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A Critical Contribution to the Foundations of Alternative Media Studies

Marisol Sandoval

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the question how to conceptualize alternative media. In alternative media studies, there is no agreement on how alternative media should be defined. A distinction that is drawn in this paper concerns the question whether the main aim of alternative media should be to provide critical content and to reach a broad audience for their media products (objective approach), or if they should aim at opening up access to media production and at empowering those who are involved in the production processes (subjective approach). The task for this paper is to define alternative media in a way that enables them to increase their societal impact and to contribute to emancipatory societal transformations. Possibilities and limits of alternative media as emancipatory media are identified. Based on dialectical social theory and critical media theory I construct an ideal model of alternative media as non-commercial, participatory and critical media. In taking into account structural constraints under capitalism I argue that alternative media can hardly realize all of these ideal dimensions. Thus I discuss on which of these levels alternative media necessarily need to be on the alternative side and on which they can also make use of mainstream strategies without losing their alternative character. Finally I confront the ideal-model with an understanding of alternative media as critical media.

Keywords: *critical media theory, alternative media, participatory media, critical media, emancipatory media*

Alternatif Medya Çalışmalarının Temellerine İlişkin Eleştirel Bir Katkı

Marisol Sandoval

Özet

Bu çalışma alternatif medyanın nasıl kavramsallaştırıldığı sorusuyla ilgileniyor. Alternatif medya çalışmalarında bu medya ortamının nasıl tanımlanması gerektiğine dair bir uzlaşımın söz edemiyoruz. Makalede, alternatif medyanın asıl amacı, eleştirel içeriklerin geniş kitlelere ulaştırılmasının sağlanması mı olmalı (nesnel yaklaşım), yoksa medya ürünlerine ulaşımın yaygınlaştırılması ve üretim aşamasında görev alanların desteklenmesi mi olmalı (öznel yaklaşım) sorusu irdeleniyor. Çalışmanın amacı, özgürleşimci toplumsal dönüşümlere katkıda bulunabilecek ve toplumsal etkisi güçlü bir alternatif medya tanımı yapmaktır. Ayrıca alternatif medyanın özgürleşimci bir medya olarak ne tür olanaklara ve sınırlılıklara sahip olduğu da tartışılıyor. Diyalektik sosyal kurama ve eleştirel medya kuramına dayanarak, ideal bir alternative medya için tecimsel olmayan, katılımcı ve eleştirel bir medya modeli inşa ediyorum. Kapitalizmin ürettiği yapısal sınırlılıkları da göz önüne alarak alternatif medyanın bütün ideallerini gerçekleştirmesinin neredeyse olanaksız olduğunu ileri sürüyorum. Bu nedenle tartışılan düzeylerden hangilerinde alternatif medyanın alternatif olan'ın yanında yer alması gerektiğini, hangi durumlarda alternatif karakterlerini de yitirmemek kaydıyla anaakım medyanın stratejilerini de kullanabileceklerini tartışıyorum. Son olarak da alternatif medyanın bir eleştirel medya ideali olarak anlaşılmasına neden olan ideal-modele bir karşı çıkış geliştiriyorum.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Eleştirel medya teorisi, alternatif medya, katılımcı medya, eleştirel medya, özgürleşimci medya*



A Critical Contribution to the Foundations of Alternative Media Studies

1. Introduction

Le Monde Diplomatique is a monthly newspaper for international politics that provides high quality journalism and critical reporting. It is published in 26 languages and reaches a global audience of 2.5 million people. The newspaper is financed by sales and advertising and distributed via retail, subscriptions, and as supplement in other newspapers (Le Monde Diplomatique, 2009). Should Le Monde Diplomatique be considered as alternative medium?

The answer to this question depends on how alternative media are defined. On the one hand Le Monde Diplomatique provides critical content, which means that it is alternative at the level of content. On the other hand it makes use of commercial financing and professional, non-participatory organization structures, which means that it is not alternative at the level of organization and production processes.

This example illustrates the importance of engaging in a discussion about how to define alternative media. This paper will contribute to this task.

An important question in defining alternative media is whether their main aim should be to provide critical content and to reach a broad audience for their media products, or if they should mainly try to open up access to media production in order to empower those who are involved the production processes. This paper is concerned with the question how to conceptualize alternative media in a way that allows them to contribute to emancipatory societal transformations. Figuring out possibilities and limits of alternative media as emancipatory media is the aim of this paper.

The main research questions therefore are:

- * What defines alternative media?
- * What are emancipatory and transformative potentials of alternative media?
- * How can alternative media challenge corporate media power?
- * Are alternative media doomed to marginality or can they become important societal forces?

These research questions take into account that alternative media are often confronted with many problems such as a lack of financial resources, a lack of public visibility, and therefore a lack of societal impact. Thus, critical media theory should not only look at theoretical potentials of alternative media but also at ways of how to realize these potentials within the existing societal conditions.

