

Alternative Media as Critical Media

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Abstract

This article deals with the category of alternative media from a theoretical perspective. It aims to develop a definition and to distinguish different dimensions of alternative media. The article is a contribution to theoretical foundations of alternative media studies. The notion of alternative media as critical media is introduced. Critical media product content shows the suppressed possibilities of existence, antagonisms of reality, and potentials for change. It questions domination, expresses the standpoints of the oppressed and dominated groups and individuals and argues for the advancement of a co-operative society. Critical media product form aims at advancing imagination; it is dialectical because it involves dynamics, non-identity, rupture, and the unexpected. The category of critical media is connected to Negt and Kluge's notion of the counter-public sphere. Critical media can be seen as the communicative dimension of the counter-public sphere.

Keywords

alternative media, critical theory, media theory, philosophy of communication, social theory

The aim of this article is to develop a definition and to distinguish different dimensions of alternative media. Alternative media is both an under-researched topic and an under-represented topic in the social sciences. Most introductory books do not feature sections on alternative media nor do they mention alternative media at all (e.g. Beck et al., 2004; Burkart, 2002; Gill and Adams, 1998; Hartley, 2002; Maletzke, 1998; Schirato and Yell, 2000). For example, Dennis McQuail (2005) discusses alternative media on less than two pages. There are 44 papers that contain the term 'alternative media' in the title in Social

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Sciences Citation Index (accessed 13 March 2010). One gets an impression of how under-researched this field is, if one compares it to a title search for 'public relations', which yields 1656 results.

Alternative media seems to be a largely neglected field of research. This article is a contribution to the elaboration of the theoretical foundations of alternative media. It asks the question: How should alternative media be defined? In order to answer this, the study explores the notion of alternative media as critical media.

The aim is to go beyond vague definitions, such as the following one: 'Essentially counter-hegemonic, that is challenging established, hierarchical, systems of politics, economics, and CULTURE, alternative media take many forms' (Watson and Hill, 2003: 172).

What is needed, besides more empirical studies, are also more theories of alternative media. Not many connections between alternative media theory and social theory have thus far been established. Alternative media studies are also strongly connected to Anarchist perspectives (cf. e.g. Atton, 2002), which might be due to the shared focus on self-organizing practices. The contention that I make here is that Anarchist notions of alternative media are insufficient because they tend to idealize small-scale production and tend to neglect orientation towards the political public. My alternative draft is that a realistic Marxist theory of alternative media is needed. The contention is that alternative media should not only be understood as alternative media practices, but also as critical media that question dominative society.

As part of the introduction, I will now first outline the social theory framework that will be employed to discuss the theoretical foundations of alternative media.

A more consistent typology of approaches can be introduced by referring to a distinction that is considered by Anthony Giddens as one of the central issues of social theory: the 'division between objectivism and subjectivism' (Giddens, 1984: xx). Subjective approaches are oriented on human agents and their practices as primary object of analysis, objective approaches on social structures. Structures in this respect are institutionalized relationships that are stabilized across time and space (Giddens, 1984: xxxi). Applying this distinction to the realm of the media makes a distinction between subjective and objective media theories. The former primarily deal with those people and groups that produce and consume the media (journalists, audience). They are oriented on media actors. The latter are primarily concerned with the more durable results of media: media products, media institutions, the rules, values, norms that shape the media, the economic and ideological features of the media, etc. These approaches are focused on media structures.

Giddens (1984) tried to overcome the separation of subject and object in his theory of structuration by formulating the theorem of the duality of structure that connects subjects and objects of society dialectically by arguing that social structures are medium and outcome of social actions, they at the same time enable and constrain practices (Fuchs, 2003a, 2003b). Applying this theorem to the media means that media structures and media practices are dialectically connected and produce each other so that the media system is a dynamic system that is reproduced through a dialectic of media subjects (human actors who engage in media production and reception) and media objects (media structures).

In the mass media system, journalists are actors who produce content, with the help of specific rules, procedures, structures, and technologies. This system aimed at informing a broader public. Informing the public in this context means that the journalists/producers

aim at a transformation of consciousness of the public. The content provided can have news value, entertainment value, or artistic-aesthetic value. In order to distribute the content so that it reaches the public and potential recipients, the content information is stored and transmitted through storage and transmission technologies (such as, for example, satellite transmission, CDs, DVDs, videos, records, computer hard disks, fibre optic transmission cables, etc.) and organizational structures (e.g. sales and marketing departments, marketing strategies, etc.). Content distribution is the foundation of reception.

Production is only possible based on reception and distribution. If reception stops, there is no further need for production. Produced goods are only meaningful if they are consumed. Production implies a need for distribution and consumption. Reception is itself a production process, the production of meaning. In reception, users/audiences/recipients interpret media content based on their lived experiences and societal contexts. The meaning of objects always depends on the societal and historical context. Meanings are never unhistorical or transcendental, but always social and historical. They are determined by the social context of the production and use of sign systems. They change by societal differentiation. Different meanings can be ascribed to the same object. Stuart Hall (1999) has pointed out that a certain degree of determinism in the form of hegemonic meaning as well as a certain degree of indeterminism in the form of negotiated meaning and oppositional meaning is present in the cultural reception process.

