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Defining Media through Individual Motivations and Identities

The question of who owns the media and who controls the voices of individual storytellers has become problematized with the arrival of the Internet, which has allowed for a proliferation of smaller, independent media to present individual ideologies to a truly mass audience for the first time in history. Mediated voices have now become so diffuse that arguing for a deterministic flow of a specific influential force from the media across a global, networked society appears increasingly impossible. The proliferated marketplace is exemplified by how audiences access information. For example, the Project for Excellence and Journalism found that 40 per cent of Americans used the web in some capacity for their 2008 presidential election news on a regular basis ('How Does News Media Impact Elections?' 2008). In 2010, 77 per cent of active Internet users read a variety of blogs (Technorati 2010), and one-third of voters under 40 planned to get most of their political news in 2010 from a range of sources on the Internet (Rasmussen 2010). This translates to a substantive proportion of citizens getting their information not only from online news websites but also from bloggers, viral emails, social networking sites, citizen journalists' web pages, corporate messaging and campaign websites. This means that there is much less control over informational messages from the mainstream press and many more avenues for input from what once would have been considered alternative media sources.

As has been discussed, media do not occur in a hermetically sealed environment. There are many factors that influence content, and none are particularly objective. Indeed, each piece of mediated content 'is the end-product of a complex process which begins with a systemic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories' (Hall *et al.* 1978: 53). These categories can be thought of as enveloping circles, each overlapping the other. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argued that the first influencing factor on content is the individual, then his or her media routine practices, the newspaper organization, extramedia influences and finally broader ideological forces (Shoemaker & Reese 1996). In their examination of 'classic' research studies from the 1950s, Reese and Ballinger (2001) further divide the forces that shape media messages into personal views, media routines, media organizations, external pressures and ideology. Seen as a 'hierarchy of influences', these chains of influences are highly interrelated and begin at the

most basic level of personal views. This model of examining the media has been adapted for this book's examination into the similarities and differences along the alternative and mainstream media spectrum.

Individual characteristics

If research wishes to examine the effects of media exposure or the frames used within a specific genre or medium, then it is important that scholarship attempts to unpack why storytellers adopt certain perspectives (Scheufele 1999). Simply describing the frames themselves does little to explain how the frames were created and therefore does not inform the processes behind media content. Media content is the result of a complex interplay of motivations from several frame sponsors, who are all aiming to influence the final mediated product (Carragee & Roefs 2004). Each sponsor jockey to insert his or her own perspective into the news, and each has his or her own motivations for doing so. On a very basic level, one can be motivated simply by a sense of affirmation or empowerment gained through the act of communication. Wagg (2004) found that youths felt 'legitimated' and their work affirmed by the act of communication at their campus community radio station. They gained 'a worthy sense of self in the power derived from the vocalization of personal words, ideas, thoughts and opinions' (Wagg 2004: 275). This sense of satisfaction existed regardless of whether anyone was actually listening to his or her broadcasts. Participants responded that it was the act of creating their own content, rather than the reception of that content, which was their main motivation.

Journalists are largely motivated by their love of writing (Weaver 2005). A national survey of American journalists found that after a love of writing journalists also actually enjoy the process of news gathering and reporting (Weaver 2005). Reporters have also stated that it is important for them to 'make a difference' in society (Weaver & Wilhoit 1996). This is an important motivator into journalism, given the low salaries that often accompany a media job. Around the world, journalists do not make very strong incomes (Weaver 2005). They are more likely than the general population to hold a university degree, although the degree is generally not in journalism. Even with the degree, however, there is not a corresponding rise in salaries as one would see in other professions. Because of that, in general, journalism remains a youthful occupation, with the average global age of a journalist remaining in their 30s (Weaver 2005). Over time, the idealism of young journalists to 'make a difference' tends to be replaced with a sense of dissatisfaction in the job. Indeed, satisfaction in journalism occupations is swiftly becoming a thing of the past. In 1981, roughly 50 per cent of journalists reported being satisfied in

their jobs. Since then, the numbers have continued their slow decline to almost 30 per cent in 1992 (Weaver & Wilhoit 1996).

Political bloggers also have a love of writing, but they are further motivated by a desire to influence social values and a broader understanding of political issues (Wallsten 2005). These motivations increase over time as bloggers gain audience share. They feel an increased responsibility to inform people, influence public opinion and provide an alternative to media fare (Ekdale *et al.* 2010). It is not only bloggers who feel motivated to create media content that has an impact on the opinions of society. As has already been noted, journalists feel that it is important for them to 'make a difference' in society. However, mainstream journalists are increasingly interested in influencing public opinion as well (Weaver 2007). This desire to transform the beliefs and attitudes of the public on the part of mainstream journalists and alternative media bloggers online is perhaps why many claim that the media, in general, have become biased re-presenters of the news, rather than objective narrators of current events. What may be driving modern media practitioners in their professional roles might be the very thing that many citizens are finding increasingly distasteful in the media.