In order to situate the discussion on alternative media within the wider context of critical media theory in section 2 I briefly summarize the main arguments of the critique of capitalist media.

In section 3 I construct a typology of approaches to defining alternative media. I discuss whether the proposed models can contribute to the advancement of alternative media as emancipatory societal forces.

In section 4 I propose a model of alternative media that refers to dialectical social theory and critical media theory. This model takes into account the difficulties of alternative media production under capitalism and proposes ways of how alternative media can achieve both, being critical of society, and at the same time avoid marginality in order to actively contribute to emancipatory societal transformations.

2. Media between emancipation and repression

Since the beginning of the last century, many critical theorists, ranging from the Frankfurt School to the critical political economy tradition, have criticised the system of capitalist mass media. Their critique focuses on two main aspects: the critique of the commodity form of media (see for example Nicholas Garnham, 2006; Dallas Smythe, 1997) and the critique of their ideological character (see for example Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, 1947/1977; Leo Löwenthal, 1964; Herbert Schiller, 1997).

Theorists that point at the commodity form of media are concerned with the role of media as commercial enterprises and their embedment in the overall economy (Smythe, 1997: 438; Garnham, 2006: 212). For Smythe for example the most important question in media studies is „what economic function for capital do they [the media] serve?“ (Smythe, 1997: 438).

While Garnham (2006) as well as Smythe (1997) mainly look at the media as economic actors, theorists like Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (1947/1977) are more concerned with analysing the ideological character of capitalist media. They argue that the integration of the cultural realm into the system of commodity exchange has as a consequence that only cultural products that can survive on a capitalist market are produced. The market mechanism would therefore lead to standardization, identity, and conformity. As a result consumers are confronted with the permanent reproduction of the existing societal conditions. This would lead to mass deception, manipulation and uniformity, and eliminate every idea of resistance (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947/1997).

These critical media theories are not critical of the media as such but of their role under capitalism. This means that media could also be used in ways to empower the oppressed and to foster critical thinking and resistance to the dominative capitalist relations. Douglas Kellner has pointed at this ambiguity of the media: “Media and computer technologies are among the most advanced forces of production which are creating a new global capitalist society which may well strengthen capitalist relations of production and hegemony, but also contain the potential for democratizing, humanizing and transforming existing inequities in the domain of class, race and gender. Like most technologies, they can be used as instruments of domination or liberation, and can empower working people, or they can be used by capital as powerful instruments of domination” (Kellner, 1997: 1).

Depending on the context of their usage, media have repressive as well as/or emancipatory potentials. Therefore it is important for critical media theory to criticise those relations that foster a repressive media usage, and at the same time figuring out possibilities for realizing emancipatory potentials. The following chapters will contribute to the latter.

3. A typology of alternative media approaches

Typologizing alternative media approaches can help to identify different lines of argumentation in the discussion on alternative media and to systematically compare the strengths and shortcomings of different definitions in order to overcome their weaknesses. Thus, in order to be useful the constructed typology needs to be exhaustive. This means that that every potential approach to alternative media may be situated within this typology.

An exhaustive typology of approaches to alternative media can be based on Giddens (1984: xx) distinction between objective and subjective social theories. For him the object are societal structures, defined as “rules and resources implicated in social reproduction” that “are stabilized across time and space” (Giddens, 1984: xxxi). The subject is understood as the “knowledgeable human agent” (Giddens, 1984: xx). Thus, theories that focus on structural aspects can be termed objective, those that are more oriented towards actors can be termed subjective.

In the following this distinction of subjective and objective social theories will be applied to the realm of alternative media theory. All approaches to alternative media point out that such media pose an alternative to the dominant system of capitalist mass media. This means that alternative media negate certain aspects of capitalist mass media. The question, which aspects alternative media should negate, marks the difference between subjective and objective alternative media approaches.

Subjective approaches (section 3.1) focus on media actors and the ways they produce alternative media. They argue that media can have emancipatory societal effects if they contribute to democratizing the access to media production in order to give ordinary people a voice. Subjective approaches thus argue for an understanding of alternative media as participatory media.

Objective approaches (section 3.2) are more oriented towards alternative media structures. They argue that alternative media can realize their emancipatory potentials by negating the ideological character of capitalist mass media by providing critical media content. Media content can be understood as a media structure because it is a durable result of media production.

In discussing these approaches the central question is whether these two different concepts of alternative media are suitable for advancing an emancipatory usage of media, not only in theoretical terms, but also in terms of potential societal impacts and practical political effectiveness.

