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## Communication Theory and Alternative Media

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### **Abstract**

The article draws firstly on theories that question the exclusionary nature of mass communication in terms of the emancipatory potential of 'new media'; of the democratization of communication; or even in terms of advancing alternative forms of communication. By probing specifically into various small-scale, decentralised media projects, issues concerning the social as well as the cultural context of their implementation; their creation, production and dissemination; the employment of new technologies; and, instances of the very mediation process itself, across both the production and reception process, are addressed. From the perspective of a non-essentialist account of such media projects, the paper draws finally on approaches that evaluate these projects on the grounds of their 'lived experience', in terms of their social actors, agents; acknowledging thus an overall framework of understanding the practice of such projects, as instances of the constitution of citizenship.

### **Beyond mass communication**

Various theoretical approaches on the media of communication, and their diverse applications, have evaluated their emancipatory role in terms of either promoting participatory communication, or advancing the democratization of communication, or even encompassing modes of subversive action. Whether the interest of such concerns is focused on large or small-scale media, their considerations have pointed out the need of setting the very communication process beyond the realm of mass communication, acknowledging thus a wider field of its practice, where the communication process is addressed not only in representative terms ('for the people'), but in participatory terms as well ('from the people').

Brecht highlighted the democratic potential of radio broadcasting, pointing out the possibility of the two-way practice of communication. By criticizing the fact that radio was one-sided, 'a pure instrument of distribution that hands things out', Brecht evaluated its emancipatory dimension, attributing to the radio a new function. 'Radio should be converted from a distribution system to a communication system ... if it were capable not only of transmitting but of receiving, of making the listener not only hear but also speak, not of isolating him but of connecting him. This means that radio would have to give up being a purveyor and organise the listener as purveyor' (Brecht 1983, 169). From this perspective, Brecht supported the view that radio technology does not presuppose a certain form of broadcasting, but allows for its exploitation in various cultural forms. Thus, although technology was advanced enough to produce radio in various forms, it was the 'public' that had to take advantage of it. Moreover, Brecht conceptualised the exploitation of the two-way practice of radio broadcasting in pedagogic terms, through the interface between radio and art. As such, the function of radio in such a project is constituted in the realm of actuality; the listener is activated and 're-employed as a producer'. '[The technique of such a project] will be directed towards the prime task of ensuring that the public is not only taught but must also itself teach' (Ibid, 171). In this context, Brecht evaluated the full realization of participatory communication.

Benjamin's approach evaluated the liberating potential of the 'new media' (*apparatuses*) too. '[M]echanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility' (Benjamin 1968, 224). Along these lines, Benjamin introduces the idea of *the author as producer* that questions the very distinction between producer and consumer. This process of transition, which in the case of literature took a long time to be realised, applies to the 'new media' more easily because mechanical reproduction is inherent in the very technique of their production. Focusing on the paradigm of film, Benjamin pointed out firstly the detachment of the reproduced object from the domain of tradition, and then the reactivation of the object reproduced in the particular terms of each receiver's situation. In the case of the Russian cinematic practice of that period, Benjamin evaluated this changeover of the reader who gains access to authorship as follows: '[s]ome of the players whom we meet in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray *themselves* – and primarily in their own work process' (Ibid, 232; emphasis in the original).

Drawing on Benjamin's and Brecht's lines, Enzensberger pointed out the democratic potential of the new electronic media. 'For the first time in history, the media are making possible mass participation in a social and socialized productive process, the practical means of which are in the hands of the masses themselves. Such a use of them would bring the communications media, which up to now have

not deserved the name, in their own' (Enzensberger 1974, 97). Enzensberger distinguished between the *repressive use of media* – centrally controlled, with one-way flow of messages, produced by specialists for isolated individuals, and promoting passive consumption; and an *emancipatory use of media* – decentralised, linking many to many, fostering interactivity, collectively produced and actively used, promoting collective mobilization (Ibid, 113). In this regard, Enzensberger approached the consciousness industry beyond its 'bourgeois dark side', evaluating its socialist possibilities. Such a revolutionary model of the media is conceptualised here in terms of another social context, 'in which people using small-scale media prevail and large media institutions and undifferentiated content can no longer be found' (McQuail 1987, 88; quoted also in Atton 2002, 8).

Based on Enzensberger's positions, McQuail has proposed a normative type of media theory (*democratic participant*), 'in recognition of new media developments and of increasing criticism of the dominance of the main mass media by private or public monopolies' (McQuail 1994, 131). Such a proposal raises relevant issues in the contexts of both developed and developing societies. Concerning developed societies, the term democratic participant 'expresses a sense of disillusionment with established political parties and with a system of parliamentary democracy which has seemed to become detached from its grass-roots origins, to impede rather than facilitate involvement in political and social life' (McQuail 1987, 122). In this context, the democratic-participant paradigm points out the failure of the mass media to meet the needs that arise from the daily experience of citizens, to offer space to individual and minority expressions. Overall, the theory rejects both the centralism and bureaucratisation of public broadcasting ('elitist', 'paternalist') and the commercialisation and monopolization of privately owned media ('professionalized', 'monolithic') that prevent media systems from assisting 'in the long process of social improvement and democratic change'. Consequently, in the democratic-participant theory, media are ideally constituted in small-scale terms, favouring horizontal patterns of interaction, and facilitating the expression of citizens' needs. The empirical manifestations of such a model are many and varied, including the underground or alternative press, pirate radio, community cable television, samizdat publication, micro-media in rural settings, neighbourhood media, wall posters, and media for women and ethnic minorities (McQuail 1994, 132).