Hall's main achievement is that he has shown that there is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding. Different interpretations can exist in parallel and even in opposition and antagonism to each other. I have added to these three forms of reception a fourth and a fifth one: critical reception and manipulative reception, that can be partly overlapping with the other types in certain situations. The notion of critical reception will be further elaborated below.

Media are not just social systems, they are social systems that reach a wide public and are therefore part of communication processes in public spheres. Therefore, the notion of the public sphere is important for a social theory of the media in general and as a result also for a social theory of alternative media.

For Habermas ([1974] 2001), the public sphere as ideal-type is a realm that is accessible to all citizens so that they can control and limit state power through discussion, criticism, control, and elections (formation of public opinion). In the struggle for enlightenment and against the monarchy, the bourgeois public sphere, based on constitutional rights and the media, would emerge. Throughout its development, however, it would be deformed and be controlled by special interests that constitute 'a climate of nonpublic opinion' (Habermas, [1974] 2001: 77) that is manipulated by commercial media and advertising. Habermas imagines a true public sphere, in which all competing groups and parties make information accessible to the public, engage in public discussion, and make political compromises that are 'legitimized through this process of public communication' (Habermas, [1974] 2001: 78, cf. also 1989: 210).

For Habermas, a true public sphere is compatible with capitalist society. He imagines the transformation of the political system, but not of the relations of production and ownership. But as capitalism is based on the unequal control of resources by the social classes, one might argue that resource inequality will result in unfair material advantages in public opinion formation (such as through the ownership structure of the mass media)

for certain groups and that Habermas's notion of the public sphere is therefore idealistic. The abolishment of classes is for Habermas not a precondition for the creation of an inclusive public sphere. Alternative media as intellectual means of struggle do not exist in his social-democratic account. In relation to the media, Habermas distinguishes between a 'manipulated public sphere'/manipulated publicity (Habermas, 1989: 217, 236) and 'a critical publicity' (p. 235). For Habermas, critical publicity is a quality of a true public sphere (p. 248) that is based on communicative action. It is not seen as publicity that struggles in capitalism against capitalism, but as an ideal vision. Habermas does not ignore the 'colonization of the public sphere by market imperatives' (Habermas, 2006: 422), but nonetheless he does not see the abolishment of these imperatives as necessary (Habermas, 2006: 419; 1992: 436, 444, 469f).

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's (1972) notion of a proletarian (counter-)public sphere can be read as both a socialist critique and a radicalization of Habermas's approach (cf. Calhoun, 1992: 5; Jameson, 1988). For them, the critical function of a proletarian public sphere is to contribute intellectual means to class struggles. They characterize the proletarian counter-public sphere as being radically different from and opposed to the bourgeois public sphere (Negt and Kluge, 1972: 7, 106–8), as an expression of the degree of emancipation of the working class (p. 66), a sphere of autonomous communication of the proletariat (pp. 77, 314), a society within society (pp. 341–55), an expression of the self-organization and unfolding of the interests of workers (pp. 111, 163), and a self-defence organization of the working class (p. 113). This sphere would generalize and unify the collective experiences of the proletariat (pp. 24, 310), especially its experiences in production and its context of living (pp. 223f, 346f). It would produce counter-products, not just ideas: 'Idea against idea, product against product, production sector against production sector' (p. 143). Contrary to Habermas, bourgeois and proletarian public sphere can never coexist for Negt and Kluge. The first would destroy the second (1972: 70f).

Based on these theoretical foundations, this article first applies the notion of subject and object to alternative media theories, then introduces the notion of alternative media as critical media, relates this notion to the category of the counter public sphere, and finally draws some conclusions.

Existing Issues and Theories of Alternative Media

In this section, ways of defining alternative media as well as central issues of alternative media theory will be introduced. Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2008) constructed a typology of theories of alternative media. They distinguish between four approaches that define alternative media in different ways. First, the community media approach argues that participation of members of a community in content production and media organization is central for alternative media. Others see the provision of content by alternative media as alternative to mainstream media (large-scale, state-owned or commercial, hierarchical, dominant discourses vs. small-scale, independent, non-hierarchical, non-dominant discourses). Third, one can identify approaches that use the notion of counter-hegemonic media that are part of civil society and form a third voice between state media and commercial media. And, finally, one can identify approaches that speak of rhizomatic media that are relational because they link different protest groups and

movements, connect the local and the global, and establish different types of relationships with the market and/or the state.

This typology is interesting, but seems to be arbitrary. An underlying that is grounded in and justified by social theory and used to explain the differences and commonalities of the approaches, is missing. The four approaches are introduced not based on a theoretical distinction, but arbitrarily. Another arbitrary distinction of approaches is made by Rauch (2007), who distinguishes between defining alternative media as alternative content, alternative channels, alternative sources that are featured, or alternative values.

Typologies should always be complete, i.e. able to map all existing approaches, and be based on an explicit underlying theoretical criterion. One such criterion is Giddens's distinction between subjective, objective, and dialectical social theories. It allows the categorization of all approaches of a specific theoretical field.

The subject-object distinction can be framed as the distinction between process- and content-oriented approaches in alternative media-theory. The former stress self-organized production processes as central characteristic of alternative media (e.g. Atton, 2002, 2004, Beywl and Brombach, 1982; 2002; Curran, 2002; Couldry and Curran, 2003: 7; Dagron, 2004; Hüttner, 2006; Rodriguez, 2003: 190; 241; Weichler, 1987: 151).

