The future trajectory of studies of alternative and/or community media can hardly be predicted. Noting just a handful of unforeseen developments over the past 15 years – such as the emergence of smartphone cameras, of social media, of new immersive forms of narrative and interaction, plus new fields and contexts of contestation – should make that abundantly clear. But reflexive attention to this/these field(s) of study is no less pressing and important. Indeed, scholars and activists need to be aware of how they have developed and how they are currently conducted, if only to be sure that the field(s) remain(s) critically connected to its/their practice instead of hermetically sealed from it.

While acknowledging the range of facets that could be tracked over time and compared in order to reconstruct the field’s development, a key facet that deserves the very highest degree of attention is the persistence of an underlying definitional assumption that has legitimised the field(s) of study themselves. From their formative and explicit beginnings in the 1980s, the fuzzy-edged fields of alternative and/or community media studies have been premised on a key opposition between them and the ‘mainstream’ media.

At the time, this opposition was useful as well as generally defensible empirically. It relied on a combination of observations about differences in technology, institution, products and intentions that defined the mainstream media in contradistinction to the alternative and/or community media. Put simply, the monolithic mainstream media were seen as using expensive and arcane equipment, as produced by large-scale professionalised for-profit or state-operated organisations, and as creating consensus ‘objective’ accounts of the world that justified and inoculated the dominant from criticism or change. By contrast (and often in neat opposition), alternative and/or community media were seen as using consumer-grade and easily available equipment and techniques, as being produced by small self-organised volunteer collectives, and as creating new viewpoints and depictions of the world that sought to better inform people and thus justify challenging the dominant view.

The necessity and centrality of this opposition – expressed in whatever variety of specific ways – has exerted a structuring logic of immense authority in the field(s). Despite the many inadequacies of the thumbnail sketch above, and the huge range of variations of it as articulated in decades of excellent studies as well as activist work that many times bordered on the heroic, the positing of an opposition between mainstream and alternative/community has been crucial to the intellectual justification for the field(s) as well as to the activist justification and conduct of practice. In addition, such an opposition plays a central role methodologically, in that many studies are comparative in design. They – at least implicitly – formulate a mainstream media in order to compare explicitly, and often via case study, an example of alternative/community media.

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Lest the argument here be misunderstood, this oppositional logic has been immensely productive and valuable. It has called necessary scholarly and activist attention to heretofore taken-for-granted and thus unseen facets of media practice. Studies have highlighted the importance of attending to relations between different technologies, institutions, products and intentions within many different contexts worldwide, and in ways that consensus studies rarely, if ever, acknowledged prior to this work. In doing so, studies of alternative and/or community media have made and continue to make discipline-wide theoretical and practical contributions, the value of which cannot be emphasised enough (even if the discipline of variously named mass communication, media studies, etc. has yet to fully recognise it).

Yet it must also be said that this oppositional logic is an historical creature spawned in a pre-digital era of professionalised oligopoly (in the United States, for example, three broadcast television networks). In that context, the oppositional logic had/has clear empirical support and justification. But what about today and the foreseeable future?

A handful of recent developments suggest that new ways may be needed to adequately conceptualise what have been called alternative media and/or community media. Indeed, the continued and accelerating hybridisation of media practice as it has been reconstituted by waves of technological change, institutional restructuring and textual innovation threatens to render the foundational opposition irretrievably damaged, if not hopelessly irrelevant. For example, on which side does a Facebook group authored by community activists reside? Are activist-authored accounts that mimic the style of objective news accounts alternative or mainstream? Do commercial companies’ on-the-ground live-streams of social protest – such as what Vice Media programmed during recent days of action in Ferguson, Missouri – rank as alternative or commercial? On which side of the opposition can we locate the self-recording and worldwide internet distribution via photo-sharing commercial sites of moments of one’s life via selfies or GoPro-ing – or, indeed, the accelerating monetisation of user images and textual accounts by commercial digital companies?

If a field of study is to remain embedded in the contextuality and historicity of practice, it needs to be constituted by a body of theorising that is reflexive and critical enough to remake itself as warranted and as needed. The most important future task for scholars working in alternative and/or community media is to continue to measure up the subterranean, implicit terms that deeply structure its study against the developing and messy realities it addresses. Only by doing so can this immensely important and productive field of study and practice continue to live up to its politics and its promise.