3.1 Subjective approaches to alternative media: alternative media as participatory media

The majority of approaches to alternative media is subjective and focuses on participation and the democratization of media production. Such subjective ideas about an alternative organization of the media system can for example be found in the work of Bertolt Brecht (1932/2000), Walter Benjamin (1934/1996), Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1970/1982), Nick Couldry (2003), Alfonso Gumucio Dagron (2004), Clemencia Rodriguez (2003), Chris Atton (2002; 2004; 2008), Kate Coyer (2007), Peter Lewis (1976), Helmut Peissl and Otto Tremetzberger (2008), and Nicholas Jankowski (2003). In the following I will first outline the main arguments of this approach (section 3.1.1) and then discuss its suitability for analysing alternative media and their societal impact (section 3.1.2).

3.1.1 Emancipation through participation: An outline

Bertolt Brecht already in 1932 criticized the usage of the radio as one-sided distribution apparatus instead of using it as a two sided communication apparatus. Brecht pointed out that radio technology would be suitable for opening-up access to media production for everybody (Brecht, 1932/2000: 43). Similarly Walter Benjamin pointed out that also the press could become a more democratic tool for communication by turning its readers into writers. In this case the “literary competence” would become “public property” (Benjamin, 1934/1996: 772). Hans Magnus Enzensberger stressed that in regard to electronic media the distinction between receiver and transmitter would not exist due to technical reasons, but be an expression of existing class relations (Enzensberger, 1970/1982: 48).

Brecht’s, Benjamin’s and Enzensberger’s approaches to alternative media can be considered as subjective because they all stress that the decisive factor for the establishment of emancipatory media would be the abolition of the distinction between consumers and producers of media products. Thus their approaches focus on media actors and their involvement in media production. For them the emancipatory potentials of media arise from the practices of media producers that is, from the processes of how media are produced

collectively. Such subjective approaches to alternative media point at participatory production processes as the central characteristic of alternative media.

Many recent approaches to alternative media pick up this vision of abolishing the division between producers and consumers of media products in order to establish a more democratic media system.

So for example for Nick Couldry the main problem with the existing highly concentrated mass media system is that the majority of people is excluded from media production. Media concentration would therefore result in a concentration of symbolic power, which allows commercial mass media to gain “influence over peoples beliefs (barely articulated) through which we frame the social world” (Couldry, 2003: 43). Therefore for Couldry the most important task for alternative media is to challenge the highly concentrated media system and the resulting power of capitalist mass media by challenging the “the entrenched division of labour (producers of stories vs. consumer of stories)” (Couldry, 2003: 45). Couldry’s approach to alternative is very similar to Brecht’s, Benjamin’s and Enzensberger’s claim for abolishing the distinction between producer and consumer of media products. According to Couldry the emancipatory and progressive potential of alternative media lies in opening up access to media production to a broad public. This would allow challenging the mass media’s power of naming by confronting the reality constructed by capitalist mass media with other versions of social reality. The strong emphasis on media actors that gain back media power by producing alternative media shows the subjective orientation of this approach.

Also the discourse on community media is widely oriented towards the practices of media actors. Community media approaches are subjective because their focus is on participatory access to media production and the empowerment of individuals. Community media are understood as media that serve a specific geographic community or a community of interest, and allow non-professionals to actively engage in media production, organization and management (Lewis, 1976: 61; Jankowski, 2003: 8; Coyer, 2007; KEA, 2007: 1; Peissl and Tremetzberger, 2008: 3).

Whereas for Couldry as well as for Brecht, Benjamin and Enzensberger participatory media production is necessary for establishing more democratic media system at the macro-level, community media approaches stress that participation in the first instance should contribute to the empowerment of those who are engaged in alternative media production.

This argument is also central in Alfonso Gumucio Dagron’s (2004) and Clemencia Rodriguez’ (2003) examination of alternative media. For Gumucio Dagron participatory production processes are at the core of alternative media projects: “In my own view alternative communication is in essence participatory communication, and the alternative spirit remains as long as the participatory component is not minimized and excluded” (Gumucio Dagron, 2004: 48). Although Gumucio Dagron points out that the promotion of social change is central for alternative media participatory production processes remain their central characteristics. According to him only participatory media give voice to the voiceless and are able to support social change by representing “people and not and not only the economic and political interest of a powerful minority” (Gumucio Dagron, 2004: 47). Clemencia Rodriguez uses the term citizens media in order to illustrate that alternative media should assist those who are engaged in the production processes in becoming active citizens: “Citizens’ media is a concept that accounts for the processes of empowerment, concientization and fragmentation of power that result when men, women and children gain access to and reclaim their own media” (Rodriguez, 2003: 190). For Rodriguez the main task of alternative media is to assist people in living a self-determined life.

Another important representative of a subjective approach to alternative media is Chris Atton. Besides of participatory production he also stresses the importance of anti-capitalist and anti-managerialist organization processes. Also for Atton the empowerment through the

direct involvement in production and organization processes marks the emancipatory potential of alternative media projects. He points out that alternative media “emphasize the organization of media to enable wider social participation in their creation, production, and dissemination than is possible in the mass media” (Atton, 2002: 25). For Atton practicing prefigurative politics by anticipating the idea of a society beyond capitalism is what makes alternative media emancipatory (Atton, 2002). But unlike Rodriguez and Gumucio Dargon he warns against validating “participation as good in itself” (Atton, 2008: 217).