As was discussed in Chapter 2, there have long been charges of bias in mainstream media. Most of those in traditionally marginalized groups feel as if they have been misrepresented in the mainstream news. One stated reason for the misrepresentation of minority groups in mainstream media is a lack of ethnic and racial diversity in newsrooms (Barringer 1999; Heider 2000; Wu & Izard 2008). The argument is that if there are no minorities reporting the news, minority perspectives will not be integrated into news content. The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) has set a goal of reaching minority parity in newsrooms with equivalent numbers of minorities in society by 2025 (ASNE 1999, updated March 2002). While this goal seems admirable, it is important to note that this aspirational mark was redefined after failing to reach a previous benchmark of staffing parity by 2000 (Wu & Izard 2008). In 2004, ASNE remained still quite far from its goal, with only 13.4 per cent of newsrooms staffed with minorities (ASNE 2005). A broader analysis of American newsrooms found that only 9.5 per cent of journalists were minorities. The number of African Americans in the newsroom has remained relatively static at under 4 per cent ever since 1971 (Weaver *et al.* 2006). These disparities are that much more pressing in the United States when contextualized against predictions that minorities will collectively exceed half of the American population by 2050 (US Census Bureau 2006). Hispanics now comprise over 13 per cent of the American population but only just over 3 per cent of reporters and editors (Weaver *et al.* 2006).

A survey of New Zealand journalism schools in 2005 found that more than 85 per cent of students were Pakeha/European (Tully 2008). This is in contrast to 67.7 per cent of the New Zealand population identifying as European,

14.6 per cent as Maori and 9.2 per cent as Asian. As a leading journalism educator in New Zealand has said, the over-representation of Pakeha in newsrooms is problematic as 'news stories are constructed in ways that repeat traditional patterns of understanding. If the overwhelming majority of journalists are Pakeha, for example, a corresponding worldview holds dominance' (Tully 2008: 236). Like their Kiwi neighbours, Australian journalists are also more likely to be Anglo-Saxon than the general population. In 1993, a majority of 1,068 journalists interviewed said that it was more difficult for racial minorities to succeed in journalism than for people of Anglo-Saxon descent (Henningham 1993). In Canada, a nearly universal 97.3 per cent of journalists are white (Pritchard & Sauvageau 2000).

Minority journalists feel that more minorities in news management would lead to greater sensitivities towards racism, more jobs for minorities within the newspaper, increased coverage of minorities and a transformed way of thinking about minorities (Rivas-Rodriguez *et al.* 2004). Their feelings are not without support in academic research. More minorities in the newsroom have been found to result in a wider range of story ideas that had not previously been considered (Shipler 1998). The presence of minorities in the newsroom has also been shown to lead to greater questioning as to why minority issues are covered in specific ways (Gross *et al.* 2002). The presence of ethnic minorities in the newsroom can have an effect on content because of the belief systems that reporters bring to the selection of news stories and the eventual frame applied (Gandy *et al.* 1997). 'White journalists are likely to differ from their African American colleagues in the extent to which they believe individual or institutional racism is the primary influence over the outcome of some conflict' (Gandy *et al.* 1997: 164). When minorities in a newsroom achieve a 'critical mass', then the overall approach of a newspaper can shift as different frames are used more frequently (Gissler 1994).

Women comprise a larger proportion of the media workforce than ethnic minorities; however, their numbers have not grown in decades. Women remain roughly one-third of all full-time journalists (Weaver *et al.* 2006), which is about the same proportion of women in the media 20 years prior. This lack of growth is despite the increasing numbers of women as journalism majors at the university level. In each of the 19 newsrooms examined around the world by Weaver (2005), men outnumbered women; yet women far surpass men as majors in communication and journalism degrees. Only New Zealand and Finland showed some parity across gender, but on average women comprise about a third of newsroom numbers throughout the globe. The presence of the female gender in newsrooms has also been found to alter resulting content. More specifically, female editors tend to focus on the positive angles within stories more than their male counterparts (Craft & Wanta 2004). The issues appear to remain the same, but how they are framed changes depending upon gender.

One might assume that this dearth of minorities and women in mainstream media would be counterbalanced by a markedly increased representation of these groups in alternative media. Yet bloggers, for example, are overwhelmingly white, well educated and male (Lenhart & Fox 2006). An even greater percentage of those blogging about non-personal issues, which are generally news and political events, are university educated, white men (Cenite *et al.* 2009). In fact, there tends to be very few differences between online journalists and traditional newspaper reporters (Weaver *et al.* 2006). The two groups are quite similar in age, education, views on the role of journalism in society and ethical responsibilities, political attitudes and demographics.

No research could be found that measured demographic data from a wider range of commercially minded alternative media, where one might assume a broader proportion of racial and ethnic minorities and women in such a categorization. It is important to note that ethnic media, an essential portion of the alternative press that would presumably be more likely to employ or host volunteers of that particular ethnicity, has grown in recent history. The numbers of ethnic media outlets and the varying types of media transmitting ethnic media content have both generally expanded over the past two decades (Matsaganis, Katz & Ball-Rokeach 2011). This growth has not been found in all sectors of ethnic media. For example, throughout 2009, African American magazines 'took a severe battering even by the standards of the beleaguered magazine industry' (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010a). Yet, as a whole, ethnic media have grown alongside a widespread demand for heterogeneity throughout the media spectrum. In 2005, almost half of all major minority groups in America said that they preferred ethnic media to other mainstream alternatives (New California Media 2005). This far-reaching study by New California Media surveyed Arab Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics and African Americans.