Such a focus on process excludes many oppositional media that act in more professional ways. Journals such as *New Internationalist* (with a circulation of over 70,000, the largest left-wing publication in the UK), *Le Monde Diplomatique* (probably the most important alternative publication in terms of global reach and circulation), *Z Magazine*, *Rethinking Marxism*, *Historical Materialism*, *Monthly Review*, or *New Left Review* have critical content, but they have professional editorial teams. Therefore, not all citizens can easily become writers. These are journals where professionals report and criticize domination. Because such oppositional media have political importance for the Left, it would be a mistake to exclude them from the category of alternative media just because they do not have self-organized production structures. It is better to distinguish between different alternative media strategies that might be appropriate to different progressive contexts.

Process approaches are mostly oriented on self-organized small-scale community media that enable citizen participation. The danger that lies in this orientation is that such media will remain insignificant and be unable to have a transformative political potential because they are unable to reach a mass public and therefore are unable to be embedded in a large counter-public sphere. Such media tend to produce fragmented unconnected publics that are only accessed by isolated subgroups and undermine the possibility for a large sphere of political communication that is accessed by all exploited, oppressed, and excluded groups and individuals. Comedia (1984) characterizes small-scale alternative media as an "'alternative" ghetto' that lacks resources and therefore political relevance. Knoche speaks of the threat of alternative media remaining insignificant non-profit-dogs (Knoche, 2003: 10). I am not saying that small-scale community media should not be considered forms of alternative media, but that it is important to stress that they are not suited to supporting and advancing large-scale political change processes.

The ideal of practising grassroots democracy in a world that is dominated by economic and political elites who control economic and political resources can become problematic for alternative media. If they lack resources (as they frequently do), then self-exploitation

Table 1. Potential dimensions of traditional and critical media

Dimension	Capitalist mass media	Alternative media
Journalistic Production	Elite journalism	Citizens' journalism
Media Product Structures	Ideological form and content	Critical Form and content
Organizational media Structures	Hierarchical media organizations	Grassroots media organizations
Distribution structures	Marketing and public relations	Alternative distribution
Reception practices	Manipulative reception	Critical reception

and precarious labour will be the outcome. Resource scarcity can result in time- and energy-consuming internal conflicts and divisions that further undermine the political potentials of alternative media. A pluralistic media landscape, in which each consumer can become a media producer with the help of alternative media, is not automatically a media democracy. If only a few are heard, then a situation of repressive tolerance (Marcuse, 1969) emerges that legitimizes the continuing existence of dominant capitalist media corporations that centralize profits, wealth, power, recipients, and influence.

Other alternative media approaches are more focused on media products (e.g. Downing, 2001; O'Sullivan, 1994). These are objective alternative media theories. They are oriented on media structures. For John Downing, the central characteristic of alternative media is their alternative political vision: 'By radical media, I refer to media, generally small-scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives' (Downing, 2001: v).

In the next section, I will formulate my own concept of alternative media as critical media.

Alternative Media as Critical Media

Alternative media are mass media that challenge the dominant capitalist forms of media production, media structures, content, distribution, and reception. Table 1 gives a comparative overview of the potential characteristics of alternative media. Not all of these criteria are necessary qualities of alternative media. The central aspects are journalists and their practices, recipients and their practices (actor-oriented), media product structures, media organizational structures, and media distribution structures (structure-oriented).

In elite journalism, one finds journalists as a professional wage-labour class that is confronted with corporate and political pressures, journalistic production conditioned by power processes, and the accumulation of journalistic status capital. The model of citizen journalism, in which one finds the independence of writers from corporate and political influences and pressures, challenges this production model. Anybody can be an author without specific training or expertise. Ordinary citizens can become journalists, so journalism is citizen-controlled. Individuals or groups, that are affected by certain problems, become journalists or at least the positive subject of journalism (concerned citizens). Such journalistic practice is frequently part of protest movement practices. Consumers become producers (prosumers, producers), the audience becomes active.

Content and form of traditional media are ideological. Content is strictly defined by what is considered as popular and sellable. The drive for profit can result in a lack of quality, complexity, and sophistication (as e.g. yellow journalism that simplifies reality and is focused on singular examples, emotionalism, and sensationalism). Content takes on an ideological form either by reporting that is based on manipulation or by stories that are reported as important, but are not really important for society at large. In any case, such content aims to distract the recipients from confrontation with actual societal problems and their causes.

Critical media, in contrast, are characterized by critical form and content. There is oppositional content that provides alternatives to dominant repressive heteronomous perspectives that reflect the rule of capital, patriarchy, racism, sexism, nationalism, etc. Such content expresses oppositional standpoints that question all forms of heteronomy and domination. So there is counter-information and counter-hegemony that includes the voices of the excluded, the oppressed, the dominated, the enslaved, the estranged, the exploited, and the dominated. One aim is to give voices to the voiceless, media power to the powerless as well as to transcend the filtering and censorship of information by corporate information monopolies, state monopolies, or cultural monopolies in public information and communication. There are forms of presentation that are not one-dimensional, but are demanding and challenging the recipients in order to advance their imagination and complex thinking (e.g. Brecht's concept of dialectical form in epic theatre, radical discontinuities that shock people).

