

## What's so alternative about 'alternative' journalism?

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### ABSTRACT

As journalism educators, a great deal about how we teach students to be 'good journalists' has remained unchanged—at least over the past 15-20 years since I was a journalism student and, I suspect, for some time before that. But the world is changing and the world of journalism, in particular, is changing incredibly quickly. While our students' employment prospects and expectations may have adapted somewhat—ie we now teach students they need to be multi-skilled, working across platforms, developing content for online delivery etc—our advice to them about 'what is news' and how to structure the news has remained relatively static. It follows an essentially mainstream and what we call a 'professional' definition of news. This is despite the fact that the study of community and alternative media forms has blossomed over the past 10-15 years, highlighting different ways that journalists working outside the mainstream have been able to engage their readers and facilitate public involvement during times when people were increasingly turning away from traditional journalism, and refusing to participate in broader democratic activities. This paper attempts to tackle an apparently simple concept—to define what it is about alternative journalism that makes it different. While discussions around this issue have continued for some time now (Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Atton 2009; Forde 1997a and 1997b; Collins & Rose 2004; Harcup 2003; Couldry 2002), authors have focused primarily on the media outlets themselves and not on the work of the journalists, with the exception of the very recent work by Atton & Hamilton (2008). This paper contributes to the discussion on this issue through its attempts to define alternative journalism, although its overarching concern is broader and feeds into an international study which investigates alternative journalism in Australia, the UK and the USA. The paper's purpose is two-fold—an illumination of what alternative journalism really is; and ultimately the implications of this discussion for the way we teach journalism education in Australia.

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### INTRODUCTION

It is easy to write a paper about alternative journalism that trumpets all the wonders of the independent media, evaluating the many and varied benefits that non-commercial, advocacy media outlets can bring to democracy and political participation. And indeed, their contribution is significant and, still, quite undervalued by both the industry and researchers alike (Rodriguez, 2001; Howley 2005; Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Forde, et al 2002; Meadows et al 2007; Harcup 2003; Couldry 2002). As a journalism researcher working in the field of the varied alternative, independent, community, and radical media forms, I am more than aware that many in our broader journalism and media studies research disciplines are sceptical about the *journalistic* value of alternative and independent media outlets, primarily based on concerns about their marginal audiences; their subjectivity and, by implication, their lack of 'professionalism' which is, usually, grounded in objectivity (Schudson, 1978; Hampton 2008). Collins & Rose, two editors of a once-successful but now defunct alternative/radical newspaper from Wellington, New Zealand, illustratively reported:

Especially towards the end of the paper's life, we heard from people who were sick of all the stories about protests and bored by our 'obsessive' coverage of the proposed privatisations of Capital Power and then Wellington Airport. Even though we always aimed to cover protests in a 'constructive' way, with phone numbers and details about how to get involved, our coverage was often seen as unbalanced and 'shrill'. The paper became seen as narrowly oppositional, full of carping criticism. There was little to get excited about or to inspire. Although McNair surveys showed that our total readership was steady, the anecdotal evidence suggested that it was narrowing.

People interested in local politics and the arts tended to love the paper, but many people interested in other things stopped reading it (2004: 37).

Undoubtedly, the alternative media does it differently—but how? The aim of this paper is to add to the ongoing discussions which attempt to define ‘alternative and independent journalism’<sup>1</sup>—not their media, but specifically their journalism. While much of the data and commentary for this paper is drawn from Australian examples, the discussion is also informed by preliminary research on the United States Association of Alternative Newsweeklies. Importantly, it draws on very recent work by Chris Atton in the UK which offers the most contemporary definition of alternative journalism which has been developed in his new collaboration with US alternative media researcher James Hamilton.