The international growth of minority media may be reflective of the movement of diasporic communities around the globe (Georgiou 2005). In the Netherlands, for example, minority media have been skyrocketing, particularly since 1999 (Meulensteen 2003, cited in Deuze 2006) as minority populations continue to grow in that country. However, as Deuze points out, the rise in ethnic media has been met with a concomitant rise in all kinds of 'community, alternative, oppositional, participatory and collaborative media' (Deuze 2006: 263). There is a general drive throughout developed countries for individuals to be participating within some kind of mediated communication. As more people participate, more people of ethnic origin inevitably become part of that mix. While that rise needs to be celebrated, it is important to state clearly that even as the proportion of women and ethnic minorities increases alongside the global rise of different media, the numbers of those minorities contributing to the media still do not resemble the percentage of the population that these groups hold in society. And even as the very important drive for diversity

throughout the media continues, it is equally important to remember that simply inserting minorities into the newsroom does not always result in 'better' content. Research has suggested that the level of analysis or explanation in media content does not increase with more minorities in the newsroom (Wu & Izard 2008). The power of organizational and industry norms in journalism are 'stronger forces than individual ethnicity in news judgment' (Wu & Izard 2008: 110). Minorities may provide more news of substance about minorities, but their presence does not mean that the level of analysis, regarding minority issues, rises as well.

Correlations have been found in the past between a person's personal perspectives or ethnic identity and resulting content. However, many remaining questions about individual identity are mired in complex personal assumptions. For example, it has been found that media workers tend to be more liberal than the average population (Perloff 1998). However, there has been a recent decline in journalists' self-reported affiliation with the Democratic Party in the United States (Weaver *et al.* 2006). Despite this drop, which might be due to a reluctance to provide information on political affiliation but could also reflect a real drop in liberal ideologies in the media profession, there remains a widespread belief that the media, in general, are liberal (Media use and evaluation 2006). Examinations of actual media content are at best contradictory and do not appear to corroborate perceptions of a liberal media. For example, Groseclose and Milyo (2004) compared news content to Congressional statements and found that most major American news magazines were to the left of Congress. Conversely, an examination of 25 years of American news coverage found that liberalism itself has been portrayed negatively in mainstream newspapers and magazines (Kenix 2009b). In that study, liberalism was more likely to be associated with negative attributes than positive ones. This finding would counter any influence of personal ideologies on media content, given the relatively larger proportion of journalists with liberal ideologies. A conservative press, however, would help to partly explain the shift away from a liberal ideology in the mid-1970s to the denigration of liberalism in American society today.

Measuring the actual numbers of liberal reporters, Maori bloggers, Spanish videographers or gay publishers is relatively straightforward. However, the impact of one's personal opinions, which are presumably related to his or her personal identity, on media content is often very difficult to measure. First, how one feels about something personally does not always translate to performance on the job. After all, being able to distance oneself from a particularly difficult task at hand (commonly referred to as 'professionalism') is a key component to almost any successful career. But perhaps more importantly, being able to ascertain and measure personal bias is inherently fraught with difficulty. In order to measure bias, you need to have a point of comparison that is completely 'bias free'. How do we know when something contains absolutely

no bias? How do we know the truth of what actually happened? Even if you were present, how can you be absolutely sure that what you saw was the truth? The self-perpetuation of biased beliefs colours many individuals' judgements (Suen 2004). Unfortunately, because of the very essence of human perception, 'truth' is a malleable concept. Each person views events, people, places and things differently, which is why many have argued for diversity in the newsroom, whether that be based on ethnicity, race, gender, dis/ability or sexual identity, on the assumption that there will also be a resulting diversity in content. Although the goal of diversity has remained evasive throughout the commercially minded media spectrum, it has remained an extremely important goal for the entire media continuum.

The identity of corporate consumption

Even with a very important emphasis on increasing diversity throughout media, it is worthwhile to question whether there might be a larger homogenizing shift in the individual identities of those who work in commercially focused alternative and mainstream media. This book challenges whether smaller, independent media may also be usurped within this corporate model of consumption in their drive for commercial viability. Alternative media undoubtedly have a myriad of unique and disparate operating goals, but in their effort to gain revenue of some kind, the centrality of individual differences in identity might be softened under the weight of an omnipresent consumerist ideology. Consumerism as an identity is endemic to those living and working within capitalistic societies. This 'new consumerism', as Schor (2003) calls it, describes 'an upscaling of lifestyle norms; the pervasiveness of conspicuous, status goods and of competition for acquiring them; and the growing disconnect between consumer desires and incomes' (Schor 1999). This form of consumption has come to define a large part of how we think of ourselves as members of developed countries and may have a large role to play in how identity is expressed or restricted within media outlets.

The forces of globalization – mainly, technological innovation, an interconnected global economy and international migration – have led to an explosion of media across the world but have also served as a conduit to highlight consumer culture within our collective social ideology and our individual identity as well. The media explosion, like the forces that created it, has converged in such a way that individual identity based on race or gender, for example, might be much less central to resulting media content than the pervasive identity of capitalism. The art of selling and the practice of consumption have become fundamental to our identification as human beings participating within the developed world.

As Jenkins (2004) convincingly argues, we are in the midst of a convergence culture, which helps to explain some of the 'new consumerism' identity.

This converged participation culture is a mix of consumer-driven desires and corporate-driven practices. While the format of the communication exchange appears, at first, to be equally balanced, ‘corporations – and even individuals within corporate media – still exert far greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers’ (Jenkins 2006: 3). The use of the term ‘consumers’ is central to this homogenized perspective within much commercially minded media. In our new converged culture, consumers are encouraged by a wide range of media outlets to find information across a variety of media and piece these nodes of information together. These pathways for such active participation on the part of information consumers, otherwise known as citizens, are created to increase corporate revenue. The *raison d’être* of the communication exchange among commercially minded publications, whether they be alternative or mainstream, is the capitalistic intent to sell something, whether that be website views, newspapers, jeans, advertising share or brand loyalty.

