Article

Journalism
12(1) 15–31
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DOI: 10.1177/1464884910385191
http://jou.sagepub.com

Alternative journalism as active citizenship

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Abstract

This article explores relationships between alternative forms of journalism and political concepts such as democracy and citizenship; in the process of doing so, it explores the role and purpose of alternative media. By means of an exploratory empirical study, utilizing qualitative research methods with a sample group of alternative media practitioners within the UK, the article discusses differing concepts of alternative media, paying particular attention to the journalistic methods and outputs of such media and the ways in which they can be seen as supportive of citizenship. The findings are discussed within the context of the work of international scholars on issues such as alternative media and democratic participation. The article concludes that, although a precise and universal definition of alternative media remains elusive, there appears to be a considerable degree of agreement amongst practitioners and scholars of alternative journalism alike that such media can play a role in reflecting, nurturing and demonstrating what can be identified as active citizenship.

Keywords

active citizenship, agency, alternative journalism, alternative media, citizenship, citizens' media, democracy, empowerment, feminism, participatory media, practitioners, public sphere

Introduction

The production of alternative and participatory forms of media can be seen as an example of active citizenship, yet it is an example that tends to be little discussed within mainstream literature about relationships between journalism and politics. Alternative media can provide 'a rich vein of journalism which is simply invisible in journalism studies', laments John Hartley (2009: 314). Similarly, Richard Keeble (2009: 60) points out that: 'Despite the vast economic power of the mainstream press, a lively alternative print

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industry (ethnic minority/left-wing/peace movement/feminist/single-issue campaigning) survives against the odds – yet it tends to be ignored by both Fleet Street and academe.'

However, although the journalism of such alternative media may indeed be regarded as of marginal interest within much of journalism studies, it is neither completely invisible nor totally ignored. Journalism has 'several legitimate registers, which contribute in different ways to the functioning of democracy', writes James Curran in his foreword to the *Alternative Media Handbook* (Coyer et al., 2007: xvi). Those registers include the 'advocacy and interpretative and subjective styles of journalism' that are to be found in much of what is labelled 'alternative media'; forms of media that, for Curran, 'enable divergent social groups to define and constitute themselves, facilitate internal strategic debate, and further the forceful transmission of their concerns and viewpoints to a wider public.' Curran's contribution comes amidst a recent flurry of book-length studies of media practices and products that might be termed 'alternative'; in addition to the *Alternative Media Handbook* in 2007 we also have *Understanding Alternative Media* by Bailey et al. (2008) and *Alternative Journalism* by Atton and Hamilton (2008). Such studies of alternative forms of media production can inform us not just about the alternatives themselves, but, it is argued, can also shed light upon more established media practices, because:

> Alternative journalism proceeds from dissatisfaction not only with the mainstream coverage of certain issues and topics, but also with the epistemology of news. Its critique emphasizes alternatives to, inter alia, conventions of news sources and representation; the inverted pyramid of news texts; the hierarchical and capitalized economy of commercial journalism; the professional, elite basis of journalism as a practice; the professional norm of objectivity; and the subordinate role of audience as receiver. (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 1)

These books build on what has been a gradual increase over the past decade in scholarly attention to alternative media (Atton, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Atton and Couldry, 2003; Atton and Wickenden, 2005; Baker, 2005; Bareiss, 2001; Beckerman, 2003; Bolton, 2006; Caldwell, 2003; Davis, 2003; Downing et al., 2001, 2003; Forde et al., 2003; Gibbs, 2003; Haas, 2004; Hamilton and Atton, 2001; Harcup, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Howley, 2003; Khiabany, 2000; Platon and Deuze, 2003; Rodriguez, 2001, 2002; Shaffer, 2003; Waltz, 2005; Welch, 2003). Many of these studies were informed by earlier research (such as Aubrey et al., 1980; Berry et al., 1980; Dickinson, 1997; Fountain, 1988; Harrison, 1974; Landry et al., 1985; Traber, 1985; Whitaker, 1981), arguably going back to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's 1970 *New Left Review* article 'Constituents of a theory of the media', which discussed potential 'emancipatory' use of media (Enzensberger, 1970: 26), or perhaps even to EP Thompson's (1952) polemical pamphlet *The Struggle for a Free Press*.

