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Introduction

Diverse media are central to a healthy democracy. The media re-present our politics, our social institutions, our governments and ourselves. A plurality of perspectives has been said to be essential in developing an engaged, mutual understanding of the differences and similarities that exist between us as human beings. Media construct our reality and help to define who we are and even who we wish to become. Communication is ‘the creative making of a social order’ (Hamilton 2000a: 361) that is confirmed and exercised within communication processes. Relationships are shaped and societal boundaries are formed through this expansive exchange of information. Research has argued that these communication channels should reflect the diversity that exists within society. Such interconnected diversity has been said to be absolutely central to a thriving democracy. To put it plainly, the importance of a diverse media to the enrichment of our daily lives simply cannot be understated (Carey 1989).

Alternative media, in particular, have been seen to be fundamental in providing diverse content to democratic societies. Alternative media, which are situated outside of the mainstream, have been said to articulate a ‘social order different from and often opposed to the dominant’ (Hamilton 2000a: 362). This point of distinction aims to celebrate diversity within society and increase our shared understanding of one another. If scholars and practitioners shift their focus away from media, and towards communication in general (Sparks 1993), then the potential strengths of what is commonly known as alternative media become even more obvious. Alternative media have been seen as distinctively different from the mainstream and have been said to have the capacity for ‘transforming spectators into active participants of everyday dealings and events affecting their lives’ (Tracy 2007: 272). This unique capacity of alternative media to influence social change has been found by other researchers (i.e. Atton 2002a; Downing 2001) to be generally absent elsewhere in the media spectrum.

Historical examinations of media have found differences between the alternative and mainstream to be quite prominent within what has historically been a polarized media system. This book agrees that very important differences remain between generalized conceptions of alternative and mainstream media; however, this book aims to question and investigate the complexities that now exist in categorizing and understanding our present media system. The convergence of communicative technologies, coupled with changing economic

mandates and a rising consumer culture, as well as a raft of other factors to be discussed throughout this book, has made the task of differentiating much of mainstream and alternative media difficult.

Modern mainstream media are increasingly using communication models that attempt to transport spectators into active participants – a feature commonly associated with alternative media. Conversely, many commercially minded alternative media outlets are borrowing economic models from their mainstream counterparts. Previous academic scholarship has focused on the hierarchy of influences (Shoemaker & Reese 1990b) to help explain the resulting content of particular media institutions. This hierarchy is traditionally viewed visually as concentric circles, which first begin with individual motivations and gradually move ‘outwards’ through organizational practices, ownership models and finally ideology. All of these influences except for ideology, which is embedded in all of the other levels of influence, are largely at the level of production. This range of production processes, in varying degrees of strength and purpose, has been said to have a direct impact on what constitutes resulting media content. But what if the content of alternative media is not as different from the mainstream as was once thought? Certainly, important points of demarcation continue to exist, but how would such signs of convergence complicate previous theories of a unique hierarchy of influences that has historically helped to describe mainstream media in counterpoint to the alternative press? Or are the hierarchies themselves conflated in today’s technologically infused, commercial society? A broader, yet related, question is what does it mean to be alternative within a media spectrum that at least appears to include every taste, interest and political perspective possible?

Alternative media have traditionally been considered to be quite distinct from their mainstream counterparts. A rather reductive argument that is frequently drawn upon in general discourse is that alternative media publish information generally not seen in the mainstream media, from a perspective generally not accepted within the mainstream press, in a way generally not found in mainstream content. This argument would suggest that alternative media are not interested in maximizing audiences like their mainstream opposition and therefore don’t succumb to the often conventional and formulaic reporting techniques of mainstream pack journalists. This position argues that alternative media generally seek to critique capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy and the nature of corporations. Conversely, a pervasive critique of the mainstream press is that they are so entangled in the perpetual cycle of mergers and corporate acquisitions that they are locked within a hegemonic world view that does not allow for investigative enquiry. This argument would suggest that mainstream media are trapped within entrenched norms and values that predispose a certain perspective of the world, whereas alternative media, free from such ideological and structural constraints, report issues in a manifestly different manner than their mainstream opposition.

