

Reviews

Democratic Communications: Formations, Projects and Possibilities. By James F. Hamilton. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008, 335p. (cloth, \$80.00) ISBN-10: 0739118668; ISBN-13: 9780739118665

Understanding Alternative Media. By Olga Guedes Bailey, Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpenter. Maidenhead UK and New York: Open University Press and McGraw Hill, 2008, 196 p. (paperback, \$54.95) ISBN-10: 033522210; ISBN-13: 9780335222101

The Alternative Media Handbook. By Kate Coyer, Tony Downumt and Alan Fountain. London and New York: Routledge, 2007, 352 p. (paperback, \$34.15) ISBN-10: 0-41535965-1; ISBN- 13: 978-0-415-35965-8

During the past decade or so the category of “Independent/Alternative Media” has slowly become accepted as (1) existing at all and (2) a legitimate object of study – a functioning media subsector – in the field of Communication research.

On the one hand a string of books and articles have accomplished three benchmarks. First, they constructed a series of theoretical frames that valorize independent alternative media. Second they provided a tableau of case studies showing varied and continuous operation of these media refuting a previous era’s conclusion that they were always and only linked to and dependent upon transient social movements. And last, they offered a range of accounts uniting previously perceived disparate initiatives into an inter-related category confirming Raymond William’s early estimation that resistance formations would always appropriate media forms and technologies for alternative information and culture production (Atton, 2004, 2003a, 2003b, 2002a, 2002b, 1999; Coudry and Curran, 2003; Downing et. al., 2003a, 2003b, 2001,1995,1984; Duncombe, 1997; Hackett and Carroll, 2006; Halleck, 2002; Hamilton and Atton 2001; Hamilton, 2000; Kidd, 2003a, 2003b; Murphy, 2005, 2004,1994; Rodriguez, 2001; Streitmatter, 2001).

On the other hand new developments in quantifying the impact of Independent/Alternative media on society as a whole have over turned the chronically inappropriate market based data collection models to show that, while small in size, the ‘sector’ has an influence far larger (Clarke and Van Slyke, 2006).

On the whole these dual developments have tended to influence theoretical debates inside post-graduate academia or served to bolster claims for foundation support to working media organizations. But have these important findings filtered to the place where the vast majority of people study Communication?

Most people who connect with the study of Communication do so as undergraduates. For most undergraduates the “frame” for understanding what makes up

the field of Mass Communications is delivered in the classic introductory course variously titled, “Introduction to Mass Communication; Introduction to Mass Media.” That introductory course and its text book define for students the map of media activities in politics, economics and society.

The generic ‘Introduction to Mass Media’ course has become so ubiquitous that a virtual textbook ‘sub-sector’ has evolved. Two typical books in this genre are ‘Introduction to Mass Communication, Fifth Edition (Baran, 2008) and ‘Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication (Campbell, Martin and Fabos, 2009/10). These books, supported by their various CD/DVD/Web page appendages, have become the de-facto ‘Canon’ of the range of media and communication activities in society.

Independent/alternative may have become an established category of analysis in the sphere of research and practice, but has it seeped into the mainstream canon of mass communication studies?

The Baran textbook is 516 pages and includes chapters highlighting perspectives ranging from “Communication and Culture” (reflecting the mainstream nod to Critical Cultural Studies) through media industry surveys, theories, regulations, and global media. ‘Alternative’ media are mentioned in five instances throughout the whole book – dispersed and unconnected with no sense of size, category of actions and impact: blogs (not necessarily ‘alternative’); the early Native American press; a paragraph summarizing all the American alternative news weeklies from the 1960s to 2003; a paragraph on ‘commuter’ newspapers; a passing un-contextualized mention of the American Internet critical news distributor *Altnet* without highlighting its influential founder Don Hazen (Hazen and Winokur, 1997). There are no content listings under ‘Independent Media.’”

The Campbell et. al. textbook is 513 pages and includes the now accepted ‘nod’ to critical perspectives, a standard set of media industry surveys, and a discussion of “media and democracy.” Again, ‘alternative’ is mentioned in four cases, dispersed, unconnected and without any discussion of social/political impact – even in the section on media and democracy: three paragraphs on alternative political magazines from left to right between the 1960s and 2008; two pages on non-commercial and ‘alternative rock’ radio (not necessarily alternative as defined by the scholars mentioned above); a brief survey of the history of minority community newspapers; a one page profile of I.F. Stone. The word ‘Independent’ is used only in relation to feature films and a TV channel.

Is there a disconnect here? There is a two decade spread of substantial research establishing existence of a significant Independent/Alternative media sector that is diverse, has multiple connections to constituencies and can be shown to have a significant impact upon politics and society. But there is also a Mass Communication studies canon that hardly recognizes the whole sector, mentions bits and pieces of the sector in minute individual profiles and ignores the evidence of media activism, investigation and social/political impact.