As this outline shows, subjective approaches to alternative media have in common that they stress the importance of democratizing media production. Alternative media are first and foremost understood as participatory media. In the next sub-section I will discuss in how far participation is a suitable criterion for defining alternative media.

3.1.2 Emancipation through participation: A critique

In the 1980s a research group called Comedia strongly criticized an understanding of alternative media as participatory media. According to Comedia the public marginality of many alternative media projects would stem from “the absence of a clear conception of target audiences and of marketing strategies to reach new audiences, the failure to develop necessary skills in the area of administration and financial planning, and the commitment to an inflexible model of collectivity as the solution of all organizational problems” (Comedia, 1984: 95). Practicing prefigurative politics would be a central obstacle in gaining public visibility and societal relevance. The disadvantages of collective organization structures would be high expenditures of time and resources. According to Comedia alternative media therefore remain in an “alternative ghetto”. Comedia argues that the main task for alternative media producers is to create a balance between economic necessity and political goal (Comedia, 1984: 96). This would include the insight that “capitalist skills as marketing and promotion can be used to further their political goals” (Comedia, 1984: 101).

In their recent book Chris Atton and James Hamilton stress that the struggle for obtaining the necessary resources for media production puts alternative media under immense pressures. They state that the “general political-economic dilemma for any critical project is that it needs resources with which to work, but those crucial resources are present only in the very society that it seeks to change or dissolve” (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 26).

Without money alternative media production rests on the self-exploitation of media producers, low-cost production techniques and the usage of alternative distribution channels. This creates problems with continually producing an alternative media product and difficulties in reaching a broad audience. Gaining public visibility requires financial resources for producing and distributing media products. Under capitalism it is difficult to obtain these resources without making use of commercial mechanisms of financing like selling space for advertisements. Using such capitalist techniques of financing contradicts the political aims of emancipatory alternative media that are critical of capitalism. But alternative media are not located outside the capitalist system and therefore are dependent on financial resources for producing and distribution their products. These resources can hardly be obtained without making use of commercial mechanisms of financing.

One could argue that with the Internet new possibilities for cheap participatory media production (Couldry, 2003: 45; Bennett, 2003: 34; Wright, 2004: 90; Atton, 2004; Hyde, 2002: online), for bypassing gate-keepers (Bennett, 2004: 141; Rosenkrands, 2004: 75; Meikle, 2002: 61) and for reaching a potentially global audience arise (Vegh, 2003: 74; Meikle, 2002: 60f).

This is certainly true, but at the same time with the Internet another important problem for alternative media production becomes more evident: Not every media content that is produced and distributed receives public visibility and is consumed (Wright, 2004: 84; Rucht,

2004: 53; Curran, 2003: 227). In this context Pajnik and Downing point out that “in the contemporary world it is not uncommon that being heard is more important than what is being said. The result is a cacophony of simultaneous monologues leading ultimately to uniformity and standardization, rather than exchange of ideas between equals” (Pajnik and Downing, 2008: 7).

Thus, giving ordinary people a voice by opening up access to media production is not enough for a truly democratic media system to emerge. Referring to blogs Christian Fuchs states: „that everyone is in principle able to post political ideas in a blog doesn’t mean that he or she will be heard and listened to because blogging today takes place in a hierarchical and stratified society in which public attention can be bought and is controlled by media corporations and political elites“ (Fuchs, 2008: 135).

Also on the Internet political and financial power are essential for gaining public visibility. Those projects that have the means for advertising their websites (as for example established capitalist media institutions) have an advantage over those without resources (as for example many alternative media projects). Participation remains very limited if people can only talk but are not heard. Therefore the discussion on emancipatory media potentials also has to consider structural inequalities as a central feature of capitalism.

In the context of the Internet Marcuse’s (1965) concept of repressive tolerance becomes more apparent than ever before. According to Marcuse tolerance becomes repressive when, due to the large number of ideas that are available for consumption, critical ideas are tolerated but immediately subsumed under the ruling ideas. Marcuse states: „other ideas can be expressed, but, at the massive scale of the conservative majority (outside such enclaves as the intelligentsia), they are immediately 'evaluated' (i.e. automatically understood) in terms of the public language“, this means that „the antithesis is redefined in terms of the thesis“ (Marcuse, 1965: 96).