These perspectives are obviously simplistic but help to serve as a benchmark for the widely accepted chasm between these two divergent silos of media. There are no clearly delineated and agreed-upon definitions for what constitutes alternative and mainstream media. However, for the purposes of this text, it is worthwhile to state that alternative media have historically been defined by their ideological difference from the mainstream, their relatively limited scale of influence in society, their reliance on citizen reporting and their connections with social movements. Mainstream media have been defined in contrast to these points of demarcation: they are situated completely within (and concomitantly co-creating) the ideological norms of society, enjoy a widespread scale of influence, rely on professionalized reporters and are heavily connected with other corporate and governmental entities.

Some recent research (most notably Atton 2002a; Downing 2001; Hamilton 2006) has suggested that scholarship should be wary of viewing alternative and mainstream media as mutually exclusive binaries. This text agrees with those sentiments and goes further to argue that any conclusive distinctions between commercially minded alternative and mainstream media may even be disappearing. This is not to say that differences between these two previously envisioned encampments of media do not still exist on a fundamental, political level. There is something tangibly different between how the socialist magazine and website *The Monthly Review* and Rupert Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* report fiscal issues. But there is also something materially different between how traditional mainstream outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* report those same fiscal issues. In addition, it can be said that there are very few similarities that can be logically drawn between the alternative conservative blog, PowerLine, and the alternative Jewish magazine and interfaith movement, *Tikkun*. Although both PowerLine and *Tikkun* are what are commonly referred to as alternative outlets, they simply share very little in common. Indeed PowerLine and *The Wall Street Journal* draw many parallels with each other. It is important to state that these differences and similarities are not simply about political persuasion. They are fundamental differences in the models of communication used, which are the result of a complex, interwoven mix of factors that combine to create media content. What defines all of these media outlets is far more nuanced in today's technologically infused media market than was even considered possible when most of these academic and professional definitions and distinctions were first created.

It is also worthwhile to reflect upon the reality that while many alternative (and mainstream) media offer ideologically challenging positions, no media are situated completely outside of the ideological mainstream, carrying distinctive identities completely excluded from entrenched, elite systems of power. All media, particularly commercially minded media, exist within the same capitalistic framework that drives much of the decisions, practices and resulting content found across the media spectrum. This book argues that alternative

media can – and do – construct distinct ‘alternative communications’ but perhaps along a different continuum (or continuums) than envisioned earlier. The text aims to tease out the differences and similarities as well as the strengths and weaknesses across media, which combine to form resulting media content.

In a 2010 plenary presentation to the International Association for Media and Communication Research, the prominent media scholar Barbie Zelizer stated that ‘media cultures can be defined as environments in which beliefs, actions, behaviours, values, mindsets and notions of authority, power and community come together with people, organizations and resources involved in some capacity with the media’ (Zelizer 2010). This accurate and exhaustively inclusive definition of media problematizes any attempt to categorize media into coherent, contingent semantic divisions. Media extend into every facet of modern life, and information now duplicates in confounding multitudes. This struggle to capture the constitution of media itself is highlighted by the myriad of attempts at defining alternative media in academic scholarship. This is not to say that such attempts should not be undertaken. There is much to be learned from how media can be categorized along indices of industry, content, professions and approaches. However, there is also much to be gained from a better understanding of the areas where such distinctions are blurred and categorizations are problematized.

This book argues that traditionally conceptualized mainstream and alternative media now draw so heavily from practices historically thought to be the purview of the other that it is increasingly difficult to ascertain any clear demarcations of difference. Most individual media can no longer be compartmentalized within each categorical nuance of what has traditionally been conceived as alternative or as mainstream. This relatively recent shift in media is not only a change in the linguistic assessment of a category for organizational purposes. This shift represents a convergence in the media spectrum, which has traditionally been conceptualized as sections of mutually exclusive domains for alternative and mainstream media to occupy separately. This book will explore examples from across these traditional encampments to better understand how individual motivations, organizational practices, media ownership and ideological influences may be conflating to produce a converged, re-mediated, media spectrum.