Informed by such literature and utilizing a qualitative empirical study involving a sample group of alternative media practitioners, this article discusses the relationship between forms of journalistic activity that might be labelled 'alternative' and expressions of citizenship that might be labelled 'active'. But, first, what is meant by the concept of active citizenship?

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Active citizenship

Active citizenship can perhaps best be understood in terms of agency and participation. For the influential feminist political theorist Chantal Mouffe (1992: 3), 'the notions of citizenship and community have been stripped of much of their content by liberal individualism, and we need to recover the dimension of active participation that they hold in the classical republican tradition.' For Mouffe, active citizenship is central to what she sees as a necessary project to create a more radical and inclusive form of democracy: 'A radical, democratic citizen must be an active citizen, somebody who *acts* as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking' (1992: 4, emphasis in original). According to this analysis, although citizenship as a legal status may be conferred on an individual merely by birth or residence in a particular nation state, active citizenship requires the use of human agency, as Ruth Lister argues:

> To *be* a citizen, in the legal and sociological sense, means to enjoy the rights of citizenship necessary for agency and social and political participation. To *act* as a citizen involves fulfilling the full potential of the status. Those who do not fulfil that potential do not cease to be citizens; moreover, in practice participation tends to be more of a continuum than an all or nothing affair and people might participate more or less at different points in the life-course. (2003: 42, my emphasis)

Thus, for Lister, active citizenship is a process – an activity – rather than an outcome or a status, and it is through 'struggle' that 'citizenship emerges as a dynamic concept in which process and outcome stand in a dialectical relationship to each other … Citizenship as participation represents an expression of human agency in the political arena, broadly defined' (Lister, 2003: 6 and 37). An active and informed citizenry may well become more critical of a society's power structures but, as Pippa Norris (2000: 319) points out, 'increasing criticism from citizens does not necessarily reduce civic engagement; indeed, it can have the contrary effect'.

The idea of participatory democracy cannot be understood in isolation from the concept of social justice, argues political theorist Iris Young (2000: 17), because 'in the real world' there is unequal access to democratic processes and forums for discussion. Therefore, the inclusive idea of widening intervention within a political – lower-case p – arena of civic engagement opens up the possibility of oppressed and marginalized groups constructing the sort of collective identities and narratives of solidarity that the theorist Nancy Fraser has described as 'the standpoint of the collective concrete other' (cited in d'Entreves, 1992: 158). Yet, as Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves (1992: 165) observes, 'the ability of citizens to enlarge their opinions and to test their judgements can only flourish in a public culture of democratic participation that guarantees to everyone the right to action and opinion.' Having space/s in which citizens can exercise their voice/s is seen as 'crucial to their possibilities of acting as citizens' (Couldry, 2006: 326). This is where alternative media come in, as one way in which the public sphere, or spheres, can become more inclusive and less male, less bourgeois and less dominated by the market. It is by encouraging and *reflecting* a culture of participation

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that alternative media projects can be seen as supportive of active citizenship; and it is by *being* participatory forms of media that such projects themselves constitute a form of active citizenship.

Alternative media

'Sometimes,' writes media theorist Denis McQuail (2000: 160), 'dissatisfaction with established media has found expression in the celebration of completely different forms, free from established systems.' He has proposed the concept of 'democratic-participant' media as a way of explaining, or at least labelling, the 'many ideas expressed on behalf of alternative, grass-roots media that expressed and looked after the needs of citizens'. He writes:

> The theory found expression in the 1960s and 1970s in pressure for local and community radio and television. It challenged the dominance of centralized, commercialized, state-controlled and even professionalized media. Often the key to applying this theory was seen to lie in the new technology of the times …It favoured media that would be small in scale, non-commercial and often committed to a cause. Participation and interaction were key concepts. At the present time, quite a lot of expectation for re-invigorating political life is invested in the promise of new interactive media. (2000: 160)