Another problem of an understanding of alternative media as participatory media that becomes specifically obvious on the Internet is, that participation as such is not necessarily emancipatory. Participatory organization principles can also be used for advancing repressive media content. One example is the Internet Forum of the right-wing National Democratic party of Germany (National Democratic Party of Germany, 2009), which is an extreme right-wing medium, that is produced in a participatory way. As Richard A. Viguier and David Franke (2004) as well as Robert Hillard and Michael C. Keith (1999) illustrate, participatory production is not only employed for politically progressive, but also for conservative purposes. In this context Bart Cammaerts points at “the extensive use of the internet (as well as other media) by non-progressive reactionary movements, be it the radical and dogmatic Catholic movement, the fundamentalist Muslim movement or the extreme right – post-fascist – movement” (Cammaerts, 2007: 137).

Nevertheless some representatives of the participatory media approach argue that the emancipatory effects of alternative media arise from the production process itself (see for example: Dowmunt and Coyer, 2007; Rodriguez, 2003): “The political nature of alternative media is often present irrespective of content, located in the mere act of producing” (Dowmunt and Coyer, 2007: p. 2). But as I have highlighted participation as such is not necessarily emancipatory. Thus, in my view besides form the lack of public visibility another problem of defining alternative media as participatory media is, that without referring to the content of participation it becomes impossible to distinguish between emancipatory and repressive media usages. As Atton states participation should not be validated “as good in itself” (Atton, 2008: 217).

The hope that a communication apparatus that abolishes the distinction between producers and consumers, as Brecht imagined it, automatically leads to a more democratic and emancipatory media system has to be disappointed. The abolition of the distinction between media consumers and media producers, as it has been realized on the Internet, is not

enough for making an emancipatory media system reality. Public visibility is still stratified through power relations.

According to Gumucio Dagron (2004) and Rodriguez (2003) public visibility is not an aim for alternative media projects. They stress that the success of alternative media should not be measured along criteria like scope, number or recipients, or circulation: “anyone asserting that alternative media are fine but their coverage is too limited geographically or in terms of users does not understand what alternative media really are” (Gumucio Dagron, 2004: 49). According to Gumucio Dagron alternative media are successful if they contribute to the establishment of dialog within a local community or within existing social networks.

This is certainly true for a certain type of alternative media, which aims at local community building as or at enabling communication between existing social networks such as social movements or protest groups. In these cases it is important that alternative media are organized participatory and that every recipient can also become a producer of messages in order to allow exchange and dialogue.

But one can also think of another type of alternative media that aims at establishing a counter-public sphere by reporting about topics neglected by capitalist mass media and by criticizing structures of domination and oppression. Such alternative media need to gain public attention if they want to be successful in raising awareness and mobilizing for social struggles. At least such alternative media are dependent on financial resources that often make necessary commercial financing and restrictions regarding access to media production.

Examples for such a type of media are *The New Internationalist*, *Z Magazine*, *Rethinking Marxism*, *Historical Materialism* or *Monthly Review*. Defining alternative media as participatory media excludes such oppositional publications although they provide critical content and contribute to the establishment of a counter public sphere.

As outlined above there are several reasons for arguing that participatory production processes should not be considered as decisive for the alternative character of media. In summary, these reasons are:

- * Participatory, non-commercial media that reject professional organization processes often suffer from a lack of resources. This makes it difficult to gain public visibility and to contribute to the establishment of a broad counter-public sphere, which would be necessary for raising awareness on the repressive character of capitalism and for supporting radical social transformation.
- * Participatory production processes need not necessarily be emancipatory but can also be used for advancing repressive purposes.
- * Using participatory production processes as decisive criterion for defining alternative media excludes many oppositional media that provide critical content but make use of professional organization structures.

The argument that participatory production processes is not a suitable criterion for defining alternative media does not mean that alternative media should not strive for employing participatory components in the organizational structure, but that today this is not always possible to the desired extent.

3.2 Objective approaches to alternative media: alternative media as critical media

In contrast to subjective approaches, objective approaches focus on media content in defining alternative media. Media content is a durable result of media production and can therefore be considered as a media structure.

One representative of an objective approach is John Downing. He speaks of alternative media as radical media that “express an alternative vision to hegemonic politics, priorities and perspectives” (Downing, 2001: v). Alternative media should establish counter-hegemony,

report about neglected topics, and criticize oppression: “the role of radical media can be seen as trying to disrupt the silence to counter the lies, to provide the truth” (Downing, 2001: 16). For Downing radical media need not necessarily be participatory media. He points out that sometimes professional organization is important for challenging hegemony: “some forms of organized leadership are essentially for coordinate challenges to the ideological hegemony of capital and to put forward credible alternative programs and perspectives” (Downing, 2001: 15).

Downing criticizes an anarchist approach to alternative media: “For anarchism, however, it has normally been enough to attempt to create little islands of prefigurative politics with no empirical attention to how these might be expanded into the rest of society” (Downing, 2001: 72). Establishing an alternative public sphere and reporting about oppression and the struggles against it for him is more important than the realization of participatory production processes (Downing, 1995: 250).

Also Tim O’Sullivan has given a definition of alternative media that is oriented towards media content. He describes alternative media as “forms of media communication that avowedly reject or challenge established and institutional politics, in the sense that they all advocate change in society, or at least a critical reassessment of traditional values” (O’Sullivan, 1995: 10).