In terms of the developmental debate, UNESCO's forums in the 1970s addressed the issue of the constitution of alternatives to mass communication in order to balance the flow of information and communication (New World Information and Communication Order). The report of UNESCO's General Conference in 1976 in Nairobi, pointed out the need for a system of horizontal communication.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the discussion on processes of democratization of communication

and redistribution of communication power puts emphasis on the need for people and communities who had traditionally been excluded from the production and distribution of media messages to gain access in electronic media. Moreover, in the 1977 meeting in Belgrade, UNESCO's statement sketched a normative theory of alternative communication in terms of the concepts of *access*, *participation* and *self-management*. The aspect of access raised questions concerning the public service role of media, the chance for the public to 'choose varied and relevant programs and to have a means of feedback to transmit its reactions and demands to production organisations'; the issue of participation implied the 'involvement of the public in the production process and also in the planning of communication systems'; and the parameter of self-management promoted an advanced form of participation for the public to exercise 'the power of decision making within communication enterprises' and being 'fully involved in the formation of communication policies and plans' (Servaes 1999, 85; Berrigan 1979, 18-20). Furthermore, the MacBride proposal (UNESCO, 1980) concerning the 'right to communicate' constituted, according to Husband (1996, 209-210; cited in Downing 2001, 32-33), one part of a third generation of human rights entitlements in addition to the 'political-civil' and 'economic-social-cultural' ones. In an overall approach of the developmental issue Servaes addresses the necessary content and the normative components of development in terms of a *participatory communication model*. '[The participatory model] stresses the importance of the cultural identity of local communities and of democratisation and participation at all levels – international, national, local, and individual. It points to a strategy that is not merely inclusive of but largely emanates from the traditional receivers' (Servaes 1999, 88). Such a participatory model grounds developmental process at a local/community level (in its own culture, intellect, and environment) through the active participation of 'ordinary' people (the key agents), involving the 'strengthening of democratic processes and institutions, and the redistribution of power' (Ibid, 93). Moreover, this perspective questions the conceptualisation of a universal model of development, 'favour[ing] a multiplicity of approaches based on the context, the basic, felt needs, and the empowerment of the most oppressed sectors of various societies at divergent levels' (Ibid, 271).

From another point of view, highlighting the problems of the attempts to conceptualize mass communication within a distinct social setting, Hollander and Stappers point out the need for a consideration of *community communication*, which encompasses the interplay between mediated and interpersonal communication, and addresses both senders and receivers within the same social system, 'community'. The geographical locality and/or a community of interest constitute an essential context of communication since participants, both senders and receivers, share the same concerns on community issues; in this context, a 'community' realizes the reproduction and representation of its shared interests.

[C]ommunicators in community communication address their audience on the assumption of a shared relevance that community issues have for both senders and receivers because they all participate in the same community. This community, further, serves as a frame of reference for a shared interpretation of the relevance of the topics communicated within the community' (Hollander and Stappers 1992, 19-20). Moreover, this perspective of community communication, which goes beyond a linear conceptualization of the communication process as it has been constituted along with the central role of media in mass communication, evaluates the social aspects of the communication process in terms of the context, the 'community', in which 'experience' is communicated, and collectivised. Therefore, the communication process is not conceptualized here exclusively along the lines of transmission and reception, but also within a specific social setting, in relation to its own structure – the structures of relevance (both in community and individual level), and the interplay between mediated and non-mediated forms of communication. 'This implies that media use and communicative interaction are not studied as isolated activities but as an integral part of the individual's active orientation towards the physical and social environment' (Ibid, 22). In this regard, community communication is conceptualized in terms of small-scale forms of public communication implemented by various media practices within a specific social context, promoting communicative exchange and social action. Thus, the category of 'community' and its different applications have provided the ground for a further evaluation of public communication, in terms of a geographical context, of a local/social system, and along the lines of a sense of identity (Newby 1980 and Hollander 1988; cited Ibid).

In addition, the new communications technology has fostered new spaces for access and participation. Certain technological developments and their implications – one platform for different types of communication through the digitalisation of data; time-space compression; two-way, interactive communication – have provided the infrastructure for the support and encouragement of political action. 'Political parties of all sizes and ideological hues, voluntary organisations, pressure groups and other organisations in civil society are exploring computer-mediated communication as a means not only to reach potential supporters and bypass the traditional media filters, but to network with one another, sharing information and resources. For many, CMC holds the key to the enhancement of the democratic aspects of the political process and to the creation of new opportunities for citizen participation in the local and national public spheres' (Bryan, Tsagarousianou and Tambini 1998, 2). From this perspective, new forms of communication create public spaces, arenas for the free engagement of citizens in deliberation and public debate. In addition, these new forms of communication can facilitate communication which is more horizontal than vertical. Both of these aspects of

computer-mediated communication have been articulated in the rhetoric of *electronic democracy* in widespread as well as fragmented (local/community) terms. Finally, Williams's theory of *democratic communication* has been articulated both in terms of a critique of mass communication systems, and along the lines of the development of alternative forms of communication. Firstly, his critique focused on the notion of 'mass communication'. Deriving from a critique of the term 'mass' – 'there are in fact no masses: there are only ways of seeing people as masses' (Williams 1963, 289) – Williams questioned the conceptual framework of the institutionalised forms of communication. 'The usual terms suppose a central and elite group of producers who generate material consumed by others, geographically and socially remote from the originators. In that, they reproduce, not merely in their vocabulary but in the underlying theory of the place and nature of communication in society, the negative and antidemocratic associations of the term "mass" itself' (Sparks 1993, 72). Accordingly, Williams identified the problems of addressing the role of the institutions of communication itself. Moreover, Williams' theory of democratic communication takes into consideration the articulation of alternative forms of communication, the radical press as well as other cultural forms which are products of the working people themselves. These forms of communication differ from those of 'mass culture' in relation to the product itself, concerning the reflection of the 'structures of feelings' around it that are inherently different among the different classes (O'Connor 1989; cited in Sparks 1993, 72). Furthermore, the fact that Williams evaluates these alternative forms of communication in terms of promoting new kinds of relationships, and as such a new social order, is, according to Hamilton (2000, 263), 'a positive advance, in that it suggests goals of popular participation, maximum responsiveness and sensitivity to emergent ways of thinking, and maximum availability of expressions of such ways'. In addition, Williams (1980, 50-63) addresses the organization of mass media and its structural implications – *professionalization* (skills), *capitalization*, and *institutionalisation* (controls) – as the main barriers preventing wider social participation in their creation, production and dissemination. Drawing on these lines, Hamilton (cited in Atton 2002, 25) conceptualises the distinction between alternative and mass media in terms of *deprofessionalization*, *decapitalization* and *deinstitutionalization*. 'In short, they must be available to ordinary people without the necessity of professional training, without excessive capital outlay and they must take place in settings other than media institutions or similar systems' (Atton 2002, 25). Besides, Hamilton grounds the communication process at the level of experience. 'In contrast with being a synonym for "media", communication is better seen in cultural terms: as the creative making of social order. Williams emphasizes this kind of understanding in his characterization of culture as "ordinary", in the sense of being a widespread process of formulating and learning new ways of organizing experience and of finding the form or content to present it in such a way that others can understand and participate in that experience'