Peter Dahlgren (2006: 274–5) has written of how 'all kinds of horizontal "mini" media such as organizational newsletters, neighbourhood bulletins, union newspapers and activist pamphlets', in addition to various online locations, can facilitate media audiences to become 'publics'; that is, 'citizens who interact with each other and with power-holders of various kinds'. He continues:

> Audiences that coalesce into publics who talk about political issues – and begin to enact their civic identities and make use of their civic competencies – move from the private realm into the public one, making use of and further developing their cultures of citizenship. (2006: 275)

Such alternative media have been understood as being concerned with process as well as product, emphasizing 'the organization of media to enable wider social participation in their creation, production and dissemination than is possible in the mass media'; with involvement in such activity typically being open to 'ordinary people without the necessity of professional training' (Atton, 2002: 25). These alternative media structures have been described as forming part of an alternative or plebeian public sphere (Atton, 1999: 54 and 71, 2002: 35 and 50; Habermas, 1989: xviii, 1992: 430) or as 'counter public spheres' that 'comprise the communicational efforts of groups and organisations that challenge existing power relations' (De Jong et al., 2005: 11). Historically, such media can be understood as 'a crucible in which people could become aware of a range of alternative strategies for understanding and changing the world as they found it' (Conboy, 2004: 101).

Not just aware but involved. Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) is particularly concerned to emphasize the 'transformative processes' involved in the production of such horizontal

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forms of media. She draws deeply on the work of Mouffe and other feminist scholars to place alternative media at the heart of democratic communication and active citizenship. Whilst doing so, she rejects the term 'alternative media' in favour of 'citizens' media', explaining that:

> [R]eferring to 'citizens' media' implies first that a collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting social codes, legitimised identities, and institutionalised social relations; and third, that these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible. (2001: 20)

She argues that the participation and 'empowerment' offered by such citizens' media constitute citizenship in action:

> As defined by the theory of radical democracy, the concept of citizenship implies that social subjects claim a space for their public voices, that these social subjects tenaciously intervene and shape their identities, altering circulating social discourses and cultural codes, and that, as a result of the above, these negotiations and renegotiations empower the communities involved. Seen from a radical democracy perspective, citizens' media materialize as important sites where citizenship is forged. By participating in these media experiences, reshaping their identities, reformulating established social definitions, and legitimising local cultures and lifestyles on the personal as well as the local level, communities are actively enacting citizenship. (2001: 158)

In this way, for Rodriguez (2002: 79), participants in alternative media become 'active citizens' and 'exercise their own agency in re-shaping their own lives, futures, and cultures'.

The participants speak

In the very production of their own media, alternative media participants have given themselves a voice. Yet, as noted earlier, such voices tend to be heard only on the fringes of journalism studies and political studies. This is perhaps surprising because, as Atton and Couldry (2003: 580) observe, studying alternative media practice can inform us 'both theoretically and empirically' about a range of wider media issues; after all, those involved in producing such media are precisely people 'who are *not* satisfied with the exclusion from the means of symbolic production which is most media audiences' lot' (emphasis in original). To this end, this article now goes on to report and then discuss the findings of a study that asked a sample group of such practitioners to reflect on the meaning of their alternative media practice.

The sample

These practitioners, each of whom completed a questionnaire inviting open-ended responses, enjoy a particular vantage point, having worked as journalists initially in alternative media and subsequently in mainstream media. The sample group all contributed to the production of what they define as alternative media within the UK, mostly but not

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always on an unpaid basis. As we see below, they regarded such activity as a form of social participation that could be seen as active citizenship; that is, an intervention on behalf of what they perceived to be a common good. Between them, the 22 respondents identified 40 alternative media projects on which they had worked in a period stretching from the late 1960s to the 2000s, including 'party' newspapers *Militant* and *Morning Star*, feminist publications *Spare Rib* and *Outwrite*, underground magazines *Oz* and *Ink*, campaign mouthpieces such as *Anti-Nuclear Action* and *Troops Out*, non-aligned publications such as *Leveller* and *Red Pepper*, alternative local newspapers, and fanzines based on a musical or sporting identity. Print was the dominant medium, but there were also examples from community cable television, community radio and online journalism.

