So many questions:
What’s the point of researching and teaching alternative media?

Tony Harcup*
University of Sheffield

Does the world need another academic journal, and is there even any point researching alternative media? Readers can form their own judgements on the first issue, but I am in no doubt that researching alternative media is well worth doing, as is incorporating any resulting insights into teaching. Alternative forms of media are endlessly fascinating, but if curiosity alone is not enough, then it is good to know that there is another reason for studying them: it can be useful.

This thought that it might be useful (as well as fun) has prompted many people to create their own media. Reflecting on the birth of a feminist magazine in the early 1970s, Marsha Rowe (2015) writes:

When I scribbled down in my diary a list of what I envisaged the contents of Spare Rib would be, foremost among them was a news section. It is astonishing to look back at the extent to which women were excluded from positions of power and marginalised from public life at that time … The aim of Spare Rib was to reach out to all women. Therefore it had to be on the newstands. It would carry radical content within the traditional women’s magazine format. We intended no less than to take on the culture of the whole Western world. Finding a new language for both image and word to establish women’s changing identity.

It was a mighty big ambition, and the struggle continues even if the magazine does not. A similar ethos of being socially useful by reaching out beyond those already in the know underpins much (though not all) alternative media, as those behind one of the United Kingdom’s once-numerous alternative local newspapers put it:

We said: ‘We want the Free Press to be useful to people struggling for control over their own lives – as well as providing information about the sort of people who actually do have control over them.’ In this way we arrived at a new and simple definition of news: useful information. Our test, then, for measuring newsworthiness was to ask: ‘In what ways is this story useful?’ (Whitaker, 1981: 105)

That too was in the 1970s, and at around the same time another group of people similarly dissatisfied with mainstream media in their city were also creating an alternative publication designed ‘to support all groups active in struggle in industry and elsewhere for greater control of their own lives’ (Leeds Other Paper, number 1, January 1974, quoted in Harcup, 2013: 169).

That was the local paper on which I later learned the basics of producing journalism from below. That was then, but alternative journalism continues today – albeit in different times and using different technologies (Harcup, 2014, 2016).

The usefulness – or otherwise – of alternative media can vary enormously. It is not all set out with the overt (albeit non-party) political agendas of the examples cited above, whose usefulness was the provision of information to support and encourage people engaged in

* Email: t.harcup@sheffield.ac.uk
progressive struggle. Some have more of a community focus, some more cultural, others more personal. But whether we are talking about a radical publication created by members of the ‘1968 generation’ or a more recent online equivalent; a Riot Grrrl zine or an independent football supporters’ blog; a video collective or a pirate radio station; oppositional use of commercial platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube; or any of the myriad forms of media that can be labelled alternative; they have one thing in common: the people who are moved to produce and access such media tend to feel that their interests, perspectives, communities and indeed their very selves are (at best) inadequately represented within most mainstream media.

It follows that paying critical attention to alternative media must also help to inform us about wider media and social issues. How can that not be useful? Yet, as Richard Keeble (2015: 337) observes, ‘conventional histories of the media tend to marginalise or ignore altogether the non-corporate media’, despite their role ‘in the formation of a counter or oppositional public sphere’. Perhaps we ought not to find this so surprising, given the way too much scholarship reflects mainstream media’s obsession with the biggest, the richest, the strongest and the glossiest. As readers of this new journal will know, much of the most interesting stuff is to be found in more marginal media, emerging through cracks in the social structure.

Alternative media have repeatedly appeared (and, admittedly, disappeared) over the centuries and across continents, allowing the marginalised to be represented (or to represent themselves) while challenging dominant narratives. Surely there is value in researching and discussing how and why that happens? And the more we find out, the more we realise we don’t know. There remain ‘so many questions’, as Bertolt Brecht (1935) put it in the poem ‘Questions From a Worker Who Reads’.

These are not merely academic questions. By lifting our gaze from the mainstream to investigate alternatives as well, we may open our minds to broader definitions of journalism and journalists (Keeble, 2015: 340), and that might just turn out to be as useful in practice as it is in theory. A student once told me towards the end of an alternative media course that was offered alongside more traditional components of an industry-accredited journalism degree: ‘I was becoming disillusioned with journalism but this has definitely sparked something.’ And this much we know: you can’t start a fire without a spark.

References