If one is to take the generic text books at face value the average Communication/Media undergraduate will come away from a standard introductory survey course with absolutely no idea that Independent/Alternative media exist. Far from knowing the rich histories, case studies, activist profiles and ground breaking theo-

retical frames offered by the recent scholarship, undergraduates will be led to believe that the very mainstream media which the nod to ‘critical’ communication studies problematizes are the de facto permanent reality. TINA: There Is No Alternative.

If we, within the scholarship of Independent/Alternative media, are convinced to accept that the body of research during the past two decades establishes our object of study within the Communication Studies canon, is it not time to begin judging new contributions from the perspective of how they contribute to the ‘popularization’ of the sector in the undergraduate canon? In that spirit this essay focuses on three recent and substantial contributions to the field of Independent/Alternative media studies looking for a way that the material might be used to open a space in the undergraduate canon.

In *Democratic Communications: Formations, Projects, Possibilities* (Hamilton, 2008), author James F. Hamilton draws on many years of research and experience to produce a book that is both thoughtful and challenging within the scholarship of Independent/Alternative media. The work appears to be a major watershed in a long discourse on the field (Hamilton 2000; 2001). The book starts with a useful preface about definitions: What is ‘alternative’ anyway? This is a perennial debate in the field of Independent/Alternative media scholarship. Hamilton warns that a current trend to a structuralist focus upon “alternatives” which prioritizes social networking and textual analysis can miss out on historicizing the conditions that have made the current media initiatives possible. He fruitfully broadens definitions of the field beyond the specifics of texts, structures and technologies to forms and modes of democratic communication striving towards ‘cultures of truth.’

To that end Hamilton provides a section on the histories of “alternative” media that reaches back into early modern England. Borrowing a leaf from the neo-Gramscian school, and drawing heavily on the work of Raymond Williams, Hamilton posits the emergence of “alternatives” as part of a complex competition by social forces seeking to maintain or contest hegemony through social, economic and political ‘markets.’ He maintains that the field and the competitors are a shifting tableau of social groupings where alliances may shatter and re-attach in different directions depending on the flow of power in the ‘markets.’

Establishing the “market centric” frame Hamilton surveys recent and current communication initiatives driven by philanthropic, community and intellectual/cultural dissent from capitalism and its negative effects. In the conclusion of the book Hamilton weighs the possibilities for emerging democratic communications. He focuses on the current spike in speculation about consumer generated content: The ‘Prosumer.’ And he finishes with a discussion of the integrated ‘movement’ towards the democratization of mainstream communication and the surge within media education towards critical teaching: media literacy.

This book is a substantial contribution to the scholarship of Independent/Alternative media. It is clearly aimed at researchers in the field and post graduates studying the field. It adds new complexity to the debates on field definitions and brings an important and refreshing note of historicism to current trends in research.

In *Understanding Alternative Media* Guedes et. al. are trying the bridge the gap between the academic scholarship of the field and the undergraduate canon. Writ-

ing for the Open University Press in the United Kingdom, they have opted for an outline that provides a theoretical introduction followed by a range of case studies. They propose four categories in which to place 'alternative' media. The first is media servicing a community, which can be space or place based. The second is media which are predicated upon offering a different set of data and narratives to the perceived dominant or mainstream media. The third are media which see themselves facilitating the operation of civil society. Drawing on Downing (who drew on Deleuze and Guattari) the fourth is seen as "rhizomic," and serving two purposes: "to express opposition vertically and to build networking laterally" (page 25).

The authors begin their case studies by describing a Brazilian film which told the story of a community radio station started in a poor community in 1980. According to the authors, though the film is romantic and stereotypical, in its depiction of the history of the station each of the four categories of Alternative Media are demonstrated. There follow eight more case studies, two each illustrating the four categorizations.

Two case studies focus on community media. The first surveys community access radio in a range of nations and concludes that, although policies at the UN level and in nations with strong public broadcasting traditions advocate community involvement, on the whole community run radio is not facilitated by state or civil structures. The second case addresses 'diasporic' media, which in itself provides challenges for the concept of 'Alternative' media. The chapter is a literature review of studies on how diasporic media are perceived and used. The conclusion is that diasporic media are used to negotiate past, present and future identities across spaces.

Looking at alternative media as countering a perceived mainstream two chapters focus on blogs and the second Iraq war, and the media of ethnic/religious minorities. The first, a brief content analysis, speculates that blogs can be a very accessible counter to hegemonic news narratives but also represent a shifting space between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' ideological formations. The second, a single case study of a minority newspaper, questions the common assumption that if a media organization is 'commercial' it is therefore not 'alternative.'