The findings

The ways in which reflective practitioners define their own activities can help inform the scholarly exploration of media practice, and this becomes apparent in the simple listing of respondents' alternative media experiences, which highlights the slipperiness of the label 'alternative media'. Questions arise such as: Can a party newspaper be defined as alternative, if it is the mouthpiece of a hierarchical organization? Are trades union journals or student newspapers mainstream or alternative? Did the London listings magazine *Time Out* start out as alternative and then become mainstream; if so, at which precise point? Can a sports website such as *MatchON.com* be considered as alternative, simply because it was an early example of bypassing traditional print and broadcast models to publish only on the internet? Even before we examine what the respondents had to say, interesting questions have already been raised about how alternative media might be defined and who does the defining; there are already signs that the answers are unlikely to be simple ones.

For one freelance journalist, 'alternative media' was 'probably not the term I would use these days, though everyone knew what it meant back in the 1970s and 1980s'. He went on to place the alternative media of the 1970s–1980s within a longer history of radical publishing, part of 'a tradition which could be traced right back to the 19th century publications like *Northern Star*, *Poor Man's Guardian* etc., through *Workers' Dreadnaught*, *Call*, etc.'. However, not all respondents articulated such a conscious link with historical radicalism. Another freelance journalist responded, when asked how he would define 'alternative media':

> I'd never even thought of the label until I read your letter in *Journalist*. I'm not sure I could define it! How about: 'Media, usually small-scale, that is produced mainly to promote a personal interest or belief, with minimal desire to become an expanding business but maximum desire to share or argue a particular point of view'?

Defining alternative media is more complicated than it used to be, according to a magazine journalist:

> It used to be everything that your newsagent didn't deliver or wasn't in WH Smith[1] but it's completely collapsed now as a definition, largely but not exclusively because of the internet. It

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> could mean *Indymedia* but it could also mean *Al Jazeera*. I'm tempted to say that the distinction is between taking advertising and not.

A number of respondents offered definitions of alternative media that amounted to a form of self-fulfilling negative; that is, alternative media are alternative media because they are not mainstream. For one magazine journalist, alternative media were 'non-commercial, non-consensual, off-message', whilst a newspaper journalist suggested 'anything which has a view which is contrary to and challenges the status quo'. A range of broadly similar definitions included the following points about alternative content, perspectives, and working methods:

> A look at a situation from a different angle. Not traditional or restricted in its reporting, not tied to 'sexy' news. (Former alternative media journalist; now newspaper journalist)

> Media which provide different information and perspectives from those provided by the dominant media, political bodies, organizations etc. (Former alternative media journalist; now freelance journalist)

> Anywhere working in a different way – collective, for example. Media which sets out to challenge the norms generally accepted by society at that point in time, or that is born of protest or which seeks to subvert. (Former alternative media journalist; now freelance journalist)

This concept of providing an alternative to established and/or commercial media led directly to consideration of questions of ownership and funding, as identified in one broadcast journalist's definition of alternative media as 'any publication/radio/TV not funded commercially or through a licence fee'. Another broadcast journalist offered the formulation of 'media not produced and funded by large corporations'. The absence of a proprietorial influence was key for the freelance journalist who argued that alternative media were 'beholden to no one, neither owner, political thinking or pressure group'. Another freelance expanded on the theme in the following terms:

> It's got a *lot* to do with ownership. From this follows issues like it being more important to get the material out than it is to get paid for it. This is clearly still the attitude on the web and in the various propaganda/humour sheets we still punt out around town when we feel like it … 'Alternative' should sit with the Alternative Society, which is a concept I was attracted by in my teens and 20s and still subscribe to, to some extent … Alternative Society journalism always was committed, campaigning and not interested in an immediate financial return.

Having heard a range of perspectives on what alternative media are *not* – that is, they are not mainstream – we now turn to the sample group's views on what alternative media *are*: a form of active citizenship. The practitioners described their engagement with alternative media typically in terms of encouraging participation by non-professionals, by sharing jobs and responsibilities ranging from unblocking toilets to editing pages, by being prepared to say what the mainstream regarded as 'unsayable', and by having a commitment to give voice to those directly involved: 'talking to the homeless person

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before the housing officer', as one put it. Alternative publications and other outlets were seen as reflecting a point of view – or, more often, points of view (plural) – that were not otherwise seen or heard in the media. In this sense, alternative media can be seen as facilitating democratic debate and participation among otherwise marginalized groupings. As one freelance journalist put it:

> I would say that alternative media is … journalism designed to serve fringe political or environmental interest groups, particularly from a left-leaning perspective. The label is imperfect – often suggesting merely a degree of poverty.

Similarly, a newspaper journalist defined alternative media as:

> Any format or technology which offers minority groups, disenfranchised groups or non-mainstream groups within society an independent method for disseminating non-mainstream, alternative and unmediated information.

The content of such alternative media was typically described as being broadly left wing and radical in its political orientation. In the words of a freelance journalist, alternative media were 'not tied to any particular political or religious grouping, or to any business interests, pursuing a radical/left outlook'. He added: 'I know 'em when I see them.' Another freelance offered the following definition that clearly links the perceived purpose of such media to ideas of political – again, with a small p – participation and change:

> Media produced by people with an ulterior motive, that is in order to campaign for something like peace or justice, rather than make money. Those who work in it are primarily motivated by a desire to change the world rather than have a career.

This equation of alternative media with left-wing political perspectives was largely accepted by the sample group, although other alternative perspectives were also considered. A freelance explained: 'I guess Christian publications could be seen as alternative, as could ecological and environmental as well as political.' A newspaper journalist commented: 'I suppose this could also mean stuff which comes from the far right, but it's not usually used in that sense.' And another freelance journalist argued:

> The word 'alternative' carries a definite hint of a political or environmental agenda – a stance that is that of the outsider, that places itself beyond the usual political discourse. In theory, 'alternative' could apply to a right wing political publication – of a libertarian nature, for instance. But somehow the label doesn't quite fit.

Some respondents pointed to the participatory ethos of alternative media leading to a blurring of roles between journalist and source and between journalist and audience. In this sense, alternative media could be seen as empowering, according to one newspaper journalist; as 'anything produced by its potential audience', but with the difference that this 'audience' has more potential of editorial *control* than do audience members who contribute to mainstream radio phone-ins, the letters' pages of commercial publications,

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or even the moderated comments facilities that are now a standard feature of mainstream online media.

The motivations that led people to become involved in alternative media in the first place also speak to us about the role and purpose of alternative media. One respondent, who now works for a mainstream regional newspaper, explained that she had been motivated to volunteer at *Leeds Other Paper* by a desire 'to expose dishonesty, unfairness, hypocrisy, wheeling and dealing and general skulduggery going on in the establishment and to lend a hand to "save the planet"'. And a broadcast journalist explained his motivations in helping to produce the *Leveller* magazine:

> We were pretty non-aligned. I can't remember too many conversations about our collective ambitions other than [to] bemoan the fate of the country under Maggie.[2] We did want to work collectively – which at times was exciting and at others incredibly frustrating and difficult. We wanted to produce an alternative source of independent news and information covering arts and politics both in this country and overseas, which was non-aligned to any of the traditional parties of the left. Personally I felt part of a collective endeavour, I met some interesting people and I acquired some very useful skills.

This idea of alternative media as itself a form of collective action, not merely a place to comment on the actions of others, was commonly held by practitioners; however, another respondent defined alternative media in a less overtly political sense as primarily a means to 'let off steam'.

All members of the sample group went on to work in what they defined as mainstream media within the UK, suggesting that alternative and mainstream media could be seen as part of a continuum rather than as binary opposites (Harcup, 2005a). Certainly, all continued to see a role for alternative media; indeed, society's need for alternative perspectives was seen by some respondents as axiomatic. A newspaper journalist said simply that 'there has to be an outlet for dissent', whilst a broadcast journalist stressed the importance of alternative media in providing 'an alternative, unorthodox, and questioning voice' in society. As one freelance journalist put it: 'If there's a role for media, there's a role for alternative media.'