Concerning organizational structures, on the one hand, there are hierarchical capitalist media corporations that aim primarily to make a profit. They are financed by selling content to audiences and/or by advertising. There is private ownership of media corporations and there are hierarchical structures with a clear power differential that creates influential decision-making actors and less influential roles as well as a division of labour within media organizations.

The alternatives are grassroots media organizations. In such systems, there is collective ownership and consensus decision-making by those who work in the organization, no hierarchies and authorities, symmetric power distribution, no external private ownership, but economic self-management. There is a focus on non-commercial media that are not financed by advertisements or commodity sale, but by donations, public funding, private resources, or no cost-strategies. The division of labour is sublated: the roles of authors, designers, publisher, printers, and distributors are overlapping.

In traditional media, distribution is a form of marketing that makes use of high-tech distribution, marketing and public relations departments, specialists and strategies, sales departments, advertisements, and distribution contracting. In alternative media, also technologies that allow easy and cheap reproduction are used. Strategies like anti-copyright, free access, or open content allow content to be shared, copied, distributed, or changed in an open way. Furthermore, one also finds alternative distributors or alternative institutions (e.g. alternative book stores or libraries) that focus on the distribution of alternative titles.

At the reception level, a distinction between manipulative and critical reception can be drawn. In the first case, content is interpreted in ways that create false consciousness. In the second case, content is interpreted in ways that allow the recipients to question

domination. An interpretation of media content is critical if the consumed form or content causes subjective insights that allow the recipients to question certain forms of domination, develop ideas of alternative models of existence that advance co-operation and can potentially guide transformative actions and social struggles. The important aspect here is that there is an objectivist judgement that co-operation is the true, original, essential form of human existence (cf. Fuchs, 2008). Manipulation, in contrast to critical reception, means that recipients interpret content and as a consequence reality in forms that do not question domination, but further advance, legitimize or leave untouched dominative/heteronomous structures. The categories of critical and manipulative consciousness refer to states of consciousness.

Certainly, the ideal case within contemporary society is that all of these alternative practices and structures are given. In such cases, alternative media are based on self-managed citizen journalists' production of critical content that is widely available, distributed, and reaches a large audience, that critically receives content and becomes itself active in critical journalistic production. In such a case, there is a dialectic of self-managed media production and critical media structures. The ideal case for journalism is a different societal framework, which allows all citizens to have the time, skills, and resources so that they can all act as critical journalists and critical recipients at the same time and their practices constitute a public sphere, in which decisions are taken collectively in participatory grassroots processes. The distinction between production and reception completely vanishes and alternative media become the standard way of doing media. It is easily imaginable that such a vision requires the establishment of a participatory democracy and of a co-operative society.

To focus strictly on prefigurative politics in media practices means idealizing the limited possibilities and constraints that alternative media production is facing within contemporary society. Furthermore, self-managed practices can also be used to advance highly repressive (e.g. fascist) content. Hence in the approach advanced in this study, the focus is more on content and form – media products. This is not to argue that process is unimportant, but that a minimum requirement for speaking of an alternative medium is critical content or critical form. If audiences critically interpret uncritical mainstream media content, one cannot speak of an alternative medium, but of critical reception practices. Given a focus on critical media products, also mainstream media under certain conditions can be considered as alternative media. The existence of a critical product is a necessary condition in order to speak of a medium as critical medium, but certainly it is desirable that as many other alternative qualities are achieved as possible. The pity is that under the given capitalist structures, it is not easily possible to achieve all of these alternative visions and practices. To strictly focus on self-managed processes, anti-commercialism, etc. means ignoring the problems of alternative media production and naïvely arguing that an alternative society can already be created within an overall repressive totality. In the framework at hand, citizen journalism, self-managed ownership, alternative distribution, and critical reception are desirable qualities of alternative media, but not necessary conditions.

A theory of critical media was already anticipated in Marx's writings on the press. For Marx, the essence of the press is that it is critical, not commercial. 'The writer, of course, must earn in order to be able to live and write, but he must by no means live and write to

earn ... The primary freedom of the press lies in not being a trade' (Marx, 1842: 71). So the argument is that capitalist structures are detrimental to free critical expression in the press. Marx's argument shows that the goal is a free press in a co-operative, non-capitalist society.

The notion of critique that underlies the concept of alternative media is the Marxian one as laid out in the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*:

The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that *man is the highest essence for man* – hence, with the *categoric imperative to overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence, relations which cannot be better described than by the cry of a Frenchman when it was planned to introduce a tax on dogs: Poor dogs! They want to treat you as human beings! (Marx, 1844: 385)

Critique here is understood as radical humanism, orientation on human essence, and as opposition to all domination. I argue that Marxian critique is not only an economic critique that ignores non-economic forms of domination based on, for example, gender, race, ethnicity, nation, etc., but that it is a form of critique in which all forms of domination are seen as being unjustified and unjust. In such an account, all non-economic domination is based on and articulated with economic domination.