Graham Meikle points at several aspects that mark critical media content: “Stories that address complexity rather than reducing it to a good guys/bad guys schema. Stories that stimulate discussion and debate rather than constructing conflict, stories that go beyond a spurious objectivity and recognise their writer’s responsibility to strengthen civic discourse and involve community members in coverage issues which affect them” (Meikle, 2002: 100). In my view focusing on media content is more useful than pointing at participatory production processes, because it offers an objective criterion for defining alternative media. As I have outlined in the proceeding chapter, participatory production can be used for progressive as well as for repressive ends. Therefore a more objective criterion, like critical media content, is necessary for deciding upon the repressive or emancipatory character of media. This objective criterion is also important for my dialectical approach to alternative media, which I will outline in the next section.

4. A dialectical approach to alternative media

In this chapter I will outline my understanding of alternative media, which is based on dialectical social theory. A dialectical approach to alternative media tries to overcome the dualism between subjective and objective approaches. In a first step I will introduce a model of ideal-typical alternative media (section 4.1). This ideal-typical model can function as vision for organizing alternative media. But due to structural constraints under capitalism it is not always realizable to the desired extent. Thus in a second step I will argue for using minimum requirements for defining alternative media (section 4.2).

4.1 An ideal-typical model of alternative media

My approach to alternative media is based on a dialectical model of the media system, that is on the assumption of a dialectical relationship between media actors and media structures. This means that media structures enable and constrain the action of media actors, who again through their actions shape the media structures.

The actors of the media system are producers and consumers of media products. Media structures in the sense of institutionalized relationships (Giddens, 1984: xxxi) for example are institutions, technologies, media content, or the economic form of media products.

The decisive question in defining alternative media is how A) alternative media structures and B) alternative media actors differ from those of capitalist mass media:

A) Alternative media structures: Critical media theory has shown that capitalist mass media are repressive because of two interconnected aspects: their commercial character on the one hand, and their ideological character on the other hand (see section 2). Thus if alternative media want to negate the repressive capitalist media system they should be non-commercial instead of commercial and provide critical content instead of ideologies.

B) Alternative media actors: In alternative media theory it is stressed that alternative media differ from capitalist mass media because they open up access to media production to a broad public and try to abolish the distinction between media producers and media consumers, so that a prosumer (Toffler, 1980) emerges (see section 3.1.1).

Ideal-typical alternative media realize all of these dimensions: They are non-commercial, provide critical content and are produced in a participatory way (see figure 1):

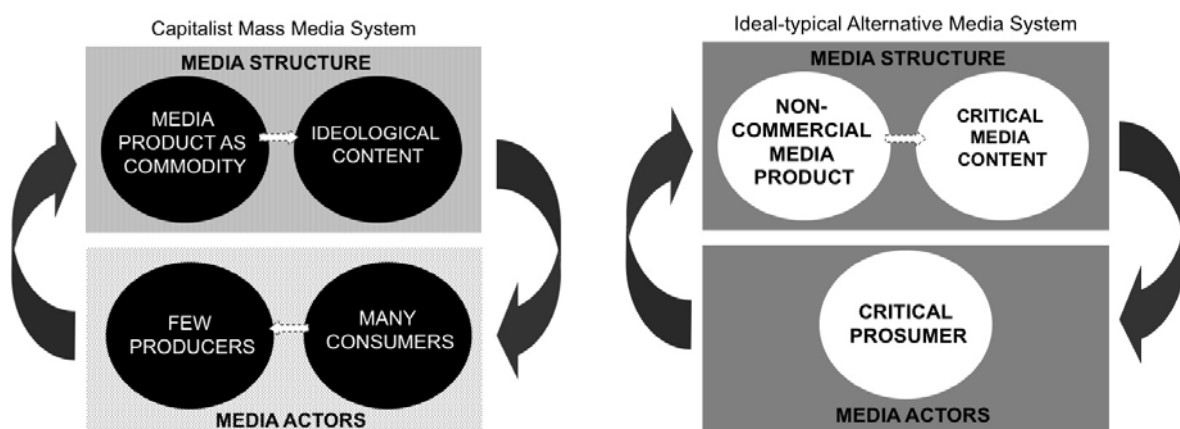


Fig. 1 A model of capitalist mass media vs. an ideal model of alternative media

The model of capitalist mass media and ideal-typical alternative media that is shown in figure 1 is dialectical because it shows that through the production process subjective knowledge of media producers becomes objectified into media products. The subjective knowledge turns into an objective structure that is media content. The structure as objective media content again becomes subjectified through the process of reception, that is the objective media products turns into subjective knowledge. This shows that the actor and the structural level do not form completely separated unities but encroach upon each other. The comparison in figure 1 contains a strict dichotomy between capitalist mass media and ideal-typical alternative media. But since alternative media production today takes place under the conditions of a capitalist society the ideal model cannot be realized to the desired extent.