Many respondents were explicit in stating that alternative media must be understood in terms of fostering democratic inclusion and participation and countering social exclusion and political disengagement. Alternative media are seen as playing a vital, democratic role in influencing public debate because, as one freelance argued: 'There's always a need for alternative viewpoints and diversity if any change is to be made to current conditions.' In this sense, alternative media could be seen as products of active citizens, which perform a socially useful function, as the comments by these two practitioners make clear:

> Democracy is dead without them. The mainstream media is governed by commercial success. Therefore it sticks to safe and popular ideas, tried and tested formulae, and very rarely rocks the boat. The alternative media are governed by ideas, no matter how initially unpopular they may appear to be – that's the whole point of them. (Former alternative media journalist; now PR adviser)

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> The idea of an organization not bound by commercial pressures is healthy for society, but the people running it have to be prepared to put in an enormous amount of hard work for little or no pay. (Former alternative media journalist; now broadcast journalist)

Without such alternative forms of media, the practitioners argue that many individuals and groupings would in effect be rendered voiceless, at worst, or isolated, at best. As a freelance journalist put it: 'There is too much influence in mainstream media on what is and isn't included and so it is easy for some social groups or cultural minorities to be left out.' Others agreed that mainstream media excluded many valid perspectives, leaving a gap that alternative media could help citizens to fill for themselves:

> Alternative media can showcase the work of people not considered right for the mainstream, disregard conventions, profit margins and other constraints to present a valuable fresh perspective … [It] can also provide a service to a community on a very small scale that would never be commercially viable. (Former alternative media journalist; now newspaper journalist)

In this way, alternative media were seen as giving sections of the population spaces within which they could communicate with each other. A freelance journalist related this communal function to alternative media's more overtly counter-hegemonic role when offering the following explanation of the purpose of alternative media:

> To throw a spanner in the works, to remind people who are isolated in their radical, subversive, mad, nihilist beliefs that they are not alone, and to tell others that there is more to heaven and earth than they had imagined.

As another freelance journalist put it: '[It] is vital that everyone in society has a place they can call theirs.'

Although all members of the sample group saw a continuing role for alternative media – and the majority continued to use alternative media as sources for their own journalism within mainstream media – they were not uncritical. A national newspaper journalist offered the following reflections:

> Journalism at its best is often independent social activism … The concept of 'alternative media' is now very different from the mid-1980s due to the emergence of the internet and email. The need and market for [a] radical press has been completely supplanted by digital media … Its [the internet's] influence and effectiveness has grown significantly since the late 1990s, and is a much more democratic, accessible and free-flowing medium than any other preceding technology. It allows interest groups, campaigners and umbrella groups such as Stop the War to directly reach their target audience, produce independent news sources and connect up with like-minded information sources. Also, the internet's power to subvert or overtake traditional news forms has been proven by the speed with which international news circulates … What has not yet appeared in my (probably limited) experience are alternative media outlets that have the credibility and influence of printed predecessors, such as *City Limits*, early *Time Out*, or *Leeds Other Paper* … [The] alternative media no longer digs up genuine scandal as it might have in the past. My personal attitude towards alternative media journalism (in its professional sense),

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> having now had 14 years in the mainstream press, is increasingly sceptical. Much of it now appears to be commentary and editorialising, rather than objectively journalistic … Modern alternative media is far more valuable for me in giving me direct access to the sources and subjects of a story.

This development of alternative spaces on the internet was also heralded by a former alternative journalist who now works in public relations. He observed that young people had led the way in exploring the potential of the internet to express active citizenship:

> Their parents sit at the breakfast table tutting over the latest 'outrage' highlighted by the indignant *Daily Mail*, while upstairs their children are surfing all sorts of weird and wonderful sites. We can see this from the mass demonstration against the Iraq war.[3] With the exception of the *Daily Mirror*, most sections of the mainstream media were either neutral or for the war. Yet anything between one and two million people turned out on the streets … It was the plethora of 'alternative' websites internationally that ignited this mass protest.