This lopsided interrelationship of power may change in the future. Jenkins (2004) speaks with admiration and fondness for the millions of teenagers actively working to create a bottom-up culture that demands media be immediately on hand and in the format that consumers’ desire. While the input that particularly young consumers have in decision-making processes of the media is certainly expanding, citizen decisions remain largely within the framework of consumption. Options are generally selected through a series of consumptive choices that may benefit the individual on some level but ultimately provide corporations with hefty financial rewards. The individuals involved in this communication chain, both on the supply and demand side, form their identities around a shared culture of consumerism. There is a co-dependent interrelationship between the corporate world and the individual consuming within it: self-expression exists, but only within the confines of a consumerist prism of limited choices and restricted identities.

This relatively modern consumptive identity is reflected in the shared image of a ‘citizen-consumer’ (Scammell 2000) who buys certain brands that have the added benefit of purportedly benefitting society in some fashion. For example, buying a specific coffee to assist in the efforts of free trade for poorer nations or workers’ rights in South America. Citizen participation has been transmuted onto purchasing decisions (Banaji & Buckingham 2009). This consumerism is not only embedded within political purchases/activity but also seeps into every facet of media coverage across a range of different media (Miller 2007). The examples of consumerism within the media are almost too omnipresent to disentangle from media content, although much scholarship has found evidence of its presence in media coverage of national holidays (Brennan 2008), broadcasting content on 24-hour news channels (Cushion & Lewis 2009), wedding media (Engstrom 2008) and television reporting of food and weather (Miller 2007). This consumptive ideology is exported to

developing countries, such as China (Paek & Pan 2004), through a global multimedia market that celebrates citizens as consumers (Beale 1999; Drucker & Gumpert 2000). This corporate model of journalism, which generates naturalized systems of constraint within a conglomerated, capitalistic media system, can now be seen as the dominant influence on individuals throughout the media (Zollmann 2009).

Consumption has become central to how individuals, within a capitalistic society, come to view themselves. Consumerist 'choices' allow individuals and groups to 'express and transform their collective identity and acquire social membership' (Lamont 2001: 31–2). This individual and group identification as a consumer is the result of an intricate interplay between the media and the audience whereby a congruence of self-understanding occurs across all actors who are implicitly participating within a consumptive society. The identity of consumption influences how collective societies view their own familial relationships (Moisio, Arnould & Price 2004) and prescribes a moralistic foundation for our collective understanding of one another (Wilk 2001).

The identity of consumption and corporate consumerism might perhaps be best 'seen' through visual communication. All media, whether alternative or mainstream, develop visual associations that display the identity of those creating the media message that they hope will resonate with an audience. The ideology of organizations, individuals and groups is directly expressed through visual imagery and design techniques in the media. The current media environment is situated within, and central to, what Lin and Yeh call 'a solid consumer culture based on visual identity consumption that articulates and interacts with each consumer's daily actions, words, and visual perceptions' (Lin and Yeh 2009: 61).

Citizens now access a wider range of political messages online than ever before, and these diverse outlets have been suggested to have very different approaches to identity, content and purpose. The following study attempts to challenge that supposition through an examination of visual identities expressed throughout the broader media spectrum. Research thus far has largely ignored the aspect of visually represented identity in media content. The related studies that do exist examine largely mainstream representations of political events and focus principally on text-based communications. The following study aims to explore if there actually are differences across alternative and mainstream media in re-presented identities along several visual indices, including consumption.

A study of visual identity online

As an area of study, visual imagery and design across a range of media have largely gone unnoticed. The limited research that does exist is focused on

effects studies of visual stimuli within a particular medium and generally does not include design. Within that stream of research, there has been a wealth of compelling findings that suggest visual messages have a profound influence on how one thinks about the content. For example, research has found that media images of political candidates in newspapers can affect how citizens evaluate a candidate and their voting intentions (Barrett & Barrington 2005). Visual metaphors have been found to increase the persuasiveness of arguments in advertising (Jeong 2008). Positive visual representations in televised media have been found to influence how individuals felt towards marginalized groups (Levina, Waldo & Fitzgerald 2006). If marginalized groups are visually portrayed negatively, then individuals feel much more negatively about that group. Users receive important information from visual communication that they do not receive from accompanying texts. In fact, visual communication has the power to actually negate or counteract textual information (Desmarais & Bruce 2010).

The strong impact that visual communication can have is due to the simultaneous and comprehensive processes of sight that synthesize multiple analyses almost instantaneously (Gattegno 1969). Visual images are absolutely central to 'how we represent, make meaning, and communicate in the world around us' (Sturken & Cartwright 2001: 1). Visual communication elicits emotions, serves as photographic proof and establishes an implicit link between the image itself and some other emotion or thing that resonates with the viewer (Messaris 1997). Visual imagery is fundamental in reproducing informational cues that individuals use to construct their perception of social reality (Graber 1990). Visual communication can transcend textual limitations and instantly convey complex emotions in addition to factual evidence (Lester 2003). Images are often the first items scanned within a mediated message (Miller 1975) and generally form the longest lasting impressions on memory (Lester 2003). While largely overlooked in mass communication research, visual images are fundamental to our ability to communicate (Messaris 1994). There are endlessly complex sociological, political and cultural cues embedded within visual messages (Huxford 2001) that all coalesce to expose the ideological constituency (Reeves & Campbell 1994) and the identity (Manovich 2001) of those who created the media message.