The arguments within this text will principally be based on online and offline newspapers and magazines as well as blogs and social networking tools of communication, although ancillary examples will also come from other forms of media. Alternative media include limitless genres and modalities, such as film, gaming, art, protest, music and graffiti (Downing 2001). However, examples drawn for this text will principally be from commercially minded media with at least an ancillary goal for economic sustainability, coupled with an interest in current news events. Being commercially minded does not mean that these media were created with the specific aim to make a profit. Rather,

commercially minded alternative media are cognizant of economic pressures and fiscally plan their operations in such a way to (hopefully) ensure their own continued existence – even if the chance of economic sustainability is quite small. Evidence of an economic mandate within media organizations, albeit even if it is quite secondary, can be detected simply by asking media representatives, but also by the presence of advertising, subscription fees or donation requests. This prerequisite for inclusion into this text would exclude media that exist for their own sake, such as media created explicitly for artistic purposes or media with a strictly altruistic intent. The reason for limiting examples in this text to commercially minded, current events media is that any comparisons made between the communicative models of alternative and mainstream media might then highlight differences that are due to purposefully unique characteristics and not a difference in subject or intent. For example, contrasting a subversive performance art piece with a mainstream article from *The Age* would most likely reveal striking differences in content, but such differences lose their meaning in a comparative context. One would expect a performance art piece to be different from a mainstream news article, given the widely different modes of expression and the creator's intent as either art or as commerce. Commercially minded operations share a fundamental perspective on self-sustainability that necessitates a certain level of audience awareness. This may be where the resemblance ends, but it is a point of similarity from which it might be possible to draw more evocative conclusions about the nature of an organization.

It should be noted, however, that the capitalistic intent of the *Guardian*, for example, would undoubtedly be quite different from the liberal arts 2.0 blog, kottke.org. Even Jason Kottke, the blog's creator, states plainly that he created the site 'for fun *and income*' (Kottke 2010, italics added). He creates the site for his own pleasure but also hopes to provide a sustainable income for himself. In aiming for an economic return, Kottke must gain a sense of what his readers expect from his blog in the hopes that he can fill that need and potentially earn an income. This interest in the audience is manifestly part of any economic equation. It is also this interest in the audience that gives the alternative and mainstream media in this book an originating commonality – no matter how slight. It should go without saying that commercially minded media may share this important facet of operations but then can still operate in strikingly different ways. It is that point of difference (or potential similarity) that is the focus of this book. By limiting this analysis to commercially minded media focused on current events, this book will hopefully be better able to make meaningful and cogent comparisons between the alternative and mainstream press, while still directly addressing what it still means to be alternative and mainstream in contemporary society.

In taking such an approach, this book aims to examine how traditional and non-traditional notions of power are implicated in the operations of both

alternative and mainstream media systems and institutions. Examples will be drawn principally from the United States, New Zealand, Australia and England in attempt to gauge, on some level, the state of English-speaking alternative and mainstream media. Obviously, this is not a conclusive or exhaustive examination of all alternative and mainstream media throughout the English-speaking world. Yet examples in this book were purposefully selected as potential illustrations of other global media. Although these examples are largely drawn from four specific countries, the analyses made will be applicable to a much larger audience.

Historically, alternative media have been a central force in social change. Gitlin (1980) was among one of the first scholars to chronicle the impact that negative mainstream coverage, and positive attention from the alternative press, could provide for a social change organization. He examined the Students for a Democratic Society in America during the politically turbulent 1970s and found obvious differences in the sources used, the opportunities for activism within each media institution, the levels of transparency in coverage, the personal characteristics of reporters, the organizational structure of each media organization and the representations of power found in what was then a widely divergent press system. Thirty years after his groundbreaking work, it still must be recognized that many alternative media maintain the same differences from the mainstream press that Gitlin first highlighted. However, many contemporary alternative media outlets clearly do not uniformly subvert the hierarchies of access that Gitlin (1980) found to be so fundamental in the division between the alternative and mainstream press. For example, the most popular blog in New Zealand, Kiwiblog, is the work of David Farrar, a former advisor to New Zealand's Ministerial Services and previously employed by the Prime Minister's Office. He is heavily involved with the National Party, which is the country's largest centre-right political party. His résumé reflects a person who situates himself squarely within traditional processes of political power and not as a radical outsider aggravating for structural change. Farrar's blog follows a format similar to other contributors in the blogosphere, whereby he generally selects a news story from 'mainstream media' and then offers his own perspective, which in this case generally supports the traditional centre-right position. When he has had original interview material to share on his blog, it has been exclusively from what could quite confidently be labelled as entrenched, institutional sources of power: government representatives, political leaders and business owners. Does this then mean that Kiwiblog is not alternative? The independent blog operates far outside of what one would consider being corporate mainstream media. However, the content of Kiwiblog, like most political current events blogs, is largely from the same hierarchies of access used by those in the mainstream. It is not Kiwiblog's ideological affiliation that necessarily complicates its placement as an alternative media outlet. Rather, it is the process of investigative newsgathering, the kinds of stories that