The impetus for this paper came from a simple comment by the former editor of *The Monthly* newsmagazine in Australia, Sally Warhaft who left her position in controversial circumstances about four months ago. In attempting to discover why *The Monthly* considers itself ‘independent’, I had asked Warhaft how she felt *The Monthly* did journalism differently. She answered that the publisher, Morry Schwarz, had made a deliberate decision *not* to employ a trained journalist as editor (Warhaft, 2006) in an effort to elicit a different way of thinking about the publication’s content. While Schwarz has respect for ‘good journalists’, Warhaft’s background as a lecturer in politics, and as an anthropologist working in the slums of Mumbai in India had placed her in the realm of someone involved in, and interested in, political and social issues but without the journalistic training which might provide more predictable editorial outcomes (Warhaft, 2006). She intimated that a trained journalist would consistently frame the news, and discussions of current news events and social issues, in a fairly predictable way and this was something *The Monthly* wanted to avoid. This was an important point for both journalists, and journalism educators. It certainly suggested that perhaps what alternative—and I interchange the word ‘independent’ with alternative—journalists do is not merely a reaction to the mainstream, but in some cases deliberately takes very little account of mainstream journalistic practises and values.

## Theorising alternatives

Atton & Couldry argue the increasing crises in Western democratic systems with decreasing voter turnouts, the growth in the global social justice movement and other worldwide trends are making the work of alternative media outlets more relevant than ever before to the agendas of media and communications research (2003: 579). Deuze finds in 2006 that alternative news outlets produced specifically for particular ethnic groups – particularly print outlets – are experiencing ‘exponential growth’ in the United States and in European countries such as The Netherlands (2006: 262-63). And Deuze does not accept that the growth of this media is due to the growth of such ethnic populations in Western democracies such as the United States – more, it is consistent with the “worldwide emergence of all kinds of community, alternative, oppositional, participatory and collaborative media practices” (Deuze 2006: 263). Scholars writing in this field consistently define what it is *they* mean by the range of terms used for all the non-mainstream media and forms of journalism that are emerging and receiving so much scholarly—and public—attention. The term ‘community

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted here that I regularly use the joint term ‘alternative and independent media’ to refer to media organisations outside the mainstream organisations and institutions. While Atton simply refers to all these groups as ‘alternative media’ (2002; Atton & Hamilton 2008), I have found in interviewing some editors and journalists for non-mainstream outlets that they object to the term ‘alternative’ – not because they do not see themselves as offering an alternative, they do – but because the term ‘alternative’ seems to place them at the margins and suggest that they do not have the potential to influence mainstream news agendas. For this reason, I use the more cumbersome term ‘independent and alternative media’ to encompass all.

media', according to the international professional body for community radio AMARC, and also accepted by Carpentier et.al., tends to refer to non-profit media outlets which, generally, encourage the participation of their community (whether that be a geographic or community of interest) in developing content (Carpentier et al, 2003: 53; also AMARC, [www.amarc.org](http://www.amarc.org)). Clearly, different outlets that we might generally consider to be 'non-mainstream' come in many different forms – some are commercial organisations, for example, while others consider their non-profit status to define them; some attempt to include their communities/audiences in production, while others do not; some are structured democratically or in a cooperative arrangement (Atton, 2002), while others work on fairly traditional media organizational structures (Forde, 1997a). A far more considered discussion of the nature of these organisations is provided in Carpentier et.al. (2003) – and although they use the term 'community' rather than 'alternative and independent' as is applied here, the recognition that the organisations under discussion stand outside the mainstream through their attempt to offer "an alternative for a wide range of hegemonic discourses on communications, media, economics..." (2003: 51) suggests that their discussions are entirely relevant to definitions of alternative, independent and radical media outlets as well as community media outlets – indeed, these terms very frequently overlap. In particular, the identification of 'Approach 2' termed by Carpentier et al, which posits "community media as an alternative to mainstream" is particularly relevant.

To define what I call alternative and independent journalism—and the task of defining is an important one—I need to consider very recent work from the UK by Chris Atton, directly addressing this topic in a comprehensive way for the first time in our field. Atton's recent work with James Hamilton, *Alternative Journalism*, not only attempts to define the key term but also offers important frameworks for thinking about 'alternative' journalism. Among many points his work makes, a common theme in Atton's writings is his conceptualisation of alternative journalism as 'amateur' (2002; 2008; 2009)—"[alternative journalism] is produced by those outside mainstream media organisations. Amateur media producers typically have little or no training or professional qualifications as journalists; they write and report from their position as citizens; as members of communities; as activists, as fans" (2009: 265). Much of the scholarship around 'community' media forms follows this (quite accurate) identification of amateur production, of the non-professional nature of the medium and the journalism it produces (Jankowski 2003; Lewis 1976). Atton's definitions extend to what he terms 'cultural journalism', exhibited in fanzines; alternative journalism produced by individuals rather than collectives through blogging; but the common theme is the 'ordinary people' involved in the production of this alternative journalism (2009: 268).