Those within the media frame images, like text, after a complex negotiation of contributing forces, which were discussed in Chapter 3. Recalling a commonly used definition of framing from Entman: those who create media content 'select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman 1993: 52). News, like any other system of communication, can be understood as a narrative that has implied meanings, which are transmitted through media frames. Visual framing, which is a specific type of frame, refers to the salient visual schema

used to construct meaning. Visual frames can activate certain constructs at the expense of others, thereby directly influencing how a reader thinks about the issue at hand and the mediated messenger (Gamson *et al.* 1992). Symbols have been so widely used in the media because these visual constructions effectively and succinctly communicate the ideology of an organization to the viewer (Sturken & Cartwright 2001). For example, when symbols such as a national flag are used, the meanings associated with that flag (perhaps in a developed democracy, patriotism, capitalism, freedom etc.) are transferred to that media organization in the mind of the viewer.

As this review suggests, visual imagery must not be understood as only evidentiary. Visual frames need to also be contextualized within an ideological position. For example, camera angles provide varying levels of credibility for the subject and source (Campbell 1991). The visual schema operating within such an image combine to transfer an understanding of that subject's identity to the subject itself. These identities are drawn from a shared culture that implicitly understands such visual cues and their transferred meanings. For example, corporate media consistently rely upon images that are based on marketing categories embedded within a shared culture and mutually understood identity of consumerism (Machin 2004). Identities are formed and perpetually reconstituted through continually shared visual re-presentations. Stereotypes are persistently regurgitated through still and moving visual representations to reveal the constitutive identity of those captured within the frame as well as the media outlet that re-presented the image for consumption (Beasley & Standley 2002; Entman 1992; Fink & Kensicki 2002; Signorielli, McLeod & Healy 1994).

Every media organization and media outlet creates their own visual identity – the implicit boundaries where particular information is included and excluded for their readers. This purposeful focus on visual identity has become progressively more refined online. Early information on the web was purely academic without any aesthetic sophistication (Veen 2001). As the medium gained notoriety and attention through the 1990s, online design increasingly attempted to make elements more 'user-friendly' and idiosyncratic by directly reflecting a user's unique, individual experience (Cordone 1998). Within corporate news media, design alterations 'are usually planned so as to maximize the functionality and aesthetic appeal of the product for consumption in a competitive marketplace' (Cooke 2005: 23). This rush for commercial return has led many within corporate media to cut their expenditures and converge their design styles across integrated print, television and online outlets (Cooke 2005), presumably as a decision based on economies of scale. While that kind of visual convergence can happen across outlets with a shared owner, this study aims to explore whether convergence is happening across the mediated spectrum, possibly the result of a shared individual emphasis on commercialism.

Design principles

Whether the design is of a newspaper, website, magazine or poster, there are certain guiding principles that drive the aesthetic of a publication. Research has shown that different techniques and aesthetic approaches signify different meanings and identities to viewers. For example, the overall design of a web page itself can suggest an identity of sophistication, seriousness and professionalism if it follows a structured, aligned construction (Williams 1994). When elements are aligned, there is an invisible line that connects items and indicates their relationship. Without any alignment, the media organization appears haphazard and unstructured. In deconstructing design, experts have generally agreed upon several guides (Lauer & Pentak 2002) which have implications for the potential ideological division between alternative and mainstream media: unity, balance, rhythm and contrast. These widely accepted design techniques, when skilfully used, create an identity of cohesion, professionalism, serenity and calmness (Williams & Tollett 2000). When manipulated, these techniques can also translate into a re-presented identification of disorder, tension, a sense of chaos and division. For example, balanced designs have been found to denote an identity of strength (Lauer & Pentak 2002), whereas an unbalanced design creates a sense of uneasiness.

Unity, which is determined through proximity, repetition or continuation can communicate specific ideological, geographical or symbolic cohesiveness to the reader (Lauer & Pentak 2002). This concept is closely related to the Gestalt theory of visual cognition, which states that through various methods of unification there is a resulting perception that the whole is substantively different than the sum of its parts. Balance is an element frequently used to demonstrate an identity of strength and professionalism or isolation and uneasiness (Lauer & Pentak 2002). For example, professionalism can often be elucidated through symmetrical balance while isolation can be evoked in asymmetrical designs. Each design also has rhythm that can be seen as either progressive or alternating. The rhythm of a design creates a sense of movement and purpose. Contrast can have a strong effect on design. More contrast emphasizes difference and divisiveness while less contrast communicates calmness. Alignment and structure are generally seen in mainstream publications while organic placement is more frequently seen in independent publications. All of these factors come together in the overall design of a publication. Design can help to re-present a confrontational identity with a challenging or even hostile approach. It can also demonstrate an extremely professional and corporatized identity which can display significant skill or experience.

Williams and Tollett (2000) suggest that type on web pages can create an identity that is sophisticated and professionalized if a few simple rules are followed: type must be readable, not in too many colours, not too large, stable in movement and unblinking. Typography that breaks these rules transfers an

identity that is seen as elementary. Further, these authors have argued that organization, structure, a navigation menu and a simple background in a website can create a more professional identity (Williams & Tollett 2000).

In creating imagery for a specific audience, designers often pay close attention to attracting the interests of their constituency. Designers must presumably balance the needs of their audience against the agenda of the media organization, the design interests of the media and the organization's budget. Each one of these important facets in the creation of an aesthetic presence is, in its own right, central to the output. For the aesthetic of a site to be successful, the design must reflect the content and the identity of the media as well as attract the media organization's core audience.

Deviance from the mainstream is an important conceptual categorization in differentiating the alternative from mainstream media. Admittedly, in their existence as operating outside of mainstream media, alternative media, by their very definition, deviate from the norm. Yet some alternative media might deviate further from accepted societal values than others. Standards of deviance within alternative media have historically been constructed on loose political grounds. Meaning the further away from moderate centrist views, such as similarity to the majority of citizens and the amount of change advocated (Shoemaker 1984), the more deviant the media outlet. Alternative media can deviate from the mainstream along almost any conceivable axis, such as occupation, sexuality, politics, philosophy, economics or violence.

There is a diverse range of rhetoric, moving from the militant to the moderate (Simons 1970), found amongst those who feel they have been marginalized by the mainstream media. More deviant groups and media 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, their media have challenged design techniques and popular aesthetic conceptions. Historically, there are countless instances of those who wished to instigate the 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 1977) of visual images in the absence of 'electoral clout or (in most cases) economic influence' (Conklin 1997: 713). One would presume to see far more challenging visual stimuli in a modern world dominated by images and not words (DeLuca & Peeples 2002), whereby alternative media may need to rely upon direct, emotionally charged imagery to gain audience share. More deviant groups have historically represented themselves through alternative media with direct persuasive imagery that utilizes themes of confrontation and challenge, often through violent or sexualized imagery (Ray & Marsh II 2001). However, that might not still be the case in an online environment where the whole world is watching.

Recent research has found a rather homogenous and safe range of visual identities for non-profit organizations on the web (Kenix 2007a). Kenix (2007a) argued that, given the multitude of audiences online, non-profit organizations

are attempting to homogenize their message to reach the largest audience. Their dilemma is that there is not simply one single public that visits a site. Rather, there are several publics who may navigate through a website and are in no way homogeneous (Giussani 2003). The biggest challenge to those uploading content on the web is that they must 'take into account all of these elements, the wild diversity of the public, the different cultures, the different media tools, and to make something coherent' (Giussani 2003). This attempt at coherence may be behind the drive towards homogenization; however, how exactly these images converge also reveals important cultural influences.

This study examines alternative and mainstream media in much the same way that non-profits were analysed in previous research (Kenix 2007a), which examined the level of homogenization across visual identities in an era where consumerism has come to define so much of individual and group representation online. Given the importance of visual communication to processing information and the wide range of news sources that citizens examine on a daily basis, this research explores whether there are, in fact, differences in visual content across political alternative and mainstream media or if there has been a conflation of visual re-presentations online. Independent media may be homogenizing their visual messages through more professionalized visual approaches to news and self-imposing a more homogenous perspective on visual representations. This approach may be contradicting the political, text-based information that users are receiving, if alternative texts are truly as disparate from the mainstream press as suggested by previous scholars (i.e. Atkinson 2005; Atton 2002a; Downing 2001). This upcoming study examines the opening source pages of 100 mainstream political news sites from around the globe and compares the visual content to that of 100 independent political news sites. These websites are compared according to design principles (unity, balance, rhythm and contrast), layout (structure, organization, alignment, navigation menus, backgrounds), typography, symbols, photographs (violence, sexualization, confrontational) and logos.

Visual identity among alternative and mainstream news sites

In an effort to obtain the most extensive listing of alternative news sites possible, the search terms 'directory of independent political news sites', 'directory of alternative news sites', 'independent news websites', 'alternative news websites' were inserted into the Google search engine. This resulted in a comprehensive list that was then examined individually. Two coders read each site's 'About Us' page for a description of the individual websites and then selected the most appropriate 100 websites from that list. Those selected were websites that described themselves as independent or non-profit and provided news that was somehow different from the mainstream. One hundred mainstream websites were collated in much the same manner through a Google search of 'directly of mainstream news sites' and 'mainstream news websites'.

Just over half of all media coded were seen as 'not deviant at all', whereas the remaining half ranged along a scale of somewhat non-deviant to very deviant. The relationship between perceived deviance and type of media was highly significant with mainstream media being far more likely than the alternative media in this sample to be seen as 'not deviant at all'. Deviance was defined as the perceived distance from the mainstream. Alternative media were also far more likely than the mainstream media to be seen as deviant. In the final analysis, nearly all of the mainstream media sampled were seen as not deviant, whereas nearly all of the alternative media were categorized as deviant to some degree. Even though this was the case, a small percentage of independent websites were coded as having either somewhat confrontational or very confrontational design. Almost all of the designs used throughout the sample of 200 websites were generally safe and visually expected. Although the content itself might have been seen as more 'distanced from the mainstream', the design was formulaic in its approach. An example of this contradictory interrelationship can be seen on the Anarchist Age website. The site promotes an anarchist society, which is a 'voluntary, non-hierarchical society based on the creation of social and political structures that allow all people equal access to that society's power and wealth'. This is a decidedly different approach from the mainstream, capitalistic economies of contemporary society. The Anarchist Media Institute produces live analysis of news every day. The site also has a weekly programme titled 'The Anarchist World This Week' and 'The Anarchist Age Weekly Review'. Much of the selected news items revolve around a recurring theme of critiquing four central topics: 'capitalism, increasing population growth, finite resources and increasing greenhouse emissions'. The site argues that current economic, governmental, capitalistic and political processes have to be completely abandoned if society can 'survive the challenges thrown up by the four horsemen of the 21st century apocalypse'. As one can see from this brief review, the changes advocated by the Anarchist Age are fairly dramatic, but their website design is formulaic and non-confrontational.

A near majority of all the websites sampled relied on unity through proximity in their designs. In fact, most mainstream and alternative sites used some form of unity in their design approach, although independent websites relied upon unity in their approach significantly more. The same was true for the number of websites relying on emphasis by placement, obvious demonstrations of scale and symmetrical balance. These design guides were overwhelmingly popular throughout the entire media spectrum. Taken together, these approaches helped to create a strong sense of cohesive design in many of the websites sampled, such as The Minnesota Independent, an alternative news site, which drew heavily from these design guides to create a unified design approach. The Minnesota Independent is one of 10 websites across the United States that are part of The American Independent News Network, a non-profit organization which 'investigates and disseminates news that impacts public debate and advances the common good'. They state that their

reporting 'emphasizes the positive role of a democratically elected government in securing the common good and social welfare, and the continuing benefits of our founding culture of egalitarian government by the people, for the people'. The Minnesota Independent follows a common design template for all 10 state-based news sites. The Independent banner is centrally balanced, suggesting strength and reliability. Objects throughout the website are symmetrically balanced. Section headers are emphasized in their placement through recurring font usage and size as well as symmetry in colour. In this instance, the same green found in the headline is duplicated throughout the site to unify the page. Stories are unified by their proximity to each other and their section headlines. Photos are unified to their accompanying stories via the close proximity to the corresponding text. Sections are clustered together via their proximity to other design elements on the page, such as vertical separation lines and coloured text.

Mainstream media relied upon emphasis (particularly emphasis through placement), balance and obvious demonstrations of scale more than the alternative press, although this design guide was still readily apparent throughout the media spectrum. Overall, mainstream media were seen to be more organized and aligned than the alternative press, although neither of these relationships was significant as general organization and alignment was found throughout the media spectrum. However, the relationship between rhythm and media type was highly significant, with mainstream media relying upon alternating or progressive rhythm far more than would be expected through chance alone. The independent press were relatively unlikely to draw upon these same design guides in the 100 websites sampled.

The independent press was also significantly less likely to use contrast or white space as a design guide in their websites. Contrast in design and the interspacing of text against a wide breath of white space not only offers visual interest but is also generally more pleasing for the viewer as they negotiate textual and visual content. Type was also generally more readable in the mainstream press than the alternative media sampled. Perhaps as a result of this lack of readability, contrast and whitespace, independent media were more likely than the mainstream press to be seen as not visually appealing at all.

The mainstream press were much more likely to use a combination of technology than the alternative press, which often had no technology, such as Flash, frames or animated gifs, on their website. The mainstream news sites in this sample were far more likely to integrate social networking into their online content. They were also much more likely to be seen as professional in their design approach. This estimation of professionalism in design was likely influenced by their use of highly technological inputs, such as Flash and social networking. In fact, nearly three-quarters of mainstream sites were seen to be either somewhat professional or very professional in their visual presentation. This number was almost double that of independent websites, which were seen as much less professional. An interesting caveat to these findings is that

the mainstream press also relied upon violent images and sexualized imagery statistically much more than those in independent media, even though they were seen as more professional. It may be that visual demonstrations of sexuality or violence have been relied upon so much by commercial media that they are now intertwined with contemporary conceptions of professionalism.

There were high levels of commercialism present across all of the sites sampled in this study. Contributing to this commercialism was a near totality logos present across all websites sampled. Logos have their origin in commercial corporations and are an essential part of how a company or organization 'sells' itself. Independent media have embraced this approach. Almost all in this sample relied on a logo to visually represent their company or organization. Given the near monolithic numerical results, adjusted residuals were unvaryingly low, and the relationship between logo usage and type of media was found to be insignificant.

Only 15 per cent of independent media design was found to be non-commercial by coders of this study. This was substantially more than the 4 per cent of mainstream content found to be non-commercial, but it does represent an extremely large proportion of commercially represented, independent news. Thus, roughly 85 per cent of independent media were found to be generally commercial in their design approach. In addition to this, over three-quarters of independent websites had advertising on their site, whereas 95 per cent of mainstream media reported the same finding. This difference between advertising and media type was significant, meaning that mainstream media had significantly more advertising than the alternative news sites sampled, but one should not overlook the fact that such a high percentage (75 per cent) of independent media relied on advertising revenue. Independent media were also statistically far more likely than the mainstream press to have invitations to buy something on their site or pleas for financial support.

The mainstream media in this sample were much more likely to elicit the response, 'I get a strong sense of what this organization is about by just looking at this site', than the alternative press. The mainstream media were far more likely than the independent press to convey their textual content visually, whereas alternative media were seen to not convey their content accurately. This highly significant relationship suggests that independent media were misrepresenting their content. The identity of alternative media was seen to be 'somewhat clear in their design' far more than the mainstream press, whose identity was much more likely to be 'very clear in their design'.

A converging image?