are emphasized and the manner that these stories are told that all resemble mainstream news practices. Of course, journalistic norms and routines are not unique to the mainstream press, but the extent to which alternative media now draw from these professional standards will be explored further to help coalesce this relatively fractured field of study.

While arguing that there are new converged areas of overlap along the media spectrum, this book does not argue that all alternative media share the same individual motivations, organizational practices, media ownership and ideological influences of the mainstream press. One can look rather quickly to examples such as *Green Left Weekly*, a progressive Australian on- and offline publication, to see that it covers climate change quite differently than *The Age*, for example. More specifically, *Green Left Weekly* recently focused their discussion of climate change principally on the projected 40 to 50 per cent of all food wasted in the United States, while *The Age* remained fixated on the possibility of increased carbon taxes for local businesses. This is an obvious ideological and practical difference in approach that cannot be ignored. The frames used in these instances indicate who the newspaper thinks is the cause of climate change, who is affected and who is responsible. This difference in coverage is the result of starkly different motivations, organizational practices, ownership models and ideological influences. Yet there are also many more similarities between commercially minded media that go largely unnoticed. These similarities are in the process of gathering, collating and disseminating information across the media spectrum that results not only in converged practices but also in an increasingly homogenized range of content as well.

The following is a brief review of the eight chapters that constitute the remainder of this book:

Chapter 2: The modern media continuum

This chapter will begin by exploring the many complex, and at times contradictory, definitions of alternative media that now exist. Some scholars have argued that, in essence, those who say they are alternative media, simply are alternative media. This definition works as an individual label and helps to clarify processes of identity formation, but it does little to advance an understanding of media as an institution. Other research has tried to distance the field away from the term ‘alternative’ but for reasons outside of a converged media spectrum. Some find the word alternative places too much legitimacy on the mainstream press by denoting somewhat of a secondary status to a far more central – and therefore more important – mainstream press. Downing (2001) has problematized the word alternative in his rational argument that everything is an alternative to something else. Following this logic, he

argues that the label itself is somewhat oxymoronic. Others suggest labels to identify media not within the mainstream: independent, radical, activist, participatory, citizen, tactical, community and autonomous media. Each of these conceptualizations attempts to capture something unique about a specific media that exist outside of corporate entities. All of these categorizations share a foregrounding in social critique, which has historically placed alternative media in diametric opposition to the mainstream press. It is perhaps because of this shared perspective that potential commonalities in individual motivations and identities, organizational practices, media ownership and ideological influences have not as easily been detected.

The chapter transitions from previous definitions of alternative and mainstream media to an examination of particular examples of media convergence ranging from online newspapers, magazines and blogs to social networking. First, a brief historical examination of newspapers reveals how they were initially viewed as a ‘means of instruction’ to ‘prepare the minds of people’ for civic action. The chapter explores how this populist envisionment moved almost exclusively to the alternative realm of newspaper production while mainstream media subsumed a much more economically focused mandate. Today, fiscal goals have gained primacy across the media spectrum, as the organizational structure and internal policies of almost all media are largely oriented towards revenue building. However, this text will argue that many media across the spectrum have begun to re-embrace their earlier dictums to ‘prepare the minds of people’ for civic action, albeit on a somewhat limited scale pertaining to information exchange and interconnectivity. But this shift is reflective of an overall emphasis across the media spectrum on social networking and individual empowerment – an approach that did not exist 10 years prior. This chapter will examine recent moves by the mainstream media to incorporate traditionally alternative media practices into their standard operating procedures and also look at some innovative examples of interconnectivity from alternative media.