(Hamilton 2000, 361-362). In this context, the communication process encompasses further social processes that invariably change through it. As Williams (1976, 11; quoted also in Atton 2002, 25) sets it, '[c]ommunication begins in the struggle to learn and describe'; the other side of the same picture is that the communication process entails a learning/educational value. The learning/educational value of the communication process has been highlighted in terms of group dialogue in the dialogical/critical pedagogy of Freire (1972). Probing into communication strategies that advance democratic interaction, horizontal communication and solidarity Freire proposed a model of communication for liberation, for the empowerment of the disenfranchised. In the case of alternative communication/media practices the empowerment of those who participate in them happens, according to Atton, in tandem with reflexive practices that take place in the production process, 'establish[ing] their own alternative frames of participation, power and creative action. Participants do not simply consume reflexively, but produce reflexively in an attempt to "change the way they construct themselves, their actions and their life-worlds"' (Atton 2002, 155; citing Cox 1997).

### **Decentralised media practices**

Proceeding from theory to practice, diverse small-scale media experiments have provided the grounds for challenging various aspects of mass communication, and constituted the conveyors of various, new forms of communication/political practice. Hence, from different perspectives, small-scale media projects have been evaluated in terms of constituting agencies of resistance, of counterbalancing the unequal distribution of communication resources; along the lines of the mobilization, representation and participation of different social actors/groups; in regard to the organization (non-hierarchical, non-professional) of these projects; and, as a locus of empowerment both of the projects themselves, as narratives, and of those engaged with these projects, the agents.

### **Radical media**

The 'polemical' aspect of small-scale media projects has been prominently addressed in the work of Downing (1984; 2001) through the evaluation of a variety of media projects as resistant practices, in terms of *radical media*. Downing articulates the discourse about the radical media in terms of Gramsci's analysis of culture and power, also employing the notion of 'counter-hegemony', 'as a way to categorize attempts to challenge dominant ideological frameworks and to supplant them with a radical alternative vision' (Downing 2001, 15). From this perspective, radical media can offer a space for alternative discourses in public debate as well as a locus of oppositional power to the agency of domination. Moreover, not only do

radical media constitute counter-information institutions, which try to ‘disrupt the silence’, to ‘counter the lies’, to ‘provide the truth’, they also constitute conveyors of social change. ‘Radical media ... have a mission not only to provide facts to public denied them but to explore fresh ways of developing a questioning perspective on the hegemonic process and increasing the public’s sense of confidence in its power to engineer constructive change’ (Downing 2001, 16).

In his early work Downing conceptualises media alternatives in principle. From a point of view that claims the realization of media democracy in practice, Downing critically assesses both capitalist mass media and revolutionary socialist (Soviet) media. The revolutionary socialist media, despite its rhetoric against the monopolies of capitalist mass media, actually provide no alternative for a democratic media communication at all.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Downing argues that ‘radical media, while they may be partisan, should never become a tool of a party or intelligentsia’; moreover, he points out ‘the importance of encouraging contributions from as many interested parties as possible, in order to emphasise the “multiple realities” of social life (oppression, political cultures, economic situations)’ (Downing 1984, 17; quoted also in Atton 2002, 20). From this perspective, Downing puts emphasis on the aspect of engagement, as a collective endeavour, as well as on the organization of radical media that promotes ‘pre-figurative politics’. Both of these aspects, engagement and organization of radical media have been articulated through a discourse that has social change at its core. In this regard, examples of radical media have been drawn here in terms of oppositional politics, in different contexts, across the world.<sup>3</sup>

In his later work, Downing acknowledges that his earlier discourse about radical media had been articulated in terms of a binary scheme, between radical and mainstream media; at the same time, radical media were conceptualised in this context as the way to overcome the dominant opposition between capitalist and socialist media. Such a position ‘seriously simplified both mainstream and alternative media’ (Downing 2001, ix). Thus, Downing’s early ‘binarism’ and ‘antibinarism’ prevented him from taking into account both ‘more finely gradated positions, such as the possibility of democratizing mass media or the occasional, radical deployment of mass media’, and the very considerable variety of radical media, ‘a more ‘impure’ and hybridized version of radical media’ (Atton 2002, 21). On his updated theoretical perspective, Downing enriches the terrain of radical media by paying attention to ephemeral media forms as well by focusing, from a socialist anarchist angle, on social movements and their media practices. ‘Constructive social change must ... be built on the basis of mass activity, of self-mobilization. Effective communication within and by social movements is, therefore, a vital necessity for self-mobilization to emerge and prosper. Radical media are in no way to be dismissed as just a curious little experiment for revolutionary culture freaks’ (Downing 2001, 31). Moreover, Downing identifies