Illustrating the third category, media facilitating operation of civil society, one chapter profiles two Internet organizational mailing lists and forums while another reports on the Landless Rural Workers' Movement of Brazil and its media: a newspaper, a magazine, radio programs and a web site. The first, a content analysis, proposes that the Internet provides tools to bring people together in ways that facilitate better institutional self-organization but have a down side of anonymity. The second, a social movement profile, places the media of the organization in the context of the physical communication of direct action.

For 'Rhizomic' media the authors chose two case studies: a web page that facilitates the exchange of radio content; and culture jamming on the Internet where the individual and group actors play with, re-design and doctor cultural totems to provoke civil debate and action. The Rhizomic aspect of the radio content exchange is seen as the ability of local content producers to be catapulted onto a global networking stage. The same results are claimed for moving culture jamming to the Internet.

This book is a clear attempt to start popularizing years of Independent/Alternative media scholarship. It simplifies detailed and important theoretical discussions developed and maintained by Hamilton, Downing, Atton and many others. It attempts to make the definitions concrete with case studies which are short, direct, and tightly linked to the definitional categories. It has a chapter by chapter list of further readings directing a student and instructor to deeper analyses of the field.

With *The Alternative Media Handbook* Coyer et. al. have organized a comprehensive survey backed by overviews of theory and history, concluding in a set of recipes for people ‘doing it themselves.’ As in each of these books, the authors start first with definitions. Like Hamilton, they begin with Raymond Williams’ foundational assertions about the possibilities of new media technologies being ‘appropriated’ to make content quite different from that offered by a hegemonic social network. Then they turn to Atton’s categorizations for an Alternative media sector, to Rodriguez’s and her notion of citizens not only voting but taking communicative action, and finally again to the Rhizomic concept.

There are four chapters that provide a range of historical case studies: radio; alternative film and video; alternative press; The Web. Each draws on initiatives from various parts of the world. The case study aspect of this book offers surveys of Independent/Alternative practice circa 2001-05. The chapter on ‘Radical Journalism,’ has a useful introduction by Chris Atton and provides case studies mostly focused on Indymedia—the Indymedia Centers, IMCs. The chapter on ‘Experimental Forms,’ focuses on re-visioning television content. There is a chapter which surveys ‘citizen’ access to public media. Another chapter addresses the constant issue of how to get radical content: by negotiating through mainstream media or creating parallel media? Similarly to the book by Guedes et. al. there is a section of culture jamming.

Five more survey chapters deal with the impact of ‘new’ technologies, the organizational issues of media development, relations between community producers and audiences, student media, and media activism. Although each has its merits and is a contribution to scholarship in the field, the part of the book which sets this collection apart from others is its third and concluding section ‘Doing it yourself.’

The section opens with some guiding suggestions about starting or joining an alternative media initiative. Then it takes readers through a range of production possibilities, and how to do them in radio, video/TV production, websites, blogging, print publishing, zines, and culture jamming while giving tips on fund raising.

Looking at these three books together there is no denying that the sub-field of Independent/Alternative media studies has come of age in academic research. These contributions show in their own way that there is a shared theoretical framework - even an increasingly agreed definitional categorization of what ‘alternative media’ are. As in many collections published in the past 20 years, each contribution here provides case study material further establishing the ‘permanent’ nature of ‘resistive’ communication and cultures. In effect, they hammer home the arrival of Independent/Alternative media as a lasting and legitimate object of serious research.

But what about the undergraduates? Amongst them, these three books provide more than 800 pages devoted to the survey/explanation of a significant area of me-

dia practice, shown to be growing in social, cultural and political force just about everywhere in the world. Compare this to the brief content analysis offered above on the Independent/Alternative media sector inside the two sample text books. Unfortunately, the disconnect appears to continue.

Knowing the 'undergraduate Canon' but also the large field of Independent/Alternative media, and facing the need to teach that "intro Mass Comm." course, the best place to start from this new selection of books would be the 'DIY' section of Coyer et. al. The authors say in their introduction that they want to stimulate a conversation between theory and practice. They have made the effort to go beyond the theory/case study format and place the opportunity for students to experience "the alternative" in their hands, ready to use.

This not to say the other two books are of any less merit. Hamilton's work is a serious contribution to the scholarship of the field, offering new analogies and surveys. Guedes et. al. have provided case studies that are very closely linked to the theoretical frames in the field.

But, even with the extended practical introduction offered by Coyer et.al. we are definitely not there yet. On the one hand, the textbook industry and the 'Intro Mass. Comm.' students it serves and/or exploits is a reality facing just about every Media and Communication department in North America. On the other hand there is a plethora of well intentioned scholarly publications of great merit mapping the Independent/Alternative media sector. The trick now will be to find a publishing format in which all of the scholarship is distilled to fit say, the equivalent of a chapter or two in those undergraduate textbooks. Now that the Independent/Alternative media 'field' of study is so surely and firmly established, reaching out to undergraduate courses with simple short primers is the next challenge.

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Brian Murphy
Department of Communication Studies
Niagara University