Critical media are critical because of five qualities. The first quality of critical media is negation of negation at the content level. The content expresses an interest and tries to pay attention to the realization of suppressed possibilities of societal development. Such media do not accept existing social structures as they are, they are not interested in society as it is, but in what it could be and could become. Their goal is the strengthening of co-operation and participation and the creation of a participatory, co-operative society. Hence underlying is the judgement that co-operation and participation are more essential, true, and desirable than competition and exclusion (Fuchs, 2008). Critical content deconstructs ideologies that claim that something cannot be changed and shows potential counter-tendencies and alternative modes of development. Critical media are negative in so far as they relate phenomena to societal problems and what society has failed to become and to tendencies that question and contradict the dominant and dominative mode of operation and hence have the potential to become positive forces of social change towards the better. That the negative antagonisms are sublated into positive results is not an automatism, but depends on the realization of practical forces of change that have the potential to rise from inside the systems in question in order to produce a transcendental outside that becomes a new whole. Critical media aim to advance social struggles that transform society towards the realization of co-operative potentials.

The second quality of critical media is negation of negation at the form level. The form of critical media products challenges human consciousness so that imagination is potentially advanced and suppressed possibilities of development can potentially be imagined.

The third quality of critical media is dialectical realism at the content level. Critical media content is both dialectical and realistic. First of all, it is based on the realistic assumption that there is a world outside of cognition that can be perceived, analyzed, published, criticized, and changed. The task for critical media is to uncover and reveal

the essence behind existence that is ideologically distorted. Critical media analyze social phenomena not based on instrumental reason and one-dimensional logic. They operate: (1) under the assumption that phenomena do not have linear causes and effects, but are contradictory, open, dynamic, and carry certain development potentials in them; and (2) based on the insight that there are not only opportunities or only risks inherent in social phenomena, but also contradictory tendencies that pose both positive and negative potentials at the same time that are realized or suppressed by human social practice. Dialectic analysis in this context means complex dynamic thinking, realism, an analysis of real possibilities and a dialectic of pessimism and optimism.

The fourth quality of critical media is dialectical realism at the form level. Dialectical realism (form) mean that the form involves rupture, change, non-identity, dynamics, and the unexpected – the form is itself contradictory.

The fifth quality of critical media is the materialistic expression of the interests of the dominated at the content level. Critical media content is materialistic in the sense that it addresses phenomena and problems not in terms of absolute ideas and predetermined societal development, but in terms of resource distribution and social struggles. They are based on the insight that the basic resources are highly unequally divided in contemporary society. Critical media in one or the other respect take the standpoint of the oppressed or exploited classes and consider that structures of oppression and exploitation benefit certain classes at the expense of others and hence should be transformed.

Partisanship for the oppressed is an aspect of alternative media that was expressed by Marx in his writings on the press. The press should act as ‘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), ‘it is the duty of the press to come forward on behalf of the oppressed in its immediate neighbourhood’, the ‘first duty of the press now is to undermine all the foundations of the existing political state of affairs’ (p. 234). For Marx, the press is ‘rooted in the people and honestly sympathises with all the latter’s hopes and fears, love and hatred, joys and sorrows’ (Marx, 1843: 153). The good, true press would express ‘actual reality’ and ‘public opinion’, the bad press, reality ‘as it would like it to be’ and opinion which distorts reality (p. 156). For Marx, publicity means that the ‘real matter’ is being reported to ‘the real public’, ‘the living and actually present public’ (Marx, 1842: 44).

Critical media show how the two competing forces of competition and co-operation result in class formation and produce potentials for the dissolution of exploitation and oppression. They are based on the judgement that co-operation is more desirable than competition (Fuchs, 2008), which is just another way of saying that structures of exploitation and oppression need to be questioned, criticized and sublated. Critical media are interested in why there is a difference between actuality and potentiality, existence and essence, and aim at finding ways of bridging this difference. They aim at and express the need for the establishment of a co-operative, participatory society. The ethical dimension is not unfounded, but grounded in the essence of society as such. Its transcendence is constituted by the immanence of society, co-operative human potentials (Fuchs, 2008).

Critical media product content shows suppressed possibilities of existence, antagonisms of reality, potentials for change. It questions domination, expresses the standpoints of the oppressed and dominated groups and individuals and argues for the

advancement of a co-operative society. Critical media product form aims at advancing imagination, it is dialectical because it involves dynamics, non-identity, rupture, and the unexpected.

Non-commercial, small-scale grassroots structures that use alternative distribution forms might be an advantage in situations where media aim to mobilizing local communities and for the self-organization of concerned citizens who can become media producers by themselves. Professionalized structures that aim at high circulation rates and at reaching the masses might be more suitable in situations where media aim at large-scale societal transformation and the transformation of the consciousness of manipulated and simple-minded people (the raising of awareness, complex thinking, and critical consciousness). Both strategies can also be combined as the example of anti-apartheid media given by Thörn (2007) shows.

