PART II

GLOBAL CORPORATIONS, LOCAL ALTERNATIVES
CHAPTER 2

Corporate Media, Global Capitalism

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When one considers media, the role they play in society, and how they affect our economy, culture and polity, there are several approaches one may take. In the United States the dominant approach for much of the past few decades has been ‘mainstream’ and quantitative. By mainstream, I mean that the research accepted the existing media system (and social structure) as a given and unalterable (and, in effect, highly desirable); research then tended to emphasise measuring how the media system affected personal behaviour. More recently, in the United States and worldwide, there has been a surge in cultural studies approaches to media. This approach tends not to be ‘mainstream’, and it eschews quantitative methodologies. But the work has a tendency to examine texts and audience reception over production, and rarely places the entire media experience in a broader context. Like mainstream quantitative research, cultural studies is well suited for some sorts of questions, but poorly suited for others.

It is the ‘big’ questions about media and society that the field of the political economy of communication is particularly and uniquely suited to address. Political economy of communication entails two main features. First, it is concerned with the relationship of media systems to the broader social and power relations of society. Nowadays that means possibly the question: what is the relationship of media to capitalism and the global corporate economy? Political economy immediately and always asks the question that is all but forgotten in mainstream quantitative research: what role do the media play in reinforcing and/or undermining political and economic inequality? To what extent are media a democratic force? Cultural studies has a distinct interest in these questions as well.

The second feature of political economy is what makes it distinct from cultural studies. Political economy of communication specifically examines the structure of media industries – questions of ownership, market structure and commercial support – and how these affect media content, performance and impact. The crucial role of the profit motive in shaping media performance must be at the centre of any study of media that attempts to answer the fundamental questions that begin with ‘why’. Those approaches to media that ignore this basic structural fact tend to drift off course and lose sight of the big picture. Political economy of communication cannot answer every question in media studies by a long shot, but it can provide a necessary context to promote better answers for almost all of them, and it is ideally suited to tackle others. Political
economy, for example, is particularly concerned with how these structures of corporate control, markets and advertising set limits on what can be done by media workers, be they journalists or those toiling in the entertainment realm.

Above all, and far more than any other branch of communication research, political economy of communication is explicitly critical. Critical does not necessarily mean that it is ‘radical’ or ‘left-wing’: indeed, one may be a card-carrying conservative and yet employ political economy of communication. Political economy regards the state sceptically and is directly concerned with issues of censorship. What ‘critical’ means is that the very nature of the communication system as a whole – including the role of the government – is never taken as a ‘given’, as something natural and therefore off-limits to hard examination. The starting point for political economy of communication is the recognition that all media systems are the direct and indirect result of explicit public policies. Powerful interests invariably attempt to make the media system appear as if it is ‘natural’ and therefore necessary, but that is never the case. For that reason, the political economy of communication takes particular interest in examining the nature of political debates over media and communication policies. Much of this research is historical in nature.

So this is the intellectual pedigree for this chapter (and for this book). In what follows I will briefly lay out the contours of the global media system, how it developed, its relationship to global capitalism, and its implications for democracy. As you will see, political economy of communication is no mere academic exercise. Its orientation is to understand the world so as to change it; to promote or protect those values we deem most important.

The Media System Goes Global

In the past, media systems were primarily national; but recently, a global commercial media market has emerged. To grasp media today and in the future, one must start by understanding the global system, and then factor in differences at the national and local levels. ‘What you are seeing’, says Christopher Dixon, media analyst for the investment firm PaineWebber, ‘is the creation of a global oligopoly. It happened to the oil and automotive industries earlier this century; now it is happening to the entertainment industry’.

This global oligopoly has two distinct but related facets. First, it means the dominant companies – roughly one-half US-based, but all with significant US, operations – are moving across the planet at breakneck speed. The point is to capitalise on the potential for growth abroad and not get outflanked by competitors, since the US market is well developed and only permits incremental expansion. As Viacom CEO Sumner Redstone has put it, ‘Companies are focusing on those markets promising the best return, which means overseas.’ Frank Biondi, former chairman of Vivendi’s Universal Studios, asserts that ‘99 per cent of the success of these companies long-term is going to be successful execution offshore.’
The dominant media firms increasingly view themselves as global entities. Bertelsmann CEO Thomas Middelhoff bristled when, in 1998, some said it was improper for a German firm to control 15 per cent of both the US book publishing and music markets. ‘We’re not foreign. We’re international’, Middelhoff proclaimed. ‘I’m an American with a German passport.’ In 2000 Middelhoff proclaimed that Bertelsmann was no longer a German company: ‘We are really the most global media company.’ Likewise, AOL-Time Warner’s Gerald Levin stated, ‘We do not want to be viewed as an American company. We think globally’ (Schechter 2000). Second, convergence and consolidation are the order of the day. Specific media industries are becoming more and more concentrated, and the dominant players in each media industry increasingly are subsidiaries of huge global media conglomerates. As one small example demonstrates, the US market for educational publishing is now controlled by four firms, whereas it had two dozen viable players as recently as 1980 (‘Scardino’s way’, The Economist, 2000).

The level of mergers and acquisitions is breath-taking. In the first half of 2000, the number of merger deals in global media, Internet, and telecommunications totalled US$300 billion – triple the figure for the first six months of 1999, and exponentially higher than the figure from ten years earlier (Mermigas 2000a). The logic guiding media firms in all of this is clear: get very big very quickly, or get swallowed up by someone else. This is similar to trends taking place in many other industries. ‘There will be less than a handful of end-game winners’, the CEO of Chase Manhattan announced in September 2000. ‘We want to be an end-game winner’ (‘Talk Show’ 2000.) But in few industries has the level of concentration been as stunning as in media. In short order, the global media market has come to be dominated by nine transnational corporations: General Electric (owner of NBC), Liberty Media, Disney, AOL-Time Warner, Sony, News Corporation, Viacom, Vivendi, and Bertelsmann. None of these companies existed in their present form as recently as fifteen years ago; today nearly all of them will rank among the largest 200 non-financial firms in the world for 2000 (‘The World’s 100 Largest Public Companies’ 2000). Of the nine, only five are truly US firms, though all of them have core operations there. Between them, these nine companies own: the major US film studios; the US television networks; 80–85 per cent of the global music market; the majority of satellite broadcasting worldwide; all or part of a majority of cable broadcasting systems; a significant percentage of book publishing and commercial magazine publishing; all or part of most of the commercial cable TV channels in the US and world-wide; a significant portion of European terrestrial television; and on and on and on.

By nearly all accounts, the level of concentration is only going to increase in the future. ‘I’m a great believer that we are going to a world of vertically integrated companies where only the big survive’, said Gordon Crawford, an executive of Capital Research & Management, a mutual fund that is among the largest shareholders in many of the nine firms listed above (Bianco 2000). For firms to survive, Business Week observes, speed is of the essence. ‘Time is short’ (ibid.). ‘In a world moving to five, six, seven media companies, you don’t want to be in a position where you have to count on others’, Peter Chernin, the president of News Corporation states:
You need to have enough marketplace dominance that people are forced to deal with you. There are great arguments about whether content is king or distribution is king. At the end of the day, