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Conclusion

This book has attempted to demonstrate some of the similarities between what has been traditionally seen as alternative media and the mainstream press. As was stated in the introduction, this book does not aim to argue that the two are mutually exclusive or exactly similar. Rather, as is the case with much in social science, the reality is far more complex. This text offered numerous examples to highlight some of that complexity, but it is hoped that these serve only to start the conversation. The continuum of media is constantly evolving and therefore needs continuous scrutiny to better understand the meaning of media as an institution of power, entertainment and information. In this chapter, the text will explore possibilities for future development of media. In doing so, this text furthers the argument that the media spectrum is converging – not to a finite diminishing point – but rather to an ever-expanding, blurred intermix of media spheres that develop because of one another and not despite the other’s existence.

In this final chapter, as was the case throughout the entire text, the goal is not to examine a truncated list of questions that are then systematically answered. It may be that most of the questions raised in this book simply cannot be answered. However, they must be asked if we are to gain a better understanding of our media as an entire continuum and not as silos of content that draw nothing from one another. Journalism, in particular, is in the midst of tectonic pressure to innovate, reorganize, generate revenue, entertain and inform. As this text has suggested, mainstream journalism has done much to bridge these gorges of change by drawing from traditionally alternative media practices. The reverse is also true. Alternative media have learnt from the successes and failures of the mainstream to create their own opportunities – and all media continue to exist within a pervasive commercial system dictating, to a large extent, many of the future directions in mediated communication.

This book has contemplated many of the influences on media frames – individual motivations, organizational practices, ownership and ideology. After exploring these influences, this book argues that ideology, and particularly commercial ideology, may have the largest influence. Shoemaker and Reese (1990) argued much the same over 20 years ago when they found ideology to be the largest enveloping sphere of influence on journalism. However, they applied this ideological influence only to mainstream media and, as this

text argues, that sphere of ideological influence is equally applicable to those within alternative media. The reach of ideology, and in particular commercial ideology, does not exist in a vacuum. It is constitutive within contemporary culture, which operates within a consumer-driven environment and is spurred by economic incentives. The inroads of commercialism into all forms of news are already largely evident. 'Professional journalism, with its veneer of autonomous and independent reporting in the public interest, allows corporate news entities to further solidify their place in society' (St John III 2008: 112). The veneer of transparency and objectivity creates an environment where citizens who attend to either alternative or mainstream media believe they are being served by a larger institution with professionalized norms that work to protect citizen interests. 'This is a portrait of public benefit that greatly legitimizes and stabilizes ... the commercial institutional control of the news apparatus' (St John III 2008: 112).

The commercial imperative throughout media is grounded within a mass culture perspective (Bennett 1982) that aims for expansion merely for the sake of expansion. Yet such a belief is based on 'dubious assumptions' (Hamilton 2000a: 359). The first assumption is that bigger is simply better. The second assumption embedded in this mass culture perspective is that mass-produced and mass-circulated media are necessary to support sustainable social change (Cirino 1987). A third assumption, suggested by Hamilton (2000a), is that mass-scale production requires a corporate organizational system. Hamilton (2000a) convincingly argues that these assumptions are based on commercial ideologies that will inevitably influence those seeking representation and the re-presentation that they receive. 'Capital-intensive, professionalized forms' (Hamilton 2000a: 360) of participation are valued more than democratic, organic organizational structures within a commercial environment. These capital-intensive, commercial models of media have always existed, but has intensified as corporate consolidations increase. Alternative media have responded to this structural shift largely by promoting mainstream conventions, thereby limiting open-access participation and embracing commercial models of communication. There is a certain level of irony in this circuitous equation. As alternative media adopt more corporate organization models, this requires more professionalized modes of production, which implicitly locks out voices that were part of what made alternative media 'alternative' in the first place (Solomon & McChesney 1993). However, it appears that the alternative press simply must pursue professionalized, commercial practices if they are to compete within the media marketplace.

Again, it is important to remember that alternative media generally, although not exclusively, remain less commercially minded and more ideologically driven than the mainstream media. They continue to operate in ways that are often distinct from mainstream media. Perhaps buoyed by these remaining distinctions, many continue to steadfastly argue that

marginalized groups, which have historically found a more friendly reception in the alternative press, should not bother attempting to gain representation in mainstream media given that these media operate in ways completely opposite to traditional alternative media practices (Albert 2006). Those making this argument continue to adhere to a long-held philosophical dichotomy between media conglomerates, which reflect conservative political ideologies that support government and capitalistic corporations (McChesney 2000b), and independent, alternative media, which embrace liberal perspectives and citizen interests. As such, mainstream media simply can't be relied upon to portray any truth about those outside of corporate interests. While this text has attempted to highlight some of the contradictions in this argument, it does not deny that there remains much reason for concern. The institution of mainstream media can, and does, obscure the underlying meanings behind issues. Issues are often individualized, with very little substance (Gauntlett 1996). Yet, as this text has hopefully illustrated, it is increasingly contradictory to exclusively compartmentalize mainstream media as a singular institution that is managed and operated 'by the beneficiaries of the oppressive institutions we oppose' (Albert 2006: n.p.). It is impossible, through this one-dimensional perspective, for alternative media users to align at all with mainstream practices – the very practices that are now driving much of the alternative press. This text would ultimately argue that as citizens we must demand more from both alternative and mainstream media. Citizens, reporters and media owners from across the mediated spectrum must ultimately find shared avenues of cooperation for the advancement of democracy.

These shared cooperative moments have already occurred in the past. There have been several instances of the alternative and mainstream press covering the same issues and even relying on each other's resources. Atton (2002b) suggests that these moments of 'coming together' occur through three principal scenarios. The first instance is when the agendas of both mainstream and alternative media are shared and an event fulfils the needs of both outlets. An example of such an instance is from the large-scale protests against the WTO in Seattle. This was such a compelling, big news story that the mainstream media needed more immediate information, particularly from a human-interest angle. Conversely, alternative media aimed to explore the reasons behind the protests. Both had information that the other needed (Fenton 2007). Here, it was a mutually beneficial relationship where both 'sides' gained valuable information from the other. Both the mainstream and alternative news media need to embrace such shared moments. The second way that alternative media and mainstream media have historically worked with more cohesion is through incorporation (Atton 2002b). This has occurred when alternative media sources are needed for mainstream requirements of human interest or conflict. Again, there is an undeniable benefit to both parties; even when one addresses any lingering concerns that alternative media might serve as some

sort of sensationalistic voyeurism for mainstream outlets. The third method of cohesion is through dissidence. In such a scenario, the alternative press gains the attention of mainstream media simply by virtue of their 'alternativeness' (Fenton 2007). Here, the danger is that minorities can be misrepresented and their point of difference can be highlighted as a central focus in coverage. However, with stronger alliances, fully cultivated and developed over time, alternative media can work to mitigate against such misrepresentations.

Some alternative media run the risk of an ideological 'ghettoization' if they do not engage in cohesive processes such as these. If the purpose of a media outlet is to steadfastly remain outside of commercial interests, then the 'ghettoization' of some alternative media may be essential for principled reasons. However, if the purpose of a media outlet, whether alternative or mainstream, is to educate, entertain and inform citizens, then the acceptance of a commercial structure is inevitable for their own continued existence within a capitalistic system. Therefore, finding pathways for cooperation has institutional as well as economic benefits. This acceptance on the part of alternative media does not translate to a homogenous existence in concert with the perceived corporate media largesse. Rather, this acceptance acknowledges the constraints and freedoms of a commercial enterprise and pursues a greater understanding of the overlapping spheres of influence impacting the entire media spectrum.

Alternative and mainstream media must continue to learn from one another and change their structural models to better respond to economic challenges. As the expanse of the Internet continues to unravel into the farthest reaches of the globe, the strength of future media will be in their ability to detail local events within a specific place and time. Local content is thriving in some areas of the present media landscape and declining in others. For example, community radio is increasingly 'playing a crucial role in the democratic process by fostering citizen participation in public life' (Meadows, Forde, Ewart & Foxwell 2009: 155). Community radio helps to build local narratives that can be thought of within a complex pattern of 'local talk' that is central in creating public consciousness. However, the rise of community journalism within radio is not mirrored in local online and print newspapers. Local outlets are closing at an alarming rate (Greenslade 2009), largely due to the perceived needs of a globalized marketplace; a decline in journalistic standards, which at the local level continues to rely on single sources; a continued focus on reporters as the sole source for information without any reliance on readers for input; and an emphasis on stories with little consequence that require only simplistic newsgathering skills (O'Neill & O'Conner 2008). Alternative media could easily fill such a gap with networked local writers and readers who are eager to explore perspectives relevant to their lives – and then feed that information back to the mainstream. The dominance of locality in popular alternative news blogs is emblematic of such a need. Users are clamouring for hyper-local information that is pertinent to one's own immediate experiences.

Hyper-local online news content needs to be embraced by alternative news sources, particularly given the continued closure of mainstream local outlets after conglomerate takeovers. These local alternative sources of information can serve as reliable checks on local councils, police, education issues and legislation. Important partnerships with the mainstream media need to be forged, if hyper-local coverage is to grow. These kinds of relationships already exist and are generating important and necessary content. For example, *The New York Times* has recently partnered with local blogs in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and Millburn, New Jersey, to create local content in those two communities. *The Times* has also forged relationships with the City University of New York Graduate School of Journalism to create a collaborative blog titled 'The Local' which provides essential local content and analysis of citizen's contributions to news. This journalistic experiment has resulted in the creation of a large pool of regular internal and citizen-based contributors that add an important local source of information to the community. Gannett, the same company that first bought up and then was forced to close so many local newspapers, has now recently moved into hyper-local blogging. In doing so, this large media conglomerate is now hiring local, independent writers and university students to create hyper-local content within an established readership base.

As these partnerships increase between mainstream and alternative media, synergies need to be forged across smaller, local outlets as well. These synergies are already found within a conglomerated mainstream press but are still relatively new for alternative media. Within the United States, there are thousands of alternative media publications, but no cohesive unifying force that brings together all that content and readership. AlterNet is the rare example of what can be done when pulling across the alternative media spectrum. It receives more than 3 million monthly visitors and more than 7.5 million monthly page views (AlterNet 2009). It is unlikely that these numbers represent unique users given that this was not reported in the website material. However, even 3 million repeat viewers represent a significant amount. AlterNet claims to combine original reporting with material from over 200 independent media sources, 'including over 40 of the most compelling and insightful blogs' (AlterNet 2009). This is an impressive body of news and information that users can access quickly from one central control point – information that likely would not be seen otherwise.

Outside of the success of AlterNet, alternative media still tend to exist without any real connection between independent outlets. AlterNet should be examined further as a model for future growth in alternative media and how connections can be forged with mainstream alliances that already exist. As more and more websites proliferate the Internet, networked portals that offer obvious localized pathways for content must continue to grow or readers will likely overlook a substantial amount of content. Media mogul Rupert Murdoch has created news.com.au, marketed as news 'from all angles', which amalgamates localized news from newspapers across Australia: *The Advertiser*, *The Australian*, *The*

Courier-Mail, *The Daily Telegraph*, the *Gold Coast Bulletin*, the *Herald Sun*, *The Mercury* and *The Sunday Times*. This kind of consolidation will likely be more widely supported as information becomes even denser. Successfully finding information online is already dependent upon demographic factors, such as education levels (Hargittai 2002), and as more and more people flood the Internet for information, that information will simply need to be easier to locate. Silos of information will not be able to withstand the onslaught of content or the continued evolution of technologies. The cross-pollination of the myriad technologies available is producing a proliferation of content in multiple platforms. Navigational systems need to be developed to direct users across these platforms to media portals of information. These localized portals should draw from both alternative and mainstream media to provide important, unique, local content in a highly competitive marketplace.

Localized content thrives through social networking, which is exploding online. Any speculation about the future of media must include networking – across alternative and mainstream outlets. Almost 60 per cent of Internet users regularly use social media in some way (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010b). News has always been ‘about connection, conversation and community’ (Vargas 2009). A reader connects with content, in whatever form that information delivery occurs. That information then sparks the beginning of a conversation within each reader’s personal social networks, whether that is online or offline. When a reader engages with that material, she or he is also joining a community of like-minded people. Arthur Miller, the famous playwright, once said ‘a good newspaper is a nation talking to itself’. The future of all media will expand this statement in ways that simply can’t be predicted at this stage, but active networking between readers of disparate media outlets will surely play a large role.

This integrated social network can be, and already has been, used for citizens to instantaneously verify sources and confirm perspectives. The unparalleled access to information means that transparency, not objectivity, will become the most important tenet of quality media reporting across the mediated spectrum. Objectivity, the long-standing principle of journalism, should one day be subsumed by transparency (Weinberger 2009). This has important implications for the mainstream press that will look to successful alternative media outlets, which still have a more immediate tradition of opinion-based reporting, for guidance. Alternative media are wedged within a unique moment in history to exploit this epochal undercurrent. Mainstream corporate newspapers and conglomerated broadcast networks have long relied on the credibility that their institution provided through their simple existence as a credentialed authority. This model of transferring information from an authoritative and objective source to citizens proved so successful because of the nature of communication prior to the Internet. The barriers for information retrieval were extremely high. For example, one could certainly pour through library

archives or government documents housed in official warehouses, but the costs in time and money remained too high for most. The mainstream authority on information relied on the widespread assumption of objectivity to impart information to the masses. The Internet drastically changed how citizens now think about information provided to them. The preponderance of information available to users means that transparency is now the most important quality of news information. Transparency allows readers to examine the arguments, assumptions and values embedded within messages. '[T]ransparency – the embedded ability to see through the published draft – often gives us more reason to believe a report than the claim of objectivity did' (Weinberger 2009). News information can easily be traced through heavily networked Twitter feeds or other online social networks. All media must increasingly integrate the 'connection, conversation and community' embedded within a user's personal experience if they are to succeed. Biases should be clearly stated so that users can clearly navigate through information. As one blogger recently noted, 'bias should be considered a built-in flaw of an imperfect system. And if each of us, as news consumers, is aware of the flaws in the system, we can account for them when evaluating what we're told by the media' (Brain Terminal 2006).

Citizens increasingly expect to be able to make an input into their media systems. This expectation will continue to rise as technologies become more and more accessible. Those who participate within the media will likely embrace their new-found sense of empowerment, which will 'signify participant's ability to take control of their own destinies' (Wagg 2004: 269). This access to the media will lead to much more media literacy and a demystification of the media (Sefton-Green 2000). Categories and job descriptions that have historically defined and organized modern media creators will continue to disappear. Many levels within organizational flow charts have already been removed and recreated. This trend will continue. Technological advances mean that the time and cost to produce content has substantially reduced, which has allowed many more avenues of input from a variety of content producers. David Simon, from *The Washington Post*, correctly argues that bloggers and other alternative media have not yet begun to fill the gap that newspapers are quickly leaving behind (Simon 2009). However, as newsrooms continue to cut their numbers, bloggers and alternative media will help to supplant the investigative abilities of a watchdog press (Lasica 2003). This shift in reporting necessitates a stronger alliance between mainstream reporters and contributing members of the alternative press. This is certainly happening to a much smaller degree now, but if alternative media is to continue growing as a viable segment of the media, then purposeful extensions of the mainstream press into input from alternative media and citizen-generated content will need to be more explicit.

As this book has already discussed, many blogs use comments as a form of feedback for readers, but still few use this space as an egalitarian exchange between consumers of the content and the producers. Very few media rely

on anything other than static, one-way forms of communication. Hamilton (2000a) suggests that alternative media, in particular, should remove artificial divisions between consumers and producers. But, we have seen in this text that mainstream media are also beginning to open pathways for citizen input. Much more is needed. All media need to resemble what Rodriguez (2001) calls citizen media, which are far more active in their identity. Citizen media are actually part of a larger process of inter-communication. They are a constantly evolving expression that includes thoughtful, individual reflections and analyses from individuals who begin to collate together and actually construct their citizenship. They do so through daily collective media action. These acts of citizenship empower those who participate. Citizen media can, and should, happen through the mainstream and alternative press.

Citizen or activist media encourages involvement on the part of readers (Waltz 2005). This insistence upon action does not need to fall solely on 'alternative' ideologies. In fact, many activist media have very mainstream goals, such as urging others to vote in governmental elections. An egalitarian and engaged network of communication will define the future of alternative media. A prominent example comes from a well-publicized MoveOn.org contest titled 'Bush in 30 seconds', which called for users to create a 30-second anti-Bush commercial and submit it to the organization's website. The contest proved to be wildly successful with thousands of entries and generated widespread mainstream media coverage. Each entry was given equal consideration and the resulting content was entirely user generated. Future media content will rely on users to increasingly act as 'foot soldiers' on the cyber frontiers. Content and reports will increasingly percolate up towards mainstream publication, rather than down from mainstream content, which is largely the case now. Such shifts in the directional flow of information could originate from an identifiable alternative media outlet or from readers who actively participate in collecting information within a mainstream outlet.

Although the capitalistic structure does legitimize the commercial behaviour of all media, there are examples of community-minded, engaged media that value readers as citizens and not as consumers – even within a commercial structure of operation. The two need not be mutually exclusive. As Carey argued years ago, the disaffected might 'begin to reawaken when they are addressed as a conversational partner and are encouraged to join the talk rather than sit passively as spectators before a discussion conducted by journalists and experts' (Carey 1992: 14). When individuals are no longer 'passive recipients of a data dump', they actually '[find] a way to do something' (Schaffer 2007). There are exciting possibilities for an engaged, reciprocal, interactive media system that learns from one another. All media, bolstered by citizen journalism, have the ability to strengthen 'civic culture by working to reconnect people to their communities [and] draw them into politics and civic affairs' (Friedland, Rosen & Austin 2003).

