Alternative media for global crisis

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In the age of apparent communicative abundance, why do we still need alternative media? And what are their most important functions? Two recent globally significant events in Paris help answer those questions.

The terror attacks of November 2015, and the subsequent spike in support for fascist politicians in the United States and Europe, indicate that all of our sophisticated communication technologies have done little to cultivate attitudes and policies conducive to peace and justice. In many respects, they have become tools for fear-mongering and hate propaganda.

And COP21 saw most of the world’s governments commit in principle to reducing greenhouse gas emissions in order to minimise climate change – an agreement both historic and profoundly inadequate, as author/activist Naomi Klein (2015) notes. The mutual constitution of transnational social movements, and oppositional communication networks and media, can claim some credit for compelling governments to act. But the vested interests entrenched in carboniferous capitalism, as well as the difficulties inherent in such high-stakes multilateral inter-governmental negotiations, helped ensure that there would be no binding and enforceable targets backed by sanctions, as is the case with ‘free trade’ agreements like the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership.

The issues of political violence (whether labelled jihad or anti-terrorism), and of climate crisis, pose existential threats to sustainable human civilisation. In my view, the need for communicative patterns and resources to address these challenges provides the most compelling reason to support alternative media. Without dismissing other important benefits, including community-building, collective identity-formation and participatory citizenship, it is global crisis that renders most urgent the need for alternative journalism, and its most critical (in both senses of the term) functions: counter-narrativity, and the formation and mobilisation of counter-publics.

Journalism – including multiple media formats and long-form versions, like books and documentaries – is arguably modernity’s most important genre of storytelling. Counter-narrativity entails filling in the gaps of dominant media accounts, finding the excluded voices and the dissonant facts that don’t fit the official version, challenging repressive frames, providing new ways of making sense of contentious events and bringing attention to events and issues marginalised in the dominant media’s topic agenda.

As the work of California-based Project Censored has demonstrated for four decades, based on scouring US alternative media for news that is valid, significant and under-reported, dominant media narratives leave no shortage of missing frames and topics. With respect to terror wars, these include the extent to which the United States itself nurtured militant Islamicism, the patterns of marginalisation of Muslim minorities that provide fertile soil for
extremism in Europe, the illegality and civilian casualties of US military drone strikes, the connection between the invasion of Iraq and the rise of ISIS, and the avoidance of labels like ‘terrorism’ and ‘fascism’ to describe violence by the extreme right. Missing news about environmental crisis includes the systematic disinformation campaign by the fossil fuel industries to confuse public opinion and delay remedial climate policy action, the oil industry’s illegal dumping of fracking waste-water, popular resistance to corporate water-grabbing around the world and the terrifying implications of huge potential methane emissions from Siberia and the Arctic.

But global crisis demands not just a more inclusive news agenda and more open frames; arguably, a widespread and rapid response would benefit from whole new journalism paradigms that could help generate incentives for more peace- and democracy-oriented policy-making, and encourage popular engagement and mobilisation. During the 1990s, some US newspapers experimented with civic journalism, intended to promote a greater connection between journalists and their publics, seeking a greater role for the latter in setting media and public agendas. Internationally, peace journalists have aimed to avoid demonisation and us/them dyadic coverage, and to provide greater context to conflict news, with the hope of better enabling society to recognise and value options for non-violent conflict resolution.

But both paradigms have found the terrain of conventional corporate and state-owned media a heavy slog, at least in the Global North. Critical media sociologists and political economists have well rehearsed the obstacles:

• a news net still anchored on official sources
• orientation to affluent urban audiences
• professional ideology of ‘objectivity’
• dependence on advertising revenue
• commercial pressures towards brevity, sensationalism, conventional wisdom, consumerism
• concentrated and corporate ownership
• interlocks and synergies with corporate and political elites – indeed, capitalism and the state.

What about so-called social media? As John Downing (2015) notes, the term is a misnomer; it is better to label them ‘digital connective media’ – and corporate media at that. Social media have shifted communicative power away from conventional media, and have facilitated the acceleration and diffusion of activist messages. But as Thomas Poell and Jose van Dijck (2015) have shown, social media’s technological and commercial architecture also undermines the efficacy of movement communication, in part by privileging spectacular events over the sustained counter-narratives that help to cement a movement. Facebook and Twitter are more appropriately regarded as part of a new hegemonic media formation than as an oppositional alternative to it.

As Linda Jean Kenix (2011) and many others have noted, we shouldn’t essentialise the conceptual dichotomy of ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream’ media. Among other problems, this dichotomy naturalises corporate media as inherently culturally central, and overlooks hybridisation, reciprocal influence and oppositional moments within dominant media.

Still, ‘alternative’ media’s ability to nurture frames and paradigms suited to addressing global crisis is enhanced by many of their ideal-typical characteristics: participatory production, horizontal communication, openness to social movements, localism and engagement with communities, independence from state and corporate control. While there is still little work on how alternative and community media can promote public engagement specifically on environmental issues, initial research by Shane Gunster (2011, 2012) in Canada and Kerrie
Foxwell-Norton (2015) in Australia is suggestive. The main challenges for alternative media, of course, are low capitalisation, precarity and marginalisation.

I hope this journal facilitates dialogue between scholars, practitioners and their audiences — too often overlooked, as Chris Atton (2015) notes — and incentivises research that is theoretically informed, but also broadly accessible. The stakes are too high for abstruse over-theorising or preening intellectual dandyism. Public intellectuals need to help map paths (including system-wide reform of media structures and policies, in conjunction with broader political and societal democratisation) for expanding the field we now call alternative media. We are more likely to avoid global catastrophe if ‘alternative’ media become ‘mainstream’.

References