‘alternative zones for radical debate and reflection within present-day society’ in and round these movements. His study (1988) on the anti-nuclear media (press) movement in West Germany and Britain addressed the radical media in relation to the constitution of an alternative public realm.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Downing, drawing on the lines of alternative and counter public spheres, points out the role of radical media as catalysts of lateral communication enabling dialogical forums – ‘providing movements with opportunity to talk through their internal divisions and so to enrich and strengthen themselves’ (Downing 2001, 34). In addition, he expands the spectrum of radical media along the lines of alternative communication that encompasses fluid communication practices and instances employed by social movements. Through the prism of the relationship between social movements and radical media – ‘social movements ... are the life blood of these media, and they are the movements’ oxygen’ (Ibid, 390) – Downing weaves a tapestry of radical alternative media.<sup>5</sup> Hence, Downing’s later approach is articulated in a ‘dialectic’ scheme encompassing a wider range of media practices in place of alternative, or counter, public spheres. However, it is exclusively concerned with the formation of political consciousness. As a result, radical alternative media are conceptualised here, as agents of developmental power, in terms of the constitution of a ‘popular oppositional culture’. For this reason Downing draws exclusively on the social movements.

### **Participatory media**

Within the framework of the developmental debate and the search for the ‘new communication order’, new approaches highlighted social/grassroots movements and their alternative media as conveyors of the process of the democratization of communication. However, the process of the democratization of communication has been mainly addressed in terms of counterbalancing the trend toward transnational communication. The potential of these alternative media to establish their own communication and information systems on the basis of a bottom-up horizontal mode of communication was conceived as the means to overcome the inequalities in communication power that mass media produce along the lines of the division between North and South. Besides, it is the actual practice of these projects that could promote any changes. According to Sparks and Roach (1990, 280; quoted in Rodriguez 2001, 15), ‘[i]t is not in the corridors of power that the new order will be forged but in the little experiments in which workers and peasants attempt to find new ways of communicating their ideas and their experiences to each other’. As a result, alternative media were conceived as the terrain for a new communication order to emerge. Moreover, alternative media have been conceptualized as a potential locus of resistance to cultural imperialism. Although respective concerns have been predominantly articulated in the context of the developing world and in relation to the function of Trans-national

Communication Corporations (TNCCs), issues concerning the trans-national expansion of capitalism have been raised in the context of alternative media in the developed world as well. Here, the aspects that alternative media in the West address concern the defence of a quality of life; 'the arms race, nuclear war, state control of everyday life, and the creative use of free time, defined "a common platform on which people from many social groups ask[ed] whether life could not be lived differently, beyond the order defined by the market and the laws of cost and benefit"' (Rodriguez 2001, 10; quoting Reyes Matta 1986, 196).

In this context, a variety of participatory communication projects have been evaluated in terms of the 'defence of culture' and the 'reevaluation of cultural identity'. A wide range of such media practices have been developed across different contexts. From the perspective of the potential for difference, diversity and radical innovation in world television, Dowmunt highlights a variety of *channels of resistance* to the powerful external pressures that threaten people's cultures. Accordingly, Dowmunt (1993) evaluates the 'thirst for cultural self-expression' of indigenous people/groups alongside their engagement with video and television in a variety of ways, across both the reception and production process: in the first place, various modes of resistance emanate from socially and culturally pertinent meanings and pleasures made through reception process; moreover, the participation of people in the production process entitles them to the expression of their own values and the making of their own image. In this context, 'peoples are using video and television as tools with which to assert themselves and fight back' (Ibid, 8). In addition, Servaes evaluates *participatory communication projects* in terms of contributing to the development of the communities they serve in a progressive manner. From this perspective, a strategy that facilitates the participation of the community in the organization of communication projects promotes a participatory type of communication which 'is not limited to sending messages to the public; it is an agent for social change, culture development and democratisation' (Servaes 1999, 260).<sup>6</sup> Hence, Servaes addresses here participatory communication projects in terms of the specific context they are implemented into, along the lines of his overall concern for a 'multiplicity' development paradigm; '[t]here is no universal model for development. Each society must develop its own strategy' (Ibid, 271). Accordingly, by identifying 'ordinary' people as the key agents of change, Servaes evaluates participatory media as a locus for the development and empowerment of the dominated groups of society in terms of a two-way communication process that provides a 'diagnosis of the actual situation in the region'. Overall, Servaes points out the self-evaluative nature of participatory projects, where people become conscious of their own situation and its possibilities for change.

Overall, electronic alternative communication projects have a central place as conveyors of participatory communication due to the communal character of their

pertinent reception and production processes. In this context, participatory media have been evaluated as agents of developmental power, in terms of social and cultural empowerment. Yet, these aspects have been mostly addressed along the lines of the binary domination-subordination scheme; according to Servaes (1999, 258), '[the] culture process may be a "long revolution" – the slow process of building counter-hegemony to the dominant political culture'.

### **Community media**

There are different terms for what is here collectively referred as 'community media' that are 'not only due to linguistic differences, but are also based on ideological and conceptual distinctions' (Prehn 1992, 256). Moreover, community media distinguish themselves from the state and commercial ones, which has as a result the implementation of diverse relevant practices. The implementation of community media promoted in practice the realization of the very principles of diversity and pluralism, generating a call for more access and more participation. 'In both cases there was a rejection of top-down, uniformistic system of mass communication, be it mono-centrally originated as in Western Europe, or poly-centrally structured as in the United States' (Ibid; citing Jakubowicz 1988).