John Downing's work on radical media does not attempt to cover all alternative journalists but he also certainly sees much 'radical' journalism, as he calls it, being produced by political activists and political movements—sometimes social movements—with political and social change as the primary purpose of such journalism (Downing, 1984; and Downing et al 2001). Again, however, the producers and people working in radical media are not *journalists*, but activists, lobbyists, campaigners and so on. A survey of Australian alternative journalists conducted more than 10 years ago confirms the importance of the way alternative journalists identify themselves to a developing definition of 'alternative' or 'independent' journalism, and also found that journalists working for a range of alternative and independent print media in 1996-97 often identified their journalism as an extension of what they otherwise were—an activist; a community aid worker; an Aboriginal person representing their community; a freelance 'writer' and so on (Forde, 1997b; 1997a).

Hirst, in his critique of Atton & Hamilton's offering, suggests alternative journalism can perhaps simply be identified as occurring outside the boundaries of 'acceptable' topics:

The news media revolves around what Daniel Hallin (1989) calls the spheres of consensus and limited controversy – debate is limited to acceptable topics and

boundaries, beyond which lies deviance (and perhaps alternative journalism) (Hirst, 2009).

In order to take a step beyond how the journalists might be superficially labelled (i.e. as a journalist, an activist, an aid worker etc), we should consider their practises in more detail. The journalism of alternative media, Atton suggests, is primarily informed by a 'critique' of the dominant practises of journalism. That is:

Its critique emphasizes alternatives to, *inter alia*, conventions of news sources and representation; the inverted pyramid of news texts; the hierarchical and capitalized economy of commercial journalism; the professional, elite basis of journalism as a practice; the professional norm of objectivity; and the subordinate role of audience as receiver (Atton & Hamilton, 2009: 1).

Such a definition accounts for not only the work of scholars on community, participatory and citizens' media (Rodriguez 2001; Howley, 2005; Meadows, Forde, Foxwell, Ewart 2007; Gordon 2008; Deuze 2006; Gillmor 2006; Harcup 2003); but also the political economy work of those examining the cooperative editorial structure of alternative media organisations (Atton, 2003; Collins & Rose 2004) and the commercial imperatives of the mainstream (Hamilton 2004; McChesney 2003 and 2008). Atton's words also point to the (to date, fairly limited) research completed so far about the breakdown of the audience-producer barrier in different forms of grassroots, community and alternative media (Forde, Foxwell, Meadows forthcoming 2009; Council of Europe 2008; Howley 2005; Tacchi et al 2008). So this understanding of alternative journalism as a form which challenges a range of anti-mainstream practises and structures is incredibly useful and sufficiently broad to capture much of the activity of alternative journalists. Significantly, Atton's work recognizes the development of alternative journalism over time and indeed its longevity as form.

The key insight of this overview is that alternative journalism is not an unchanging, universal type of journalism, but is an ever-changing effort to respond critically to dominant conceptions of journalism. Accordingly, alternative journalism is best seen as a kind of activity instead of as a specific, definitive kind of news story, publication or mode of organization. What alternative journalism is at any given moment depends entirely on what it is responding to.

His suggestion, however, that alternative journalism is an evolving term which is *reacting* to the times in which it exists – i.e. its form depends 'entirely' on what it is responding to – suggests more of a reactionary format which Rodriguez specifically challenges. She argues, simply, that alternative media forms, what she calls 'citizen's media', needs to be defined by what they are, not by what they are not (Rodriguez 2001). Scholarship in the field of alternative, independent, and grassroots media then clearly recognises, appropriately, that the field is broad and diverse—and difficult to accurately define.

### **How do practitioners see 'alternative journalism'?**

Some gaps have developed among different theorists of alternative media and alternative journalism about what it is the sector is really doing, and aiming to do. Practitioners from the sector have a fresher, and a somewhat more grounded idea of the work of independent journalists. Some of it, however, is critical of the shape and operations of the sector. Australian freelance journalist Margaret Simons, who has worked for both mainstream and alternative media outlets certainly does not idealise the *modus operandi* of many alternative publications. She wrote in 2005 that crikey.com, the alternative online newspaper which provided daily e-newsletters to its subscribers and which had clear inside links to both political parties, was influential but somewhat haphazard in its content and operation:

Mayne [Stephen Mayne, the former Liberal Party staffer who founded crikey.com] is fond of referring to his 'Crikey army', to whom he often appeals for leads. But none of the independent internet outlets pays their contributors anything like industry standard rates, and most pay nothing... So far independent internet journalism mostly depends on a mixture of philanthropy and idealism or, as Graham Young, editor of the not-for-profit *Online Opinion* puts it, 'drudgery and despair' (Simons, 2005).

Simons goes on to describe Crikey.com more fully, writing at the time when original founder Stephen Mayne sold the independent online news site to Eric Beecher's left-of-centre Text Media stable. She found that, like most alternative media, Crikey was 'asking questions nobody else was asking' but that at times the publication had been 'scrappy, inconsistent and often sneered at by the more polished journalistic professionals'. Nevertheless, she wrote, "it has been more influential than most would admit" (Simons, 2005). Independent press colleagues in New Zealand who ran a successful alternative newspaper for eight years, the *Wellington City Voice*, drew on their own motivations as a way of defining their practises, and this is a useful tool. If we can understand what *motivates* independent and alternative journalists, it provides important pointers to what they might actually be doing, or aiming to do, in the field. Collins & Rose reported they aimed to produce a different kind of newspaper which "tried with public journalism to empower people to understand issues and to actually do something about them". They continued:

We aimed to report on the views and life experiences of ordinary people. If we were writing about schools, we aimed to interview the students; if the subject was prisons, we would interview the prisoners; if it was drugs, we would interview the drug addicts (2004: 34).

Indeed, more independent press journalists reported in the 1990s that they undertook their duties for the higher ideals of autonomy, the chance to help people, and editorial freedom rather than the superficial concerns expressed by mainstream journalists such as the pay, fringe benefits, the chance to 'get ahead' and job security (Henningham 1996: 211; and Forde 1997b). Furthermore, they are more committed to the active public and 'citizens' form of their craft—reflected in Collins & Rose's comments about public journalism—in that Australian independent news journalists nominate 'providing context to the news', 'motivating the public' and 'giving a voice to the voiceless' as their primary journalistic aims (Forde 1997a: 118). Independent and alternative news publications practice a journalism that is based on strong notions of social responsibility (Atton 2003: 267) and previous Australian research has found that independent press journalists demonstrate stronger commitment to the idealistic and 'professional' norms of journalism than their mainstream counterparts (Forde 1997b). Indeed, if we consider the aims of publications such as *The Monthly* (Warhaft, 2006), and *Eureka Street* (Cranitch, 2006), they describe their journalism in a way that is entirely consistent with Jankowski's definition of 'community' media, focusing on providing news and information relevant to the needs of the community members; "to engage these members in public discussion, and to contribute to their social and political empowerment (Jankowski, 2003: 4). Community media journalists are, in essence, working from the bottom up – being fed story ideas and information by their communities, local contacts, peers and politically active friends and enabling that to drive their news agendas. Importantly, they are primarily motivated in their journalism by a need to 'fill in the gaps' left by mainstream news outlets, and to provide citizens with information they believe they need in order to make political and cultural decisions, and to participate fully in public life.

Preliminary work conducted into alternative and independent journalism in the United States reveals a genuinely huge industry compared with both the UK and the Australian sectors. In particular, the industry is well structured and organised, with a range of representative bodies and professional associations reflecting the interests of the varied alternative print,