As is perhaps illustrated by the above example, the internet can be used to organize expressions of active citizenship not merely online, but on the streets too.

Discussion of practitioner perspectives

Notwithstanding the diversity of their alternative media experiences, and despite the fact that the individuals concerned went on to work for mainstream media that mostly enjoyed far higher profiles and much larger audiences, the respondents in this study continue to value the practices and products of alternative media. They articulate a commitment to social justice and active citizenship that sees alternative media as being healthy for society, even as vital for democracy. Although the practitioners' experiences are necessarily specific to the UK where they have worked, their motivations and explanations of practice may have a wider resonance with those involved in alternative forms of journalism within other locations. Their reflections can help to illuminate more scholarly consideration of what Atton and Couldry (2003: 580) refer to as 'the means of symbolic production' and of what scholars such as Lister (2003: 37) describe as 'citizenship as participation'.

In their different ways, the alternative media practices engaged in by the practitioners in this study reflect what has been identified as a typology of alternative media practices, being concerned as they are with politically or culturally radical content, alternative style of presentation, innovative use of technology, alternative methods of distribution, a blurring of roles, and horizontal rather than hierarchical communication (Atton, 2002: 27). Similarly, the definitions of alternative media offered by the practitioners in this study find echoes in the more theoretical formulations that have emerged from the academy, such as McQuail's (2000: 160) 'democratic-participant' media and Downing's 'radical alternative media'. For Downing et al. (2001: ix–xi), the dividing lines between different forms of media 'are always blurred', with alternative media found 'in a colossal variety of formats …typically small-scale, generally underfunded, sometimes largely unnoticed at least initially'.

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As the practitioners in this study have argued, alternative media tend to be organized along more democratic lines than are mainstream media, with audiences encouraged to become producers. For Downing et al. (2001: xi), such media serve two main purposes: expressing opposition '*vertically* from subordinate quarters directly at the power structure and against its behaviour', and/or building 'support, solidarity, and networking *laterally* against policies or even against the very survival of the power structure' (my emphasis). This dual role, noted by a number of respondents in this study, has also been identified by Gary Younge, a journalist within the mainstream who also contributes to alternative media from time to time. For Younge (2004), alternative media help create and sustain communities of activists by providing 'an alternative prism through which to examine the world'.

Clemencia Rodriguez makes explicit the link between such practices and theories of radical democracy and citizenship when she argues that even diverse forms of alternative or citizens' media have the common characteristic that 'they express the will and agency of a human community confronting historical marginalizing and isolating forces, whatever these may be'. She continues that such media open up 'spaces for dialogue and participation, breaking individuals' isolation, encouraging creativity and imagination, redefining shared social languages and symbols, and demystifying the mass media' (Rodriguez, 2001: 63). Whilst the alternative media practitioners in this study speak of taking part in a collective endeavour, and of creating spaces in which marginalized voices can be heard, Rodriguez writes at a more theoretical level of opening up spaces for dialogue and participation. Atton (2002: 4) is similarly concerned with such transformative processes, defining alternative media 'as much by their capacity to generate non-standard … methods of creation as I do by their content'. This opening up of such participatory spaces for social dialogue is, for Atton (2002: 154–5), akin to the ideal of the Habermassian public sphere, in which 'participants do not simply consume reflexively, but produce reflexively'.

Several respondents pointed to the growth of the internet as offering avenues of communication unmediated by mainstream mass media, opening up the possibility of what Natalie Fenton describes as 'a new form of political activism with consequences for the way we conceive of and carry out our political citizenship'. She continues:

> The internet is now home to a multitude of groups dedicated to objecting to and campaigning against particular issues and politics. Public communications online are part of the process of realizing the public sphere – a space where democracy can be enacted – allowing us to analyse how shared democratic values and identification as democratic citizens are achieved and maintained. (2008: 233)

However, although the internet can be seen as comprised of 'a plurality of voices', it has been noted that these voices may not have equal strength or resources, meaning that, for Kavada (2005: 219), 'to a lesser extent, the internet seems to replicate the power structures of the offline media'.