In North America, 'community media' originated in the establishment of community radio and television stations as non-commercial, democratic organizations aiming at community involvement. More specifically, Barlow (1988, 83-84) highlights two sources of community radio's origins – the opposition to the repressive climate of the Cold War; and, the emergence of ethnic-orientated stations. The pirate/'free' radio stations that grassroots movements, students and minority groups run, and then the development of regional/local/neighbourhood radio and television stations, have also provided the context for the emergence of community media in the European territory. The ideals of 'access' and 'participation' provided the grounds either for advancing public service broadcasting system, or for questioning its exclusionary centralised character pointing out the failure of performing its social, public service role. Moreover, the technical possibilities of broadcasting in localities enabled the local context to become the battlefield of rejecting the top-down, uniformistic system of mass communication. Through this prism, community media have advanced the principle of public communication within the small-scale form of a neighbourhood, a village, a town, as well as within the realm of a community of interest.<sup>7</sup> Thus, public service broadcasting has constituted, either directly in favour of its local application, or indirectly against its monopolization by the state, another source of the implementation of community media. The diversification of public radio was also galvanised by the creation of regional stations with some degree of autonomy, and the application of new technologies. 'This led to the

emergence of individual local radio stations, particularly those licensed to universities and local education authorities, many of them cablecast' (Dunaway 1998, 92; citing Gray and Lewis 1992, 161). Furthermore, community media have developed in a local/regional context along the lines of cultural differences. Moragas Spa and Corominas expound on the case of local media in Catalonia, a part of Spain with a strong regional identity; these community experiments promote the Catalan culture, 'operating as a form of public service' (Moragas Spa and Corominas 1992, 195).<sup>8</sup> In addition, community media have been constituted generally as a 'communication tool for special interest groups'. Stappers, Olderan and de Wit (1992, 96) sketch such a type of community station; '[t]here are usually strong ties with minority groups such as the elderly, the unemployed and ethnic groups. This type of local broadcasting places much value on encouraging programming contributions from diverse groups in the community'. As a result, the specialisation of small-scale media in the context of 'community media' corresponds to a wide conception of the term 'community', including local/regional, minority/ethnic, and more specific, grounded on diverse interests, manifestations of it. In any case, as Lewis and Booth (1989, 187, 188) put it, community media, community radio in their case, 'can [not] create communities where none exist'; 'community media reflect common interests'.

Electronic initiatives figure prominently within the context of community media. Community radio, due to the low cost of operation and its worldwide pervasiveness, has constituted the main conveyor of 'community' communication. Radio has been evaluated as the most important vehicle for promoting the ideal of democratic communication in this regard. As Hartley (2000, 153) puts it, 'radio continues to be used in a variety of community building developmental situations, providing remote, marginal and disenfranchised communities with low-cost, low-tech public space'. Concerning community television projects, the high cost of the operation of television channels makes their implementation in a local/community context highly problematic; '[l]ocal community orientated television, however, has remained in embryonic form partially because the medium is relatively expensive and because audiences generally prefer entertainment programming of high technical quality' (Prehn 1992, 254; citing Videotrame 1990). Nonetheless, diverse experiments on community television have taken place – *community television* that involves community members in the production of an overall programming package (Lewis 1976); *citizen television*, as a local dimension to public service broadcasting (Rushton 1993); *local television*, which involves strong cultural and social organizations and supports decentralizing practices in linguistic, demographic and cultural terms (Moragas Spa and Corominas 1992); and *public access television* that creates a discourse arena for diverse grassroots citizens groups (Stein 1998). On the other hand, press initiatives have been less often evaluated in terms of community/local communication because of the non-interactive nature of the medium.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, most of the small-scale press initiatives have been

addressed within a different theoretical context (*alternative media*, as it is sketched below) in relation to various aspects of the production process.

In general, community media have been mainly regarded as forms of public communication, in terms of the diverse 'communities' they serve, challenging potentially the very structure of mass communication. As a result, most approaches on community media have put emphasis on the institutional and structural implications of their implementation for the democratisation of communication, along the lines of the different contexts that diverse communities set. However, the context in which this process takes place – 'communities of interest' – provides the grounds 'for understanding the development of collective experience and of the communication process within a special social context' (Hollander and Stappers 1992, 21-22). This dimension of the term 'community', which incorporates the transformation of individual experience into public collective experience through the interplay between mediated and non-mediated forms of communication, has been misrepresented by the research of community media in favour of the prospective changing of the communication structures. However, up to date overall approaches on 'community media' evaluate a broader terrain for community media research, including aspects concerning the engagement of people in them (Jankowski 2002a; 2000b; 2003).

### **New media projects**

From another perspective rooted in the potential of the new technologies, the 'rejuvenation of local democracy' has been promoted in place of electronic democratic projects (in both top-down and bottom-up approaches). These projects 'hold a related assumption: that by altering the form of communication the content can be changed, and more participation encouraged' (Bryan, Tsagarousianou and Tambini 1998, 5). In terms of these electronically facilitated public spaces, citizens can freely engage in deliberation and public debate. As a result, their preferences and interests can be more directly represented. New media initiatives have been constituted as means of enhancing political participation making it possible for citizens to participate directly in the political process – facilitating access to information, deliberation, and debate, voting' – overcoming in this way the barriers of representative democracy. Such experiments share a number of common characteristics; 'they are perceived by the social actors initiating or participating in them as a means of reviving and reinvigorating democratic politics ...; they have been local or regional in their character, being related to more or less territorially urban and suburban communities; they have been based on broadly similar technological infrastructures' (Tsagarousianou 1998a, 168). A number of experiments in *electronic democracy* have been implemented (in the mid-1980s in USA, in early-1990s in Europe) promoting the use of

information and communications technology in order to improve initially the services of local authorities to citizens, and further, to facilitate citizens' participation in public affairs (Docter and Dutton 1998). These civic projects encompass various modes of citizens' engagement, related to the service provision of the projects as well as to citizens' participation in them. Accordingly, the character of the projects (local government-led – civil society-led) defines their objectives and aims. Thus, there are public information provision-centred projects that provide information for local concerns (Schmidtke 1998); projects that combine to a greater or lesser extent, service provision and citizen's deliberation (Tsagarousianou 1998b; Bryan 1998); some of them having also the support of grassroots groups (Tambini 1998, Francissen and Brants 1998). Friedland, also elaborates on a broad range of *citizen-and community-based information networks*, highlighting 'advocacy', 'community', 'government and electronic development networks', and 'electronic public journalism' initiatives, pointing out the distinct enabling relationship that new technologies have to the building of new citizenship capacities on the other (Friedland 1996, 206).

