Alternative media and the question of power

Natalie Fenton*
Goldsmiths, University of London

One of the main questions asked about alternative media is exactly what such media are alternative to. Alternative media have been identified through different approaches to funding, organisation, production, format, content and size. They have tended to be associated with democratic purposes, although they may not be democratic in their own practices and are generally considered to be distinct from mainstream media in the many ways in which these characteristics are manifest. It is important to discern what makes alternative media different. But getting hung up on definition has also tended to hamper the development of scholarship that finds itself seduced by the need to constantly describe and map what it is, as distinct from what it is not. This is further complicated by a converged, multi-platform, ‘prosumer’ digital universe of media abundance where everyone is assumed to be able to ‘do their own digital media thing’ and the notion of the ‘mainstream’ are called into question. In the participatory nirvana of the digital age, where anyone can be a producer, small, alternative media can indeed multiply and flourish (although funding and sustainability remain perennial issues).

It is possible to circumvent this obsession with the definitional and avoid getting lost in its descriptive mire by not beginning with the media at all, but rather starting with context. What is the broader social, political and economic environment of which alternative media are part? And how do they run counter to it? Putting context first will also seek out a history. So, in the case of alternative news platforms that often come into being out of a lack of news service or a frustration with the types of news on offer, we are forced to recognise the enormous power of legacy media that are rapidly adapting to the digital age. The vast multimedia transnational corporations of which they are a part have not dissipated in the digital age – far from it; indeed, in many instances they have grown bigger. Media ownership has become more and more concentrated as policies of deregulation and privatisation continue to work in favour of private enterprise. In the United Kingdom, just three companies control over 70 per cent of national newspaper circulation, while only five groups control 80 per cent of the online news market (Media Reform Coalition, 2015). Media concentration creates conditions in which wealthy individuals amass great social and political power.

So, whereas we may well be seeing a burgeoning of alternative media in the digital age, we do not see a corresponding dispersal of the power of multinational media corporations. Rather, we see new forms of media capital come to the fore. McChesney (2014) notes how the global power of new digital distributors has created the greatest monopolies in economic history. He argues that the hyper-commercialism, advertising and monopoly markets we now find online enhance rather than disrupt the contours of capitalism, and lead to rampant depoliticisation and undemocratic, commercial media policy as the point of government regulation pivots on helping corporate media maximise their profits rather than advancing the

* Email: n.fenton@gold.ac.uk
public interest. The point of alternative media then must partly pivot on seeking to run counter to this power. Appreciating who holds power, how it is wielded and in what forms it exists – visibly or invisibly – enables us to understand how those who have it influence the decisions that are made, which structure and organise the distribution of resources – including knowledge resources – throughout societies of which the media are such a vital part. Putting power into the equation also forces us, as scholars, to consider media and political institutions as moulded by powerful interests and then to think what it might mean to craft media that are not of this ilk, or to propose an alternative to dominant relations of media power. Indeed, it is only when we cast alternative media in this light that we can properly explain and then evaluate its purpose.

Contemplating the notion of counter-power brings concerns of powerlessness into the frame. Capitalising on communications falls not only to mega global corporations, but to rich individuals who enjoy far greater access to technology. In the United Kingdom, almost all of the wealthiest people use the internet, while this falls to 58 per cent among the lowest income group (less than £12,500) (Dutton, Blank and Groselj, 2013). Recent studies by the Oxford Internet Institute (Blank and Groselj, 2015) also show that the varying forms of political participation online correlate almost exactly with indicators of social class and educational achievement. In other words, although half of the world may now be online, those using the internet for political purposes are still largely middle class and well educated – the very people who are more likely to be listened to by the political class. A lack of power (media or otherwise) and an increase in inequality go hand in hand.

What might it mean, then, to begin our discussions on alternative media from the point of view of social, political and economic context and through the lens of power? Being alternative in this sense means addressing imbalances of power and social, economic and cultural inequalities (all of which are linked). If our systems of knowledge production, which include systems of media and communications, perpetuate a certain neoliberal logic in various ways, then we need to understand what is required to change them. Do alternative media seek to redress power imbalances? Are they able to do so? If not, what prevents them? Only by addressing these concerns will we be able to understand the conditions that are required for inequality (of all types) to be contested and for more equality to endure. These are the sorts of questions that should be at the heart of our research and scholarship, and the conversations that should preoccupy this journal. Without them, we end up not dealing with alternatives at all.

References