Commercialism and convergence

As this text has hopefully illustrated, there is a continuum of media that stretches from the margins to the mainstream and then back again. There are most certainly important differences that remain, but it is important to recognize the similarities, which provide an important context for judging the efficaciousness of an entire media system. Obviously, we need the media – every corner of the entire media spectrum – to tell us which issues are important and why so that, as citizens, we can respond appropriately. It is perhaps telling that some of the most politically active people are also some of the broadest users of media content. For example, political activists draw upon a wider range of sources across the mediated spectrum than individuals who are less politically engaged (Rauch 2007).

All media have an effect on all citizens regardless of explicit participation within democratic societies. This text has reviewed research finding that when readers are exposed to media content about environmental destruction, there is a sharp rise in environmentally responsible behaviour, such as recycling and conservation (Davis 1995). In discussing the agenda-setting research, this text highlighted the finding that negative information about African Americans in the media tends to influence how people feel about African Americans in general (Johnson *et al.* 1997; Peffley, Shields & Williams 1996). More specifically, when viewing negative images of African Americans, viewers tend to raise their opposition to welfare (Sotirovic 2001) and overestimate the number of blacks in poverty (Gilens 1995). Media exposure has been found to influence ‘citizens’ evaluations of government, feelings of self-efficacy, and levels of participation in the political system’ (Gandy Jr & Baron 1998). As these examples illustrate, media matter. We certainly need the media for information, but, given the potential effects of media exposure, we need a media that engages us as citizens and enlightens us as individuals within a collective human spectrum.

There is a danger that the prospect of an engaged and enlightened media could very well diminish as commercial pressures become more and more pertinent to the media system. This pervasive consumerist ideology is perhaps the most potentially damaging force to media, but also a fundamental reason behind much of the convergence in the first place. Commercialism is a driving influence on the continued coalescence of media outlets into conglomerated entities and also one of the principal reasons behind the duplicitous forms of practice found across the media spectrum. This force of commercialism will increasingly work to define the overlapping spheres of alternative and mainstream media and will also dictate how both media types continue to evolve. The deepening connection between commercialism and the media is indeed extremely worrying.

Alternative media, in particular, must aim to find avenues of growth that exist outside of the influence of foundations or advertisers. Obviously, media

cannot remove themselves from outside of the commercial culture they operate in, but direct influences from financial interests need to be reduced. This charge is equally important for the mainstream press, but their connections with financial interests have a much longer historical basis and are therefore much more difficult to disentangle. However, it is this commercial influence that is the most dangerous to citizens in need of clear information. Transparency, the celebrated model of future communication, becomes very difficult to monitor with so many commercial influences embedding deeper in content. Funding models, across the media spectrum, need to be solicited from a wider base of individual contributors, rather than a relatively few number of advertisers or corporate sponsors. There is a possibility that as commercial pressures continue to intensify throughout the media, individuals will become more aware of such pressures and increase their own personal donations to media outlets. While this possibility does exist, it is important to remember that individuals are entrapped within the same consumerist ideology, so the likelihood that they will recognize commercial pressures on media en masse remains relatively small. Yet that does not preclude the possibility of many other enlightened citizens rising up to protest the increasing commercial pressures on media content. These voices need to be heard, and those within media must do their best to respond to their concerns. Citizens deserve a media that is, at least somewhat, situated outside of corporate interests. As commercially minded alternative media move closer and closer to consumerist ideologies, citizens must first awaken to recognize these changes and then demand a retraction to media content that can operate with a greater degree of freedom from commercial interests. This is not an impossible task. Media that are funded largely by individual donations will not feel the pressure of a monolithic interest dictating content. These sorts of funding models need to increase if citizens are to receive media fare that is not saturated with consumptive images and commercial subtexts.

It has been said, 'we get the media we deserve'. As global citizens participating in what can only be seen as a collective democracy, we must demand that the entire media spectrum move away from the consumerist ideology that threatens to entrap media content within a circuitous spiral of celebrity and entertainment. Undoubtedly, individual preferences, organizational practices and media ownership all play an important role in dictating content. As this text has illustrated, when these forces are compared between alternative and mainstream media, one can see some striking areas of overlap that need further examination and contemplation. However, those working across the entire media spectrum must recognize not only the power of these forces on content but also the omnipresent, commercial ideological arc that has had a profound influence on the entire media spectrum. Obviously, media must produce revenue if they are to continue producing content within a capitalistic system and that content must continue to support those money-making pursuits within such a

system. However, it is vitally important for all media to recognize the influence that such an approach has had on media content, so that they can work to either counterbalance such an effect with other, more purposeful, routinized approaches or simply be more direct in their own awareness that such an influence exists. In doing so, all media will be much better equipped to examine their true position along the media spectrum.

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