Moreover, in the terms of this new kind of publicness, communities are treated as 'social capital networks, rather than strictly as discourse communities'; '[s]ocial capital describes the durable networks that form social resources through which individuals and groups strive for mutual recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 19). As such, social capital is the necessary infrastructure of civic and community life that generates 'norms of reciprocity and civic engagement' (Friedland 1996, 189). Accordingly, citizens' participation in civic and political life through new media practices has been highlighted in both collective and individual terms, in the context of on-line communities (Dahlberg 2001) and along *e-zine* culture (Atton 2002) correspondingly. In addition, new media practices have been evaluated in relation to the building of a global civil society (Curran 2003), as well as in terms of providing the organizational software of a kind of media activism (Downing 2003b), constituting in general a new terrain for 'collective' political action (Rheingold 1995; Bennett 2003).

According to Tsagarousianou (1998a, 169, 176-177), there are different theoretical frameworks for evaluating electronic democracy, the 'plebiscitary' model and the 'deliberative' one, that advance either direct or representative modes of the democratic process correspondingly; however, aspects of both these models can be found in the implementation of electronic projects concerning citizen's engagement in them. A number of questions have been raised concerning the potential of the new media to cement the principle of democracy itself. On the one hand, the issues of access to hardware and software raise the problems of non-universal access and the growing disparity between information 'haves' and 'have-nots'. On the other hand, the opportunity for deliberation that new media convey, which is grounded in their interactive nature and in the time – space compression,

is questionable in terms of the nature/character of engagement. Despite their limits in emancipatory terms, new media projects encompass various, diverse instances of citizens' representation and participation in civic and political life, as they are sketched below in terms of a non-essentialist understanding of alternative media practices.

### **'Alternative' media**

The term 'alternative media' is the most controversial concerning its definition in bibliography because of its nature to apply to various modes of contestation of mainstream practices. Different approaches on alternative media have highlighted diverse issues, putting emphasis on instances of media operation – creation, production, distribution – as well as on the process of the communication practice itself and its manifestations of empowerment, in symbolic (Couldry 1999; 2001a; 2001b), and reflexive terms (Atton 2001; 2002).

On the one hand, alternative media have been evaluated in terms of incorporating decentralised, non-mainstream, non-commercial practices in their operation. From this perspective, it is the employment of such practices pertaining to the organisation, production and dissemination of these media projects that attributes to them the very term 'alternative'. The model of the left press figures prominently here. The concern of the left press with pre-figurative forms of organisation has promoted collective models of working, a strategy that is in accordance with the political commitment of such projects. Moreover, the operation of the left press has been based on anti-commercial practices.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, diverse grassroots press projects run by various alliances and pressure groups in the 1990s have provided examples of employing alternative methods of production (reproduction) and distribution. Atton elaborates on two strategies of *distributive use* – 'anti-copyright'/'open copyright', and 'open distribution' – developed by the grassroots press. '[These strategies] are concerned with the deliberate decentralization and relinquishment of control of the processes of reproduction and distribution of alternative publications by the original publishers' (Atton 2002, 42). From this perspective, the alternative press does not simply constitute an economic rival to its mainstream counterpart, but it 'actively rejects the economic conditions of the mainstream, even to the extent of developing innovative forms of distribution' (Ibid, 50). It is actually the way these pre-figurative projects address their practice, in terms of opposing the dominant relations of production that values alternative media as such. Thus, this approach addresses alternative media practices beyond their ideological presumptions, in terms of social and political action as well. Moreover, these projects are interrelated with the alternative public sphere(s) in which they are implemented. 'The relationship is mutual and synergetic; the alternative public sphere provides opportunities and outlets for the production and

consumption of the alternative press, at the same time as the press itself provides material that sustains the sphere's function as a place for the formulation, discussion and debate of radical and dissenting ideas' (Ibid).

In this context of mutual relationships between alternative media and alternative culture/subcultures, diverse cultural forms of communication – including artistic and literary media, as well as media practices such as *zines* and hybrid forms of electronic communication – have sprung up. Probing into the *zine culture* (Duncombe 1997), the 'do-it-yourself' model of alternative media production, in both printed (*zines*) and electronic (*e-zines*) versions, Atton highlights the transformation of social relations along with the transformation of the communication process itself. Firstly, the separate roles that characterize mass media culture become one in *zine* culture. 'In this model, roles and responsibilities are no longer discrete; there is much overlap and, with that overlap, the transformation of notions such as professionalism, competence and expertise' (Atton 2001, 22). Moreover, the production of *zine*-like communication questions the very elitist division between cultural activity and everyday life, entitling a wide range of social actors in the process (Atton 2002, 77-78). In addition, the deployment of information and communication technologies within the context of new social movements promotes the very principles of activism – sociality, mobilization, and direct political action (Ibid, 133). Finally, along the lines of the practices and processes that alternative media projects employ, Atton points out the educational value of engaging in them, as it is gained through action. '[E]ducation can also come from the involvement in the production and organization of the media. Education in the alternative media leads to self-reflexivity ... Experimentation and creativity with alternative possibilities of "being" and "doing" will form the heart of such activity; autonomy and the absence of unbalanced power relations can develop a "reflexive habitus" (Cox 1997) that can connect the self with life-world' (Atton 2002, 154). On the whole, although Atton addresses the practice of alternative media in terms of process as well as in relation to their socio-cultural context, his theorization upon the characteristics and values of alternative media is principally articulated in terms of 'providing empowering narratives of resistance for counter-publics'.