In chapter 3.1.2 I have criticized those models of alternative media that exclusively focus on exercising prefigurative politics and collective organization practices and therefore often fail in reaching an audience for their media products. This means that under capitalism non-commercial, participatory, and collective organization can often only be sustained at the cost of financial resources, continuity, public visibility and societal impact. Gaining public visibility under capitalism requires financial resources for producing and distributing media products. Realizing an ideal model of alternative media would presuppose different societal conditions. It would require that people have enough time, skills, and resources for not only consuming but also producing media content and that the necessary technologies for media production are freely available. Alternative media that try to realize the ideal model to the full extent therefore are likely to fail in reaching a broad audience. But reaching a broad audience

would be necessary if alternative media want to contrast the ideologies produced by capitalist mass media with critical reporting. Only in doing so they have a chance to contribute to critical awareness raising regarding the dominative and oppressive character of capitalism. Critical awareness is a necessary precondition for critical actions and the resistance against capitalism.

Under capitalism the ideal model of alternative media is likely to fail. Thus, the strict dichotomy between capitalist mass media and alternative media has to be set off. Instead, I argue for defining minimum requirements for speaking of an alternative medium.

4.2 Minimum requirement for defining alternative media

For several reasons, which I have outline above, I argue that in order to be successful in advancing progressive political aims, alternative media may depend on employing some elements of capitalist techniques of media production. Alternative media can make use of capitalist structures and at the same time criticize them. Herbert Marcuse has in this context spoken of “working against the established institutions, while working in them” (Marcuse, 1972: 55).

In my view the minimum requirement for speaking of alternative media should be critical media content. This means that also commercial and non-participatory media can be understood as alternative as long as they produce and distribute critical media content. As soon as ideological content in standardized form is produced and distributed one can no longer speak of an alternative medium (see table 1).

		Capitalist mass media	Ideal alternative media	
Media Structure	Economic form of media products	Media product as commodity	Non-commercial media product	
	Content of media products	Ideological content and	Critical content	
Media Actors	Consumers	Many consumers	Critical consumers	Critical Prosumer
	Producers	Few producers	Critical producers	

Table 1: characteristics of alternative media

	This dimension is necessarily NOT A QUALITY of an alternative medium
	This dimension is A NECESSARY QUALITY of an alternative medium
	This dimension is A POTENTIAL, but not a necessary QUALITY of an alternative medium

At the actor level table 1 shows that media need not necessarily abolish the distinction between media producers and media consumers for being alternative. Here, the minimum requirement for speaking of an alternative medium is that media producers produce critical media content.

At the structural level table 1 shows that the economic form of media products (commercial vs. non-commercial) should not be considered as decisive for the alternative character of media. Here, the minimum requirement for speaking of an alternative medium is critical content. As soon as ideological content is produced a medium is no longer alternative. Many critical political economists have argued that it is hardly possible to at the same time employ commercial mechanisms of financing and to be critical at the level of media content. Commercial financing would necessarily lead to ideological content because it would create dependences on the market and on their financiers (see for example Garnham, 2006; Smythe,

1997; Knoche, 2003; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). I argue that the relationship between economic form and media content should not be understood as deterministic causality.

Nevertheless, alternative media that employ commercial mechanism of financing are constantly endangered of being subsumed under the interest of their financiers. For Atton and Hamilton the “key dilemma” for alternative media therefore is “whether or not to rely on advertising” (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 26). It certainly is a difficult but very important task for alternative media to maintain independence at the level of content. If they fail in doing so and their political aims get lost their alternative character vanishes. The concept of “working against the established institutions, while working in them” (Marcuse, 1972: 55) is always accompanied by the danger of getting subsumed under the interest of the established institutions. But at the same time it is often the only chance to step out from marginality and to become politically effective.

It certainly would be desirable that alternative media could do without commercial financing. Karl Marx considered the independence from market mechanisms as crucial for a free press: “The primary freedom of the press lies in not being a trade” (Marx, 1842: 71). But under the existing societal conditions commercial financing often is the only way for overcoming marginality. As Marcuse pointed out counterinstitutions “have long been an aim of the movement, but the lack of funds was greatly responsible for their weakness and their inferior quality. They must be made competitive. This is especially important for the development of radical, ‘free’ media” (Marcuse, 1972: 55).

In summary alternative media can be understood as media that try to contribute to emancipatory societal transformation by providing critical media content. A decisive question therefore is: What exactly does critical media content mean?

A definition of critical media content can refer to the definition of critique given by Karl Marx: “The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that *man is the highest essence for man* – hence, with the *categorical imperative to overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence” (Marx, 1844: 385).