Whether they operate online, offline or both, we have seen that alternative media participants do not concern themselves only with the production of alternative content;

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they also embody alternative ways of producing such content. By doing so, they disrupt established 'power relationships' on multiple levels (Rodriguez, 2001: 16). Such participation goes far beyond the mediated and moderated spaces of mainstream media, even those that invite audience contributions. As Bailey et al. (2008: 13–14) put it, true participation relies on participants having power to influence an outcome: 'Alternative media not only allow but also facilitate the participation (in its more radical meaning) of its members (or the community) in both the produced content and the content-producing organisation.' In this sense, participation in alternative media as described and reflected upon by the participants in this study can best be understood as a form of active citizenship.

Conclusion

This study suggests that scholars and practitioners of alternative media concur that 'alternative journalism' seeks to engage with 'ordinary people …as a set of voices which have as equal a right to be heard as do the voices of elite groups' (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 126). Having such a right to be heard, and having access to spaces in which to engage in dialogue with others, is seen as crucial to the possibility of people 'acting as citizens' (Couldry, 2006: 326). For feminist theorists of inclusivity such as Mouffe (1992) and Lister (2003), active citizenship implies active participation in society and engagement in some form of collective or political endeavour. This study has suggested that one form of collective undertaking in which 'citizenship is forged' (Rodriguez, 2001: 158) is the production of alternative and participatory forms of media.

For Rodriguez, as with Mouffe, citizenship is constructed, not given: 'Citizens have to enact their citizenship on a day-to-day basis, through their participation in everyday political practices … [C]itizenship has to do with empowerment' (Rodriguez, 2001: 19). This is not about empowering people to dominate or to exclude others, but empowering people to challenge and to be inclusive; in this sense the production of alternative media can be understood as forms of active citizenship and empowerment.

The practitioner perspectives expressed in this study support the concern of many commentators with the concept of the public sphere as a space in which informed citizens can – or *should* be able to – engage with one another in reasoned debate and critical reflection. The health of such a public sphere, argues Paul Manning (2001: 137 and 226–7), depends on 'the success of a diverse range of political groups and organisations in submitting their arguments and evidence to the news media'. He stresses the importance of 'alternative benchmarks' – alternative sources of information by which citizens may measure mainstream output – in helping news audiences to engage critically with and 'decode' the messages produced by mainstream media. His study of news and news sources echoes others in suggesting that these less powerful groups in society continue to face structural obstacles in gaining access to mainstream media. It is precisely such groups that, according to the self-definitions of participants considered in this article, are given voice in alternative media's forms of alternative journalism.

'Participatory media production,' writes Atton (2009: 269), 'can be thought of as providing the constituents of an alternative public sphere, where agendas are set and

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discussion is developed through the journalism of social movements and communities.' The results can be messy, but in a good way, argue Bailey et al. (2008: 153), because 'alternative media should be seen as a multiplicity of public spaces, a colourful – but at times also contentious – myriad of media initiatives as diversified as society itself'.

For the group of reflective practitioners and active citizens whose views have informed this study, the continued existence of some form of alternative media and the opening up of 'social spaces for dialogue and participation' (Rodriguez, 2001: 63) remain essential for the healthy functioning of society. In addition to operating as a critique of much mainstream journalism, such participatory forms of media can be said to help foster – and, indeed, to be an expression of – active citizenship. Despite a paucity of resources, such media can in fact be far more inclusive than their mainstream counterparts. Therefore, it must be hoped that alternative forms of journalism will not continue to be seen as of marginal importance whenever the relationship between journalism and democracy is discussed and analysed.

Acknowledgements

Parts of this article are based on a paper presented at the Seventh International Association for Cultural Studies Crossroads Conference held at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, 3–7 July 2008; the research was also discussed as work in progress at a University of Strathclyde seminar held on 30 April 2008. Thanks to the organizers and participants of both events. Thanks too to the editors and anonymous reviewers of *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* for their helpful and constructive feedback.

Notes

1 The leading chain of newsagent shops in the UK.
2 Margaret Thatcher, UK Prime Minister 1979–90.
3 On 15 February 2003 in London.

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