These results do not suggest a monolithically homogenous visual representation across the 200 websites sampled here. There were many important differences that remained between the alternative and mainstream news media sampled in this

study: first, the mainstream media relied on sexual, violent images more than the alternative press and were also seen to be more professional. They were more organized and aligned and used emphasis, rhythm and balance in their design more than the independent press. The mainstream media also relied more on contrast and white space as well as readable text and technology. These design factors combined to create an assumption that mainstream news sites were more professional than independent news sites. The intermix of sexual, violent images with a strong sense of design has long been a part of mainstream media. It may be that visual demonstrations of sexuality or violence have been relied upon so much by commercial media that they are now intertwined with contemporary conceptions of professionalism. A lack of aesthetic professionalism and relatively little reliance on design guides in the independent media sampled could create a visual environment likely to leave viewers frustrated by the difficulties inherent in simply deciphering the relative importance and meaning of content. If everything is emphasized, through a lack of efficient design, then nothing is emphasized, and this can feel haphazard to the viewer. One could assume that the limitations in design might be due to a lack of resources in the independent press sampled.

Although the differences were tangible, there were some striking similarities across the mainstream and alternative spectrum found in this study. The principal area of a shared approach between the two media types relates to commercialism. For example, nearly all of the websites in this sample relied on a logo. Logos have long been a central component to corporate visual identity (van den Bosch, de Jong & Elving 2006). A strong visual identity has been said to provide increased visibility and greater recognizability (Balmer & Gray 2000), whereas a weak visual identity has suggested dysfunction within a corporation (Baker & Balmer 1997). Independent media have clearly embraced this concept and have incorporated logos to 'sell' their identity. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the pervasiveness of commercialism within contemporary culture. Independent media appear to be adopting corporate communication tactics to compete within a crowded, commercial, online sphere. Indeed, the acceptance of a logo within the independent media sampled for this study was likely to be relatively swift, given the commercial pressures endemic to a capitalistic society. The pervasiveness of this commercialism stretched into the overall design itself. Roughly 85 per cent of independent media were found to be generally commercial in their design approach. Three-fourths had advertising on their site and independent media were also statistically far more likely than the mainstream press to have invitations to buy something on their site or pleas for financial support. Thus, the alternative media in this sample were expressing commercial interests at the same rate and, in some instances, with even more enthusiasm than the mainstream press. Commercialism has become so endemic within society that its acceptance within the largely non-profit alternative media spectrum has become uniformly commonplace.

It is simply assumed that a commercial perspective is essential to survival – a notion that has not historically been very commonplace in the alternative media community. The contemporary media system appears pre-structured to include consumption. Therefore, the act of marketing oneself is endemic to the process of communication, and that marketing message is not viewed within a necessarily conceptual framework but within the confines of the media message as a product.

There were also several visual re-presentations that, at first, appeared counter-intuitive in the alternative press, in particular. For example, although most independent sites were deemed deviant, or different from the mainstream, their visual content was decidedly non-confrontational. It is important to question how these visual constructions are received by viewers who are likely bombarded with challenging visual imagery in other mediated arenas (Waller, Fam & Erdogan 2005) but find few confrontational images within the independent press, whose textual content may actually even negate those visual constructions. One has to wonder if such a disconnect between imagery and message is seen as a point of invitation or disconcertion to the viewer. In a media sphere of shock, sex and violence, these safe, unchallenging visual messages may be inviting to a viewer who is searching out alternative news coverage with perhaps a positive difference. Yet these images may also be seen as cynical and misanthropic to an audience accustomed to sexualized, violent and challenging images found in other media. If this reticence on the part of the alternative media in this sample is due to a desire to reach larger mainstream audiences, a considerable issue becomes whether independent media might be forfeiting the ‘symbolic capital’ so necessary for smaller organizations, in their zeal to attract mainstream readers.

It is also possible that the very notion of what creates symbolic capital in independent media has changed. It is hard to imagine the possibility of a ‘deviant’ and challenging image gaining prominence when contrasted against the findings revealed in this study. Indeed, such an image may now not be seen as empowering but as debilitating to a more deviant media organization. What of those who have a radical, deviant message? Certainly, representations over time have an inevitable impact on how an organization considers its operations and purpose. Thus, a mainstreamed image may suggest a much more mainstreamed approach in the process of newsgathering and information dissemination. This has obvious implications for democracy and political participation, particularly for those who continue to view themselves as ‘outliers’ in society. Those with particularly radical messages may very well be negotiating an increasing sense of defeatism when faced with such a non-confrontational, commercial block of visual imagery in alternative media. This lack of confrontation among commercially minded independent media, coupled with a shared consumerism with the mainstream press, runs counter

to the perception that the Internet operates as a diverse, heterogeneous arena of multidimensional communication.

Finally, the mainstream media in this sample were much more likely to elicit the response, 'I get a strong sense of what this organization is about by just looking at this site', than the alternative press. The mainstream media were also far more likely than the independent press to convey their textual content visually, whereas alternative media were seen to have an incongruence between their visual content and their text. This suggests a certain level of deception that may again be driven by the need to attract as many viewers as possible. If the images and design are non-confrontational, even if the text is challenging on some level, then there is an increased opportunity to attract a larger audience. Such a disconnect between text and image is concerning as visual messages typically generate the first, and longest lasting, cognitive processes inherent to communication. One must consider why alternative media would misrepresent their textual content. Here again, the drive to conflate media messages with the mainstream appears to be a likely cause. The pressure to homogenize your message, even when facing financial constraints that likely limit the possibilities of one's visual identity online, is continuing to increase as the media spectrum converges.