Critical theorists like Max Horkheimer (1937/1992), Herbert Marcuse (1937/1992), Theodor W. Adorno (1969) have advanced this notion of critique. In summary Marxist critique departs from the critique of capitalist relations and societal contradictions. The objects of critique are all kinds of domination. The critique consists in the negation of repressive societal conditions, and aims at a society without domination and oppression in which all human beings can live a self-determined life.

Critical media content can therefore be understood as content that criticizes all forms of oppression and domination, and keeps up the vision of a reasonable and self-determined society that can be achieved through social struggles.

In this sense alternative media as critical media realize what Marx intended the press to be: “the public watchdog, the tireless denouncer of those in power, the omnipresent eye, the omnipresent mouthpiece of the people’s spirit that jealously guards its freedom” (Marx, 1849: 231). For Marx “it is the duty of the press to come forward on behalf of the oppressed in its immediate neighbourhood” and “to undermine all the foundations of the existing political state of affairs” (Marx, 1849: 234).

I propose a model of alternative media that pursue radical criticism at the level of content but are not necessarily alternative at the level of economic product form and production processes.

This definition of alternative media, which uses critical content as minimum requirement, has the following main advantages compared to an understanding of alternative media as participatory media:

- * It does not exclude oppositional media that make use of commercial mechanisms of financing. Commercial financing allows alternative media to maintain financial stability, which makes it easier to continually produce high-quality media products and to gain public

visibility. Thus, such a definition can help alternative media to overcome marginality and to reach broader publics. This does not mean that alternative media that do not reach a broad audience should not be considered as alternative but that such media can probably not effectively contribute to the development of a critical counter-public sphere, which is essential for critical consciousness building.

* Using critical content as decisive criterion for defining alternative media allows distinguishing clearly between repressive and emancipatory media usages.

Several examples illustrate that, despite of compromises, it is realizable for alternative media to at the same employ commercial financing, and remain critical at the content level. The canadian journal *Adbusters* for example is financed by donations and sales and has a paid circulation of about 120.000. *Adbusters* is critical of capitalism, supports social movements and calls for political activism. Through critical reporting the journal wants to contribute to “topple existing power structures and forge a major shift in the way we will live in the 21st century” (*Adbusters*, 2009). The bimonthly journal *Mother Jones* has a paid circulation of 250.000 and is financed by donations, sales and advertising. It aims at supporting social change by critical reporting and investigative journalism (*Mother Jones*, 2008). These two publications have in common that they use mainstream distribution channels and have an appealing design. This makes them more accessible for a broad audience.

The argument that commercialism and critical content are not mutually exclusive is also supported by Bailey’s, Cammaerts’ and Carpentiers’ analysis of the commercial Muslim minority magazine *Q-News*: “The case of *Q-News* indicates that commercialism does not necessarily undermine critical journalism” (Bailey, et al., 2008: 94). Rodney Benson conducted a content analysis of 4 Californian alternative Newsweeklies (*LA Weekly*, *New Times LA*, *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, *SF Weekly*) that are entirely financed by sales and advertising. The study showed that especially the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* is critical of capitalism and reports on political activism. Benson concludes: “This study has called into question the common research assumption that commercialism, especially advertising, necessarily undermines the critical, oppositional stance of the press. Although relying on advertising to a greater extent than U.S. daily newspapers, many urban newsweeklies offer news and views ignored by the mainstream media, as well as encouraging passionate democratic debate and, in some cases, active political involvement” (Benson, 2003: 124).

5. Conclusion

In the introduction I posed the question whether *Le Monde Diplomatique* should be considered as alternative medium. Although *Le Monde Diplomatique* is a commercial newspaper and restricts access to media production I argue that it should be understood as alternative because it questions ruling ideas, criticises domination and is partial for the oppressed, provides detailed analyses of topics neglected by capitalist mainstream media, considers causes and not only effects. That is *Le Monde Diplomatique* provides critical content.

Of course *Le Monde Diplomatique* does not represent the ideal type of alternative media. This would require negating capitalist mass media not only at the level of content, but also at the level of economic product form (non-commercial media products) and production processes (participatory production processes). As I have pointed out, realizing this ideal model of alternative media would require societal conditions that are not realized today. If alternative media want to avoid marginality and to be able to contribute to emancipatory societal transformations they rely on financial resources for producing and distributing their products. Since this can require employing commercial means of financing and restricting access to media production I have argued that critical content should be considered as minimum requirement in defining alternative media.

Alternative media that are critical at the content level can show that under the existing societal conditions the realization of the entire potentials of individuals and of society is constantly suppressed. In doing so they can challenge false consciousness and contribute to critical awareness raising.

Critical consciousness allows to question domination and to imagine an alternative society without oppression, and therefore is a precondition for critical political actions: “Thus, the break through the false consciousness may provide the Archimedean point for a larger emancipation—at an infinitesimally small spot, to be sure, but it is on the enlargement of such small spots that the chance of change depends” (Marcuse, 1965: 111).

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