Chapter 3: Media frames

Media as an institution exist within a much larger network of interpersonal and societal influences. So it is important to remember that any examination of media frames cannot divorce the frames themselves from the social and cultural scripts from which they are drawn. On the one hand, media construct powerful images of reality for the public, but on the other hand, the public draws upon these frames and contextualizes them against pre-existing schemas. The term ‘frame’ has been problematized by a history of multiple uses. This chapter reviews the many conceptualizations of frames as well as

varying definitions of narrative analysis and ideology to arrive at a purposeful framework used throughout the remainder of this book. Understanding frames is central to understanding how alternative and mainstream media construct their messages. An examination of the differences and similarities between mainstream and alternative media can't exist without a thorough review of media framing. Media frames are the structure of information. They provide meaning, emphasize areas of importance and organize the narrative of each story. Media frames signal to the reader what is important and also, by default, what is not. While media frames help content creators make sense of the often complicated information, they also allow readers to detect similarities and differences between media outlets. One can't make statements of comparison between media outlets without a comprehensive examination of the frames within that content. This alludes to the strength of examining frames as an analytical method as it can disentangle the 'taken for granted' assumptions which can potentially have a profound impact on society.

The chapter will examine this potential impact through an examination of how several contemporary social issues and marginalized people have been framed in the mainstream and alternative press. First, the chapter explores how mainstream and alternative media have historically covered social movements. This is a particularly important group to examine as most social movements exist to oppose the status quo and are usually in direct opposition to hegemonic social and political structures. Any differences between representations would signal a wide variance between mainstream and alternative media outlets, while similarities would suggest just the opposite. The chapter then moves to examine how representations of power have been framed within the mainstream and alternative press. Again, this is a purposeful exemplar in this context, given that many alternative media outlets exist specifically in contradiction to conventional notions of hierarchical power. The chapter then continues to explore how other marginalized groups have been framed within the mainstream and alternative press. While certainly not an exhaustive review of all alternative and mainstream media available, this chapter comments on some surprising similarities found between media that are often suggested to be diametrically opposed.

The chapter then specifically examines how climate change, as a once marginalized topic, has been addressed in New Zealand's mainstream online newspapers and the country's major alternative online information portal, Scoop. New Zealand is particularly interesting in this context given the country's historical roots in progressive social change and its international image as 'clean and green'. This study explores whether climate change has been framed within the alternative media, not as a sacrifice or a penalty but as an opportunity to benefit the future (O'Riordan 2007). Researchers (Nisbet & Mooney 2007) have argued that scientific reporting must move towards moralistic frames if society is to begin making fundamental changes. O'Riordan (2007), a previous

British Sustainability Commissioner and advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair, has speculated aloud that such a phenomenon might be already occurring in the New Zealand press – particularly within alternative media. If alternative media do frame issues and peoples in ways strikingly different than the mainstream press, and if they serve as a harbinger in the continual process of social change, one would expect to see these differences across New Zealand media in relation to climate change. This chapter concludes by testing this assumption.

Chapter 4: The power of representation

In moving through a discussion of framing, the text implicitly recognizes the constitutive power of media. Chapter 4 will examine how different media, across a broad spectrum of outlets, have framed issues and people with the aim of exposing the tensions, differences and similarities that exist within society. Alternative media have traditionally offered an independent, and quite distinct, platform for groups and individuals that have been marginalized by the mainstream media. Alternative media have provided such groups with much needed context in a media environment that largely ignores their viewpoints. They have historically been seen to advocate programmes of social change through the framework of politicized and in-depth social commentary. In contrast, mainstream media have been traditionally viewed as maximizing audiences through pack journalism that is conventional and formulaic, relying on content that would appeal to the most number of readers and therefore ignoring the issues that are perhaps more important to smaller, minority groups. The result has historically been content that is often binary and reductive. These definitional frameworks remain important in conceptualizing how the ends of a media spectrum might operate. Although it is argued that they are not as useful for describing the millions of alternative and mainstream media outlets that exist along the contemporary media continuum. Yet these definitions are useful in understanding the importance of media frames in society.