radio, television and online organisations operating. The Association of Alternative Newsweeklies is one of the longest-established professional bodies for alternative publications in the United States, and has fairly clear membership guidelines which provide, to some extent, a working definition of what 'alternative' means to practitioners in the United States. Interestingly, it leaves out *all* of the niche media that Atton, Downing, and Rodriguez include in their definitions, and excludes also any of the radical political media. In essence, members of the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies offer an editorial 'alternative' to the mainstream media in their local area, but they must do this within certain constraints. For example, AAN members must publish at least 24 times a year, which immediately excludes most publications that we would term 'alternative' in Australia, many of which are monthlies. They must also be general interest publications, so outlets focusing on Indigenous issues, environmental issues, ethnic communities etc are also excluded. Again, this would exclude many of the community radio stations in both the UK and Australia if the AAN definition were to be followed and certainly excludes Atton's fanzines, ezines, blogs and so on. In addition, while advocacy journalism and journalism with opinions is encouraged in AAN members, their journalism must be 'professional, thorough and fair' (AAN, 2009a). They openly exclude 'community newspapers' although overtly encourage members to stay outside the mainstream:

By definition, alternative papers exist on the outside, and they should make an effort to stay there. What the [membership] committee likes is informed, well-researched, and well-written original reporting and reviewing with a strong point of view. Rocking the boat is a good thing, as is a healthy disrespect for authority and public-relations whitewash. Investigative reporting is a major plus. Service to the readers is key, and the mission of the alternative press is to give readers what they can't find elsewhere (AAN, 2009a).

Somewhat ironically, however, our research also shows that some AAN members are significant media chains, not on the scale of major media ownership but quite large ownership groups. The Village Voice Media chain, for example, owns 15 alternative newsweeklies in New York, Phoenix, Denver, Dallas, Houston, Miami, Fort Lauderdale, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Orange County, Minneapolis, Seattle, Nashville, St. Louis and Kansas City. The Phoenix Media Communications Group owns seven AAN publications, and also publishes the official yearbooks of national basketball team the Boston Celtics, and the national ice hockey team the Boston Bruins. AAN member *Metro Pulse* is owned by E.W. Scripps, who also owns 14 daily and community newspapers, 10 television stations and two news services. The Times Shamrock Alternative Newsweekly Group is comprised of five entertainment and dining-oriented weeklies, while the New Mass Media Group is comprised of four newspapers which regularly run similar copy syndicated between the four titles. Additionally, the AAN publications are unashamedly commercial, with the websites of even the smaller, more independent publications boasting about the audiences they can sell to potential advertisers. The *Easy Reader*, for example, from Hermosa Beach has a circulation of 57,000 to residents in the South Bay area of California. On the *Easy Reader* website, the publication trumpets its alternative credentials, its beginnings as an alternative, counter-culture publication founded in 1970 with an editorial policy rooted in the notion of 'truth force' endorsed by King, and Gandhi (Easy Reader, 2009). However, the aspects of the publication which are highlighted on the AAN Membership website are quite different and emphasise the importance of marketing and commercial imperatives:

*Easy Reader* is a weekly, community newspaper serving the South Bay area of Los Angeles, one of the largest, most affluent retail markets in the country...*Easy Reader's* monthly "Peninsula People" edition reaches 25,000 homes in Palos Verdes, which has the highest per capita income of any zip code in the United States.

The strength of the paper is its aggressive news reporting. Each issue also offers an in-depth cover story, local news, and extensive entertainment listings. *Easy Reader's* home delivery offers three times the market penetration of the *Los Angeles Times* and more than twice that of the *Daily Breeze*.

Easy Reader's stitch and trim format and 4-color, electrabright cover give it a magazine quality appearance (AAN, 2009b).

The primary concern in defining the alternative newsweeklies as 'alternative' is not only their occasionally overwhelming commercialism, but the apparent homogeneity of the AAN publications in the United States. This is not to suggest that AAN publications constitute the entirety of the US alternative media industry – far from it, as our early research into the non-mainstream media in the US indicates. They are, however, one of the primary representative organisations for alternative print and online publications with significant membership, and audiences. The issue of commercialism in alternative and radical journalism was raised by the editors of the Wellington (NZ) *City Voice*, with views in stark contrast to the principles of the AAN group. Collins & Rose noted that, unlike almost all other mass media in NZ at the time, "*City Voice* did not exist primarily to make money. It aimed to earn its workers a decent living, but primarily it existed for reasons that are summed up...by the word democracy" (2004: 32). Atton clarifies, though, that "...one of the strengths of alternative journalism—and perhaps its abiding ideology—is its resistance to homogenization. This resistance derives from critiques of the political economy and ideological practises of professional journalism" (Atton & Hamilton, 2008: 138).