From another perspective, Couldry prioritizes the *mediation* process rather than the media themselves, studying 'media as a broader process which cut across the social terrain, without necessarily passing through the neat circuit of "producer-text-reader"' (Couldry 2001b, 4). In this framework, Couldry evaluates alternative media practices in a broader context, that of contesting the dominant conditions of media power, its symbolic boundaries and hierarchies. It is the concentration of symbolic power – 'the power of constructing reality' in Bourdieu's (1991, quoted Ibid, 1) words – in the media institutions of contemporary mediated societies that alternative media practices contest, declaring the right of their agents 'to share in

society's resources for representing itself' (Ibid, 2). Through this prism Couldry also takes into account practices of contesting media power which do not necessarily involve media production resources; rather they are activities that are articulated on the very limits of mediation process, within the frame of mainstream media outputs, challenging the operations of media power, as well as, in relation to the 'media frame', contesting its very constitution. Along these lines, Couldry points out the contestation of media power by the disenfranchised in terms of registering disruptively their 'presence', thus registering the inequalities of media power (Couldry 2001a), and disrupting the common sense separation between 'ordinary people' and events in mediated public space (Couldry 1999). Thus, by tracing alternative practices along the mediation process Couldry evaluates a wider field of disruption of symbolic power in terms of the registration of the 'vastness of power differentials'.

The widening of the spectrum of alternative media in terms of encompassing instances of empowerment in reflexive as well as in symbolic terms has shifted the interest to the 'agents' of these practices, and the way social actors are engaged with and in these practices. From this perspective, and drawing on the field of reception, Downing (2003a, 621) points out that '[i]t is a paradox, however, that so little attention has been dedicated to the user dimension, given the fact that alternative media activists represent in a sense the most active segment of the so-called 'active audience''. Downing sheds light on this aspect of alternative media practices as well, evaluating it along the lines of mutual relationship between alternative media and social movements. In this context, Downing employs the term 'media users' in order to point out the active nature of alternative-media reception (Ibid, 642). In general, such an approach highlights another dimension of alternative media practices, the 'blurring of producers and audiences' in them (Atton and Couldry 2003, 583), advancing and enriching the field of alternative media.

From a more inclusive approach, which takes into account instances of both the production and reception process, Rodriguez evaluates alternative media practices, *citizens' media* in her own words, in terms of the 'lived experience' of those involved in these practices (Rodriguez 2001). Thus, Rodriguez highlights another dimension of alternative media practices that has been absent from several theoretical approaches, which in the case of communication studies are trapped in traditional concepts of oppositional politics (in terms of subversive action), and in the case of cultural studies have focused exclusively in people's interaction with the media texts of dominant media neglecting the media texts of ordinary citizens (Ibid, 4). As a result, Rodriguez approaches diverse alternative media practices in terms of the way their agents, citizens' groups and grassroots organizations, engage in/with them; they do it in a way that registers their 'difference'. From this perspective,

Rodriguez identifies the heterogeneity of alternative media experiments itself, shedding light on different aspects of their 'lived experience'. Different cases of alternative media projects around the world that have been addressed above in various and diverse contexts (social, cultural, political and historical) – participatory, community/local/minority, alternative media – are reviewed here in terms of citizens' media, out of an essentialist context. 'Citizens' media result from a complex interaction between people's attempts to democratize the mediascape and their contextual circumstances. Therefore, as each one of these interactions takes a unique profile, citizens' media exist in a polymorphic ensemble which rejects tight definition. This explains why it is possible to talk about citizens' media when referring to [very diverse] communication experiences' (Rodriguez 2001, 164). By probing into diverse case studies of citizens' media in particular, Rodriguez celebrates the heterogeneity of the social actors and the diversity of forms that citizens' media take, and highlights the 'subtle processes of fracture' that citizens' media practices activate in the 'social, cultural and power spheres of everyday life'. From this perspective, Rodriguez evaluates citizens' media as significant sites for the enactment of citizenship; where the social subjects negotiate and renegotiate social definitions, their identities, cultures and lifestyles, on the personal as well as on the collective level. 'Citizens have to enact their citizenship on a day-to-day basis, through their participation in everyday political practices' (Ibid, 19). Such a dynamic and liberated framework of understanding citizenship encompasses the fluidity and complexity of alternative media practices as social, political and cultural phenomena that challenge the very understanding of the notion of the 'political'.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the differences in the focus and the term used by approaches on alternative media practices (Rodriguez 2001; Couldry 2001b; Atton 2002; Downing 2003a), 'few involved in this field would disagree with Clemencia Rodriguez's recent argument that at stake in the whole range of alternative media practice is the issue of *citizenship* in some sense' (Atton and Couldry 2003, 580; emphasis in the original). From this perspective, such approaches give priority to the 'lived experience' of alternative media, in relation to the understanding and experience of their practice by their social actors, agents themselves. Alternative media are understood here in terms of citizens' involvement in their practice and the appropriation of communication means within their own socio-cultural environment. Not only do such practices provide the space for the expression of citizenship but they also constitute agents for the enactment of citizenship of those engaged in them. Rephrasing Atton (2002, 6), 'these media are central to experience because they are media that inform, reflect, express experience, our experience, on a daily basis – if not more than the mass media, then at least in a

significant different manner, in that for those involved in their practice, the very process of such projects becomes part of daily life, of quotidian experience’.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> ‘In the past, the role of communication in human society was seen essentially as to inform and influence people. It is now being proposed that communication should be understood as a process of social interaction through a balanced exchange of information and experience ... This shift in perception implies the predominance of dialogue over the monologue. The aim is to achieve a system of horizontal communication based upon an equitable distribution of resources and facilities enabling all persons to send as well as to receive messages’ (Prehn 1992, 258).

<sup>2</sup> The realisation of any prospect of democratic communication is undermined here in practice by their hierarchical, authoritarian and bureaucratic organisation; which is the result of their organic commitment to the party and the institutions of the state.

<sup>3</sup> In the United States, radical media were the conveyors of a progressive opposition to the repressive political climate of the Cold War era. ‘A small number of leftists caught up in the turmoil of the times began to look at radio as a valuable weapon in their struggle to combat the pro-war, anticommunist hysteria sweeping the nation’ (Barlow 1988, 85). In the European context, radical media were part of political movements whose social framework was featured by the experience of fascism and national internal conflicts; radical media played a conspicuous role in national politics here (Downing 1984, 161, 215). In Eastern Europe radical media (publications) organised also new public spaces during periods of revolt against soviet-style socialism. ‘[C]ollectively, over time, these media were instrumental in helping to bring about significant political change in one of the most entrenched empires of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ... they operated in favour of justice and cultural enhancement in the teeth of a lying rhetoric of socialist progress’ (Downing 2001, 383). In the case also of former USSR, according to Manaev (1993) the role of alternative press publications, the most developed and influential part of the alternative media (a direct successor of samizdat), was important; it ‘united groups of like-minded persons characterized by a common rejection of the values and principles of totalitarianism’ (Ibid, 75).

<sup>4</sup> The movement organisations and the flood of antinuclear books, pamphlets, magazines, and flyers that circulated that time nourished an oppositional political culture. ‘[T]his nourishment was not just a function of more widely circulating counter-information, but equally or even more so because of the experience of exchange inside a flourishing alternative public realm’ (Downing 1988, 179).

<sup>5</sup> A variety of communication practices are included here: public speech, jokes, dance, and songs; graffiti and dress; popular theatre, performance art, and culture-

jamming; print media; woodcuts, prints, flyers, posters, photomontages, murals; radio; film and video; and, the Internet.

<sup>6</sup> Drawing on the Latin America popular radio movement Servaes points out three phases that it has passed through: radio as a medium to support education of the population; radio as a propaganda medium against the military dictatorships; and radio as a communication medium. In the case of radio as communication medium, '[r]adio is part of the communication process as a whole, that is, radio is there for the people and made by the people' (Servaes 1999, 267). Diverse approaches on the Latin America movement of alternative media practices have pointed out different aspects of them. Velasquez, surveying the significant contribution of miners' radio and peasant radio to Bolivian social and political life, points out that 'alternative radio is, and will be for a long time to come, the only means of communication that performs an integrating and socializing function, offering a glimpse of equality for, and participation by the popular sectors in the political life of the country' (Velasquez 1993, 95). In contrast, Huesca, adopting a procedural view of participatory communication in his study of Bolivian tin miners' radio, criticizes researchers who desperately search for theories of practice helpful to the aims of participatory media and ignore the communicative procedures by which participation is implemented in everyday life (Huesca, 1995). By approaching alternative communication from the perspective of daily practice, Huesca points to the paradoxes and limits of participation. 'If procedures are left to chance, participation will inevitably reflect relations of power in societies, neighbourhoods, and households. But if communication follows a design guided by democratic principles, responsive procedures can develop to identify and amend inequalities' (Ibid, 116).

<sup>7</sup> Kleinsteuber and Sonnenberg (1990: 97) sketch an overall map of community radio stations, 'non commercial local' radio in their own words, in the European context, highlighting their diverse applications. On the one hand, the 'free radio' model (initially in Italy and France) consists of radio stations based on protest against a public monopoly'; on the other hand, the 'naerradio model' of the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway) is the result of a revolution from above where radio stations were established in coexistence with a public monopoly. Moreover, Kleinsteuber and Sonnenberg acknowledge the existence of more complex radio structures outside the binary scheme of commercial/public versus non-commercial local radio (the cases of Netherlands, Great Britain, Switzerland and Finland) (Ibid, 98-99).

<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, Dowmunt highlights the film and video workshop movement in the UK that 'received its impetus in part from the regional (or national) aspirations of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the North East, and from the demands of black film and video makers' (Dowmunt, 1993, 8). Tsagarousianou (1999; 2002), drawing on ethnic minority communities in Britain, evaluates also ethnic community media as distinct from other local, regional or community media since they 'identify their audience in minority communities

whose identities are not rooted in well bound localities' (Tsagarousianou 1999, 57; citing Hall 1992). Tsagarousianou points out the challenges of a dynamic notion of community, which is evident through these initiatives – 'community that comprises members of different generations with different expectations, needs and tastes not necessarily linked through language.[sic] and community whose cultural hybridity requires recognition' (Tsagarousianou 1999, 66).

<sup>9</sup> Highlighting alternative community newspapers that emerged in the early 1970s throughout Britain, Atton points out their attempt to introduce a different kind of newspaper, different than the mainstream one, being produced voluntarily for specific communities of interest. These alternative community newspapers 'sought to be free from commercial considerations provid[ing] "ordinary people" with news and information that was directly useful to them in their daily lives' (Atton 2002, 17).

<sup>10</sup> Competing approaches on the function of alternative press along these lines have been articulated here. According to Comedia group's assessment the a priori rejection of mainstream economic and organizational techniques by alternative press has been the main reason for its underdevelopment (Comedia, 1984). From this point of view, Comedia group suggested that alternative press had to come to terms with issues of commercial necessity – 'the only other option either collapse or an existence so marginal as to be irrelevant' (Ibid, 96). On the other hand, the commercial strategy that Comedia proposes for alternative press – to employ capitalist skills as marketing and promotion – has, as Khiabany points out, failed miserably; working, socialist, left newspapers (the case of the monthly *Red Pepper*) that followed the traditional version of the alternative to the capitalist press have provided a more consistent 'alternative', surviving longer and attracting more readers than did the left press under a broad professional and commercial strategy (Khiabany 2000, 462).

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