This chapter examines how media coverage, with an initial emphasis on mainstream media, has worked to historically support institutional and relational hegemony within social systems. Gitlin (1980) credits Gramsci (1971) in defining hegemony as ‘the systemic (but not necessarily or even usually deliberate) engineering of mass consent to the established order’ (Gitlin 1980: 253). This chapter begins by questioning the role mainstream and alternative media may have in creating – and also rupturing – established hegemonic social processes. In doing so, the chapter examines oppositional as well as dominant readings of media coverage in order to have a stronger contextual understanding of the frequently problematic relationship between media framing and social change. Our public understanding of each other and

our shared social issues are built upon a continually evolving construction provided by media over the entirety of our lives. This public understanding is not the result of a one-dimensional, monolithic series of symbols but the result of media frames continually shifting their re-presentations of society. These frames construct our shared, social reality (Tuchman 1978).

Same-sex rights are examined as a comparative study of mainstream media coverage in both New Zealand and the United States and the subsequent social policy within each nation. Online newspaper articles from a range of mainstream outlets in the United States and New Zealand were examined through a content analysis to review the widely studied frames in journalism: conflict, responsibility, human interest and morality. This text, like many other analyses of how reality is socially constructed, argues that these representations could have an important impact on how social policies in these countries are formed. There are obviously several other possible contributing reasons for such differences in social policy. Certainly, the role of culture cannot be overlooked. But culture does not exist outside of media representation. Media content can play a central role in changing culture, and the reverse can also be said. This study, and the chapter as a whole, argues that there are potentially strong effects of media content on society. All media, whether mainstream or alternative, have a role in the definition and even constitution of our reality.

Chapter 5: Defining media through individual motivations and identities

This chapter, and Chapters 6 to 8, details the unique qualities that have historically defined all of the media – particularly in relation to the distinctions typically made between alternative and mainstream media outlets. These distinctions are categorized on the basis of work initially from Shoemaker and Reese (1990b) and then later Reese and Ballinger (2001), who divided the forces that shape media messages into personal views, media routines, media organizations, external pressures and ideology. These forces have been further consolidated for the purposes of this text into four categories: individual motivations and identities, organizational practices, media ownership and ideological influences. Given the widespread assumption that alternative and mainstream media differ on fundamental issues of representation, one would assume that there must be differing forces at play that help to create such content. These forces are examined in further detail to determine where specific differences may reside, if at all.

This chapter begins by reviewing the influence of personal views on content. Personal views include individual characteristics, political bias as well as perceived roles and individual ethics. The chapter explores much of

the research surrounding individual influences on the media. For example, the potential interrelationship between personal characteristics, political identity and media content are explored. The chapter investigates several examples from the entire spectrum of media, which both contradict and support the idea of individual-level identities pervading through media content. This portion of the book questions the level of impact such personal beliefs could have within a broader ideological system that operates within any capitalistic organization. In doing so, the chapter also explores commonalities in individual ideologies and identities across the media spectrum. While differences exist, this research asks whether there are shared individual-level assessments about what it means to be a communicator, blogger, journalist or media representative.

A study of ‘non-deviant’ mainstream current event websites and ‘deviant’ alternative current event websites are examined to better understand the relationship between the stated identity of a media organization and the visual identity used for self-representation. Deviance was used in this instance as a conceptual tool for categorizing the identities of media organizations. Standards of deviance have historically been constructed on loose political grounds. Meaning the further away from moderate centrist views, such as similarity to the majority and the amount of change advocated, the more deviant the group (Shoemaker 1984). Organizations can deviate from the mainstream along almost any conceivable axis, such as occupation, sexuality, politics, philosophy, economics or violence. More deviant organizations have historically represented themselves through direct persuasive imagery that could often utilize violence (Ray & Marsh II 2001) or subversive design techniques, such as instability and fragmentation. In doing so, these groups have challenged design techniques and popular aesthetic conceptions. These challenges are part of the organization’s identity. The visual aesthetic of a media organization helps to define how it views itself and how those outside of the organization view it. But what does it mean when an organization’s visual identity online is not congruent with its textual messages? Or when deviant organizations rely on non-deviant visual identities? The results from this study help to better understand the convergence of represented identity along the mainstream and alternative continuum. As alternative media face the responsibility of representing themselves to potentially billions of viewers online, this research investigates whether self-imposed ‘normalizing’ restrictions on visual constructions of organizational identity are occurring.