### **Working towards a meaningful definition**

From the mouths of practitioners, then, defining 'alternative' can be just as difficult and as broad as the offerings of theorists and researchers who have observed the field, often from the outside, for many years. If we consider overall the work of scholars and practitioners in the field of alternative journalism, and based on the literature and data assessed here, the main points defining alternative journalism include:

- It may be practised at a commercial or non-commercial publication/website/broadcast program
- It may occur in an independently owned OR a chain-owned outlet, providing the chain-owned outlet does not belong to a 'mainstream' or 'major' media ownership group
- Coverage of news from an alternative perspective is important, but not essential as many definitions include music fanzines, blogs and niche publications which do not cover news at all
- Attachment to a political party/movement is accepted by Atton, Rodriguez, Downing, and others; but rejected by alternative media representative bodies such as the US Association of Alternative Newsweeklies
- Those working for the alternative media outlet could be amateurs; or professionally trained journalists
- The news they produce may be incredibly local in nature—in the form of community service announcements, 'what's on' information and so on; or it may be highly skilled investigative journalism
- It may range from a daily program or publication reaching a significant audience to an individually-produced blog or ezine read by less than 10 people.

In essence, what I am suggesting is that the definitions offered so far, across the range of theorists and practitioners, are simply too broad. If we take into account all that has been offered, 'alternative media' and 'alternative journalists' could include any type of



communications which is not made by a recognised major media ownership group. Such a broad definition is not helpful, and we can do better.

If we focus on the journalistic practises at work in independent and community news organisations, and the stated motivations of those who work for such outlets we can begin to formulate a definition which has the public aims of alternative journalism, and its notion of social responsibility, as a base. If we also accept that any form of journalism must include some fulfilment, or an attempt to fulfil, a broader democratic purpose then we begin to narrow down what 'alternative journalism' is even further. Note this does not confine, necessarily, what the term 'alternative media' might include—that is far broader in both its meaning and form. Alternative journalism, though—or independent journalism—is a much narrower concept to define. I suggest we can theorise four essential components of the alternative journalism sector which are more targeted and which can frame future discussions. Alternative and independent journalism involves:

- Journalists—trained or untrained—who are personally driven to produce news and information that the public needs to know and which enhances democracy
- Community-funded media organisations which provide local news and opportunities for 'ordinary' people to become skilled in the journalism and production fields.
- Media organisations which may be commercial but which have, as their priority, quality news content over commercial imperatives
- Journalists who are involved with a range of community initiatives and/or activities; and cultural and/or political organisations.

## **Conclusion**

While the community, grassroots, and radical media field has experienced increasing attention from research scholars, established theories about the sector and a universally accepted way to 'frame' its activities is still in its early phases. This situation is exacerbated by the explosion of technology and electronic communications, much of which lays claim to being part of the 'alternative' forms of communication, user-generated content, citizens' journalism and so on that has become the focus of much media discussion. Ultimately, though, the definitions currently applied to the field of alternative journalism in particular are far too broad to be meaningful—and it is important that they become meaningful because their essence has much to offer to the future of journalism and democracy. Significantly, our understanding of precisely what alternative journalism is and how it is practised will have direct implications for the way journalism is taught into the future. If we are to accept—as so many do—that the mainstream media is in crisis and producing thinner and weaker journalism, with little investment in investigative or quality work (McChesney, 2003; Hamilton, 2004; Anderson & Ward, 2007; Trigoboff, 2002: 12; Walley, 2002: 1, 22; Westin, 2001: 35), then we must look to the practises of alternative, independent and community media journalists who are, research indicates, producing content relevant to their audiences and relevant to the role of journalism in democracy. Importantly, they are practising journalism in ways that are engaging audiences, including ordinary people, and creating a more active public by moving outside the definitions of professional news that we have become accustomed to consuming and for us, teaching. This paper was intended to provide some input into the developing discussion about the nature of independent and alternative journalism, working to identify what lies at the heart of it. It is only when we discover this—in a specific and practical way—that we will be able to integrate it into journalism education curricula and see its impact on the dominant practises of journalism.

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