being the commercial companies they are, media organisations compete madly for market shares and audiences, using any and all means at their disposal to best their competition. Greater public participation in the form of user-created content is only the latest effort to find the elusive competitive advantage. Thus, if a news company is increasingly compelled to provide substantial content gathered by ‘outsiders’ in order to gain a competitive advantage, then why have any ‘insiders’ at all, except to manage the flow of material from the outside? To the degree that this continues to be the case, the long-standing competitive advantage of professionalisation – and how it restricts the legitimate practice of journalism to a handful of organizationally validated professionals – will continue to be modified if not even more openly challenged than it already is. More generally speaking, the political economy of the news industry today is doing more to shuffle and in some ways to open up access than any degree of boycott or other overt challenge. At the same time, the danger of the incorporation of what has been an oppositional practice into the logic of commercialisation cannot be set aside.

We see the remaining and in some ways deepest challenge and most promising trend as the experimentation in new forms of authoritative representations of crises in



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our world, forms that work in ways very different from bourgeois journalism. Much of this is being done in artistic spheres, as new ways of conceiving a distributed, fluid collectivity but also of one’s place and contribution in it. Current examples hardly resemble journalism, but that may turn out to be their advantage.

One such form is the collaborative documentary, which is put to use in a variety of projects from the small and decidedly eclectic to the large and minimally commercial. The Echo Chamber Project not only seeks to make a film critical of the performance of the US press’s role in the run-up to the Iraq invasion, but also focuses, in its words, on ‘developing collaborative techniques for producing this film’. The self-described ‘grassroots political documentary’ as developed by the Brave New Foundation coordinates 1,200 volunteer field producers, researchers and organisers for the production and distribution of its various documentaries. As an example, it drafted eight self-described ‘middle-aged citizens from different backgrounds’, asking them to watch three months of Fox News and to offer their own sense of key recurring techniques that the newscast used. At the same time, the production company recorded the newscast around the clock and then used the volunteer researchers’ observations to develop the key points of analysis embodied in the documentary released as *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism*. Over and above the information gathered and the case made, what is notable here is new, collaborative forms of composition.

Beyond documentary projects (as well as the ever-expanding number of sites on to which users can download their own video and audio), other efforts experiment with forms of knowledge about the world more distantly related to the claims of bourgeois journalism, but no less engaged. For example, the ‘Lives Connected’ project documents the human implications of the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe for the US city of New Orleans both by providing a series

of public testimonials and also by providing through its innovative linking scheme a sense of common patterns and experiences among the individual stories which enlarges by many times one's understanding of this disaster as a shared experience. The project was undertaken by the Peter A. Mayer Advertising agency based in New Orleans, thus also complicating easy distinctions between 'mainstream' and 'alternative', while also stretching the boundaries of digitally enabled forms of knowledge.

While perhaps unnervingly strange, these and many other experiments at collaborative (as opposed to professionalised) composition and forms of knowledge outside of bourgeois journalism enable audiences to become creators in ways not fragmented and isolated (emulating the



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dominant conceptions of creativity), but in ways that are collective, social, negotiable – and open. They also suggest how future directions of alternative journalism are increasingly aspiring not only to information delivery (as valuable as that is), but also to the development of skills and to open experimentation with forms, technologies and uses. Indeed, the future of alternative journalism may very well be best characterised as a growth of media literacy in the broadened sense, not only of learning about the world but also of learning the skills of composition and use. Foregrounding this twin sense of learning might very well become the surest way of escaping the ghetto of marginalisation and isolation.

The greatest changes and challenges are still to come.

**WRITING WORTH  
READING FROM  
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