Chapter 6: Defining media through organizational practices

This chapter examines how organizational practices influence content within both the alternative and mainstream press. Alternative media tend to exist

within two organizational frameworks: participatory or hierarchical. Mainstream media have operated almost exclusively within the latter category, but this text will argue that alternative media have also co-opted this professionalized format as well. The chapter will review the organizational practices involved in creating institutional norms and values, sources and routines, spaces for activism and marginalized voices to be heard, and opportunities for reader input and feedback. Examples from across the media spectrum will be examined according to these organizational practices in order to tease out how alternative and mainstream media have actually converged in their approach to creating media content in many fundamental ways.

This chapter will draw on several examples to illustrate increasing overlap between the alternative and mainstream media. For example, websites such as Ikea Hacker, an online anti-consumerist operational guide to reconfigure Ikea products, operate solely on reader input. This complete reliance on reader contributions has been a historical point of differentiation among the alternative press. However, mainstream news organizations such as CNN have also begun to emphasize reader contributions through their successful citizen-based news website, iReport, which draws as much from Indymedia as it does from CNN. Such a shift is radical within the continuum of mainstream and alternative media. This approach signals a change in what has been a growing tension between transparency and objectivity in the media as an institution. The long-held belief that mainstream media adhere to principles of objectivity while alternative media allow for ideological influence is embedded within the organizational practices that influence all of these institutional behaviours. This chapter will argue that both the mainstream and alternative press are moving away from objectivity as a guiding principle and towards transparency as information becomes more readily accessible to readers.

A study of four American and British alternative current event blogs, Crooks and Liars, Think Progress, Oliver Willis, and The Osterley Times, will be reviewed in this chapter. This study relies on both critical discourse and content analysis to examine 344 posts, 1,712 hyperlinks and 10,401 comments from four political/current events blogs. This study suggests that there is very little in this sample to support an 'alternative' blogosphere as has been defined by other scholars.

Chapter 7: Defining media through ownership

This chapter examines the higher level influence of ownership in dictating content. One of the principal points of opposition against the present media merger frenzy is the fear that a monolithic media will create content that is one dimensional. This is based on the precept that a multiplicity of outlets will offer

a multiplicity of voices. As media conglomerates continue to grow, this interest in ownership has intensified. If, indeed, the ultimate control of a business lies in its owner, some research has suggested that the only way to differentiate content is to differentiate owners. Ownership has been suggested to be paramount in deciding journalism norms, behaviours and routines because it is the owners who – either directly or indirectly – have the greatest influence over the final product. However, this chapter will examine contrasting research and several case studies, which complicate the idea that ownership alone dictates content. Examples from across the media spectrum will be evaluated to better understand the myriad forces influencing content at every level of ownership influence. The chapter explores whether the influence of ownership is paramount or whether a prevailing capitalistic business model throughout the entire media spectrum has had the strongest influence on overall media content.

This chapter will conclude by examining two online randomly selected community political news websites owned by News Corporation and two randomly selected online community news sites within the same geographical region that are independently owned, over the period of a constructed week. *The Brooklyn Paper*, which is owned by News Corporation, and *The Melbourne Leader*, which is one of a consortium of 33 suburban papers in Melbourne that are all owned by the media conglomerate, are examined. The independent community political newspapers used for inclusion in this study are *The Brooklyn Eagle*, owned by local publisher J. Dozier Hasty, and *The Dandenong Star*, owned by Star News Group, which is an independent family newspaper company in the Melbourne region that runs 23 community newspapers in the area. This study explores how far from mainstream practices and ideologies these outlets actually are situated. The study examines the importance of ownership online when, as Gitlin says, the whole world is watching.