There is no binary distinction between the two sides presented in Table 1. Alternative media only in the area of content are necessarily on the alternative side, but they can also make use of mainstream strategies and structures. Particularly in order to reach larger audiences, alternative media should not see themselves as fully opposed to commercial strategies and professionalized marketing, there is the potential to use these mechanism to produce and distribute progressive content. Herbert Marcuse has in this context spoken of counterinstitutions that make use of existing structures in order to transcend these structures and overcome the problem of weak diffusion and inferior quality:

working against the established institutions, while working in them, but not simply by 'boring from within,' rather by 'doing the job,' learning (how to program and read computers, how to teach at all levels of education, how to use the mass media, how to organize production, how to recognize and eschew planned obsolescence, how to design, et cetera), and at the same time preserving one's own consciousness in working with the others . . . [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 . . . They can be competitive, that is to say, apt to counteract Establishment education, not only where they fill a vacuum or where their quality is not only different but also superior. The collection of large funds for the operation of effective counterinstitutions requires compromises. (Marcuse, 1972: 55f)

The notion of counterinstitutions shows that critical media have an institutional context. In the next section, this aspect of critical media will be taken up by discussing critical media's relation to the public sphere.

Critical Media and the Counter Public Sphere

Alternative media have the potential to stimulate public debate (Downing, 2001: 27–35). They are not just media, but media embedded in society. One needs to analyze them together with their societal context in order to avoid media essentialism. Therefore critical media should be seen as part of a wider political context. In this respect, discussion of how the notion of the public sphere relates to critical media is required.

The book on the counter-public sphere by Negt and Kluge has resulted in general discussion (e.g. Jameson, 1988) and discussion within the alternative media discourse (Downing, 2002: 29; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Sholle, 1995). A superficial reading can create the impression that their account is not very different from subjective notions of alternative media because both approaches have a strong focus on the production process of the media. But for subjective notions of alternative media, the focus is on any type of media production that takes place outside of the established mass media, whereas for Negt and Kluge, such processes are only part of counter-public spheres if they are an expression of the interests of the dominated. For subjectivists, grassroots do-it-yourself production processes are at the heart of alternative media. They focus on the degree of democracy of production. Negt and Kluge are interested in left-wing media, i.e. control of the intellectual means of production and the actual production of counter-ideas by the political left. Negt and Kluge do not exclude participatory production and prosumption/produsage, but they understand self-organization not primarily as prosumption, but as the constitution of critical organizations that are autonomous from capitalist ideologies. For some approaches, also right-wing media content is a kind of alternative medium, whereas Negt and Kluge exclude all media and media content from the notion of proletarian public spheres, if they are not part of the political left. Negt and Kluge focus on the control of the intellectual means of production independent of the bourgeoisie, not on organizational democracy and prosumption/produsage of ideas.

Negt's and Kluge's notion of a counter-public sphere, if applied to the media, is close to the ideal type model of critical media outlined in Table 1. Both focus on left-wing content and the control of production structures by the political left (Negt and Kluge, 1972: 143). Both stress cultural counter-products and relations of production/control of means of intellectual production (pp. 427, 432). My model, different from that of Negt and Kluge, is based on a more systematic notion of communication that distinguishes an actor-level and a structural level of social systems, whereas Negt and Kluge have a relatively unordered and specific way of theorizing that lacks general foundations. Also, they do not describe the relation of production process and products of the proletarian public sphere as a dialectic, a structure-agency-dialectic. Critical media can be seen as the communicative dimension of the counter-public sphere.

Alternative media are frequently connected to protest movements that make use of these media for information, communication, co-ordination, and co-operation processes. Not in all cases can alternative media be connected to protest, because there are cases where there are critical media, but no critical larger public. The totality of alternative media constitutes an alternative public sphere, a sphere of protest and political discussion that has an oppositional role and hence enhances the vividness of democracy. If there is no opposition, there is no democracy. The counter-public spheres are at the same time critical and affirmative (the latter because the existence of protest allows dominant classes to argue that society is pluralistic and does not need to be changed). Counter-public-spheres are dialectical opponents of corporate media monopolies and political opinion monopolies, which are monopolies in public opinion, and to political opinion monopolies, which are either exercised through the domination of certain parties or through the domination of hegemonic world-views. They have a dialectical role insofar as they legitimate the existing dominative system by being oppositional, which allows

dominant groups to argue that the current political system is the best possible because it is pluralistic, but at the same time they are an important locus of oppositional practices that can be the germ form for the creation of a participatory democracy and a co-operative society.

The notion of the proletariat tends to be associated with industrial wage labour. One can suppose that the nature of the proletariat has changed since 1972, when Negt and Kluge published their book, due to the rise of service and knowledge labour, neoliberal individualism, the weakening of labour vis-à-vis capital, the globalization of production, and the rise of new social movements. The notion of the proletariat therefore needs to be updated. Hardt and Negri use the terms 'multitude' (Hardt and Negri, 2004) and 'social worker' (Negri, 1988) to stress that the exploitation of the commons of society has become a central aspect of surplus value generation. Based on this insight, one can argue that it is politically wise to expand the notion of the exploited class so that it is not restricted to industrial wage labour, but also includes the unemployed, houseworkers, migrant workers, developing countries, retirees, students, precarious workers, precarious self-employment, and knowledge workers (Fuchs, 2008: 195–209; Fuchs 2010). One can use the notion of the proletariat to describe the unity of diversity of conditions and experiences of the exploitation of the producers of the commons by capital, but no longer the notion of the industrial wage labour class.

Critical media are media of the multitude, media of an updated proletarian counter-public sphere. They express the experiences of the dominated and emerge in the process of struggles and are a form of class struggle and proletarian organization. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s, political struggles were strongly oriented on the recognition of marginalized identities (women, gays and lesbians, transsexuals, etc.), and the recognition of nature as a value (ecological movement), these specific struggles have to a certain point become unified by the re-emergence of class issues due to the rise of strong socio-economic inequality. The anti-corporate movement and the movement for democratic globalization constitute a movement of movements. This movement unifies particular struggles and refocuses on class issues by questioning corporate domination (Fuchs, 2008: 290–4). Therefore, the notions of the proletariat and the proletarian public sphere, of which critical media are part, are again useful today.

One should add here that there can be and are situations in society, where the consciousness of the dominated class is manipulated and one only finds a weakly developed multitude. In such situations, critical media that express the experiences of these masses, although they are not politically conscious of their being, are still necessary and will take on different organizational forms from situations of heavy class struggles or revolutions. There is a difference between critical media in class struggles and critical media that aim at organizing class struggles and class consciousness.

The notion of the proletarian public sphere advances a relatively unified public sphere as a political goal. The proletarian public sphere, just like the proletariat, will not exist forever, but is a self-sublating movement that aims at a classless society and a non-stratified public sphere. Certain scholars have criticized the unified conceptions of the public sphere, especially Habermas's account. Women, gays and lesbians, and ethnicities would have been excluded from the public sphere, it would be more promising to struggle in multiple subaltern counter-publics against oppression than in one unified

sphere, and an egalitarian society should be based on a plurality of public arenas in order to be democratic and multicultural (Eley, 1992; Fraser, 1992; Roberts and Crossley, 2004). Habermas agrees that his early account, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1989), published in 1962, has ignored proletarian, feminist, and other public spheres (Habermas, 1992: 425–30). Habermas therefore speaks of ‘a pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public’ (Habermas, 1992: 438). The danger of pluralistic publics without unity is that in struggles they will focus on mere reformist identity politics without challenging the whole, which negatively affects the lives of all subordinated groups, and that it ignores that in an egalitarian society common communication media are needed to guarantee cohesion and the solidarity that is needed for a strong democracy. Postmodernists and post-Marxists are so occupied with stressing difference that they do not realize that difference can become repressive if it turns into a plurality without unity. Certainly, the counter-public sphere and an egalitarian public sphere should be based on unity in diversity, but the central aspect is that there needs to be unity in diversity in order to struggle for participatory democracy and to maintain this condition once it is achieved.

As to the role of alternative media in the counter-public sphere, this means that it is preferable and more effective to have a few widely accessible and widely consumed broad critical media than many small-scale special interest media that support the fragmentation of struggles. Nicholas Garnham argues in this context for the need of a single public sphere and says that the postmodernists risk ‘cultural relativism’ if they do not see that democracy is in need of ‘some common normative dimensions’ and ‘more generalized media’ (Garnham, 1992: 369). Jeffrey Alexander (2006: 276f) suggests to Fraser and Eley that ‘they fail to do justice to the universalizing premises of civil norms’ and to ‘universalistic solidarity’ in the civil sphere. Social movements and critical media that are immersed in emancipatory struggles need to be able to initiate large-scale political communication processes in order to transform society. Otherwise they can easily be ignored or will get lost in self-contained fragmentation.

Defining critical media (discussed above) and situating them in the political environment (discussed above) are two important tasks. Another related task is to distinguish various types of alternative media. Therefore a typology of how to distinguish different types of critical media will be discussed in the next section.

Types of Critical Media

Given a notion of critical media, the task arises to further elaborate this concept and to show if there are subcategories of the basic category. If social theory advances from the general to the particular in order to increase the complexity of theories and the understanding of reality, then applying this method to the notion of critical media requires us to discuss subtypes of critical media. Therefore a typology of critical media will be introduced in this section.

Table 2 presents a typology and examples of alternative media. Media are classified according to the body parts that are mainly utilized for production and reception and according to whether production and consumption are temporally synchronous or asynchronous and based on spatial co-presence or communication at a distance.

Table 2. A typology of alternative media

Media	Production	Reception	Formats	Time	Space	Alternative media	Examples
Print/Visual	Hands	Eyes	Newspapers, journals, books, pamphlets, comics, satirical prints, flyers, visual arts, graffiti, dress, textiles, pins, buttons, stickers, murals	Asynchronous	Distance	Alternative press, critical art	Mother Jones, Oz, Bay Guardian, The Nation, Le Monde Diplomatique, New Statesman, Fifth Estate, Class War; Duane Hanson, Joseph Beuys
Audio media	Mouth	Ears	Radio, telephone	Synchronous	Distance	Free radio, independent radio, community radio, pirate radio	Pacifica Radio Network (KPFA Berkeley), KPFK Los Angeles, KPFT Houston, WBAI New York, WPFW Washington DC, National Federation of Community Broadcasters, Grass-roots Radio Coalition
Audio media	Mouth	Ears	Conversation, talks, lectures, songs	Synchronous	Presence	Radical singing, protest singing	'Oh, freedom' (abolitionist), 'We Shall Overcome',
Audio media	Mouth, body	Ears	Concerts, choir	Synchronous	Presence	Alternative music concerts, protest song concerts	See alternative music, recorded protest songs
Audio media	Mouth, body	Ears	Records, radio,	Asynchronous	Distance	Alternative music, recorded protest songs	Mogwai, Godspeed You! Black Emperor, Billy Bragg, Robert Wyatt, 'The Preacher and the Slave' (Joe Hill, socialist), 'Bombtrack' (Rage against the Machine, social justice), 'Sound of Da Police' (KRS One, Anti-Racism), 'Kill the Poor' (Dead Kennedys)
Audio-visual media	Mouth, body	Eyes, ears	Theatre, performance	Synchronous	Presence	Critical theatre	Youth International Theatre (guerilla theatre), Brecht's epic theatre
Audio-visual media	Mouth, body	Eyes, ears	Film, video	Asynchronous	Distance	Independent cinema, underground film, avant-garde film, amateur videos	Crash (Paul Haggis, 2004), films by Jean-Luc Godard, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Andy Warhol
Audio-visual media	Mouth, body	Eyes, ears	Live television	Synchronous	Distance	Public access television	Manhattan Neighborhood Network
Internet	Hand, mouth, body	Eyes, ears	Digital text, digital audio, digital video, real time text/audio/video chat, online radio, online TV	Synchronous or asynchronous	Distance	Alternative online media	Indymedia, Alternet

Given the condition that product form and content are considered decisive in the alternative character of media, one cannot argue that all community-produced, non-commercial, 'free', independent, self-managed, self-organized, self-owned, etc. media are alternative, although many of them are because they feature critical content. They are more likely to be critical than conventional mass media, but they are not automatically critical.

The central characteristic utilized in this typology is the one of alternative, critical products, where there is a distinction between critical form and critical content. At least one of the two aspects of a media product needs to be given. Critical form is possible without critical content. Critical content is possible without critical form. But both can also be present simultaneously. There are alternative media where form is generally more important than content, and vice versa. In those media that are types of art (such as theatre, literature, visual arts, films, music, concerts), form is of specific importance because art lives through non-identical forms that aim at strengthening imagination. Nonetheless, forms of critical political art that are critical at the content level are also alternative media, there is no strict focus on the form level. That is also the reason why in Table 2, on the one hand, examples of critical media are given that are more content-based and, on the other, examples that are more form-based are shown.

Alternative media that are based on critical forms are critical in the sense that these forms' social function is that they are functionless (Adorno, 1970: 336f). They are radically focused on artistic forms, their functionless character can be considered a protest against the capitalist world of instrumental reason. Herbert Marcuse (1978) argues that art can only be a societal factor as autonomous art. Art would be a part of society, but one that transcends capitalist society by constituting an autonomous sphere of aesthetical forms that transcend capitalism. The beauty of art is not a portrayal of society as it is, but a metaphor for society as it could be. The notion of the autonomy and functionless character of art that Adorno and Marcuse described can be generalized not just for art, but for all alternative media products (including also expression in the area of popular culture, not just the high arts). Alternative media at the form level of the products have a radical potential if they transcend their societal context and have the potential to subvert experience. In the case of critical forms, the subversion of the experience of capitalism is an indirect one, in the case of critical content it is a more direct one.

Conclusion

In this study, some theoretical reflections on the under-researched category of alternative media were developed. It was shown that there are, on the one hand, approaches that stress process and action aspects of alternative media, so that alternative media are considered self-organized, citizen-controlled, self-managed, self-owned, non-commercial, non-advertising media. On the other hand, there are approaches that put more stress on critical product content that formulates visions of an alternative world beyond capitalism.

A model that considers a dialectic of structure and actions as the foundation of mass media was introduced. As central dimensions of mass media journalistic production, media product structures, organizational media structures, distribution structures, and

reception practices were identified. Based on this model, citizens journalism and critical reception were identified as potential actor level aspects and critical form, critical content, grassroots media organizations, and alternative distribution were considered as potential structural aspects of alternative media.

There is the danger that small-scale local alternative projects will develop into psychological self-help initiatives without political relevance that are more bourgeois individualist self-expressions than political change projects. As an alternative concept, the notion of alternative media as critical media was introduced. Critical media product content shows suppressed possibilities of existence, describes antagonisms of reality and potentials for change, questions domination, expresses the standpoints of oppressed and dominated groups and individuals, and argues for the advancement of a co-operative society. Critical media product form aims at advancing imagination, it is dialectical because it involves dynamics, non-identity, rupture, and the unexpected.

Based on the notion of critical media, Stuart Hall's communication model, in which there are three subjective relative forms of interpretation, was expanded by the two objectivist categories of manipulative and critical reception. An interpretation of media content is critical if the consumed form or content causes subjective insights that allow the recipients to question certain forms of domination, develop ideas of alternative models of existence that advance co-operation, and can potentially be guiding in transformative actions and social struggles. It was argued that other dimensions besides the product structures of alternative media are certainly desirable, but should not be considered as necessary conditions.

Alternative media research is an under-resourced, under-represented, and under-researched field – the neglected spot in communication and media studies. This article, it is hoped, will contribute to the discourse of this alternative research field. The hope that remains now is that with the continuing rise of the importance of the Internet, theoretical and empirical alternative media research will gain more importance and will finally be acknowledged as an important field by academia and the social sciences.

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