Chapter 8: Defining media through ideological influences

Drawing from Chapter 7, the book then examines ideological influences on media content. The complex concept of hegemony will continue to be examined in relation to the pervasiveness of mainstream ideology in the media. It will be important to detail both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic messages and structures that can be found in both mainstream and alternative media. This chapter examines the strong influences of commercialism, political engagement and power throughout the media spectrum. These influences can be found widely in mainstream media, but also in alternative media that aim for increased revenue streams. Some examples of counter-hegemonic content within mainstream media will be reviewed to better understand how ideology can be demonstrated within media messages and the possible reason that

ideologies between institutional structures and media messages can, at times, be in conflict. The text argues that commercialism, or opposition to commercial forces, is frequently present as an ideological force in media content precisely because of the economic pressures within the modern media market. Demands to increase revenue streams exist even within smaller, alternative media, which are examined in this chapter. The pervasiveness of commercialism within the ideology of our media, and of our lives, is difficult to measure. Economic wealth has become not only a part of our media but also of our individual aspirations. Embedded within the ideology of commercialism is the drive to value profit over any notion of social responsibility or political engagement.

There are certainly exceptions to this ideological framework, and they are most likely found within alternative media, but the study included for analysis in this chapter explores the many similarities across the media spectrum. A study of vaccinations in New Zealand online newspaper content and blogs is included in this chapter as an example of the ideological influence possible in media content. One hundred independent blog entries and 100 online mainstream newspaper articles are examined through both a critical discourse and content analysis within the framework of Marxist ideology. The praxis and theory of Marxism within the production of alternative media, much like vaccination campaigns, depend upon egalitarian, community-minded ideals. However, this study explores how alternative blogs can operate, in this ideological instance, as hierarchically determined sites of one-way communication promoting individualistically, commercially opportune behaviours contrary to the community-driven model of communication typically found in alternative media. This study explores the occasional conflicting nexus between the ideology of an issue and the supposed ideology of a medium.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This book concludes by reviewing how alternative and mainstream media, in the aggregate, have coalesced to a degree. There are contemporary examples that will almost conclusively satisfy academic criteria of what it means to be alternative or mainstream, but this chapter reviews the contradictions embedded within a mainstream media that increasingly relies upon traditionally alternative modes of communication and an alternative media spectrum that increasingly depends upon professionalized norms of reporting and mainstream content in order to expand their revenue streams. This final chapter reviews the various defining aspects of media and argues that much of what has differentiated alternative media from mainstream media in the past is now, in part, disappearing. This conclusion will review the homogenization of content across media through an appraisal of individual motivations and

identities, organizational practices, media ownership and ideology. It is argued that because of the overlapping spheres now found in how we define media, academics and professionals should be wary of overarching labels used to categorize outlets. The terms 'alternative' and 'mainstream' have become problematized as useful descriptors of the modern media landscape.

The possible reasons for this convergence of mainstream and alternative media are many. Technological advancements in communication have driven many of the changes in communication models. Citizens who now have access to social networking tools demand the same from their mainstream media, who, now under increasing financial constraints, are compelled to deliver. Also because of new technologies, some of the hierarchies of influence, particularly at the organizational level, have lost their importance. All media have become more disconnected with specific geographical spaces and organizational-specific mandates. The drive for commercial viability within an overarching ideology of consumerism and commercialism is an obvious driver of contemporary media practices. The mass dissemination of information through the Internet is also considered as a contributing reason for a confluence in content. More work is needed to better understand the goals and motivations of those producing what has been called alternative and mainstream media. This is a burgeoning area of research that demands attention. This text will hopefully serve as a nascent step towards an expanded stream of enquiry into the reasons for our converged mediascape.

If media outlets continue to condense their representation of current events, it will become even more important to protect the structures and practices previously found in alternative media and locate avenues for growth of these same practices within both the alternative and mainstream press. If alternative media wish to truly differentiate themselves from their mainstream counterparts, this text concludes by suggesting that they must combine to form cohesive portals of information, integrate networking into storytelling, increase their reliance on visual material, emphasize local news and continue to remove the barriers between consumers and producers. Alternative media must continue to search out commercially viable avenues for storytelling and self-expression that situate content as a point of difference from mainstream content. Yet mainstream media outlets will undoubtedly be using these same tactics to gain readership share. The mediascape is constantly changing and unwavering attention from those across the media spectrum is needed for the continued health of any democracy that values a free press. Diversity across identity, organizational practices, ownership and ideology will result in diversity of content, but this text concludes by arguing that these distinctions need to be much more purposeful and unified if academics and professionals wish to continue categorizing media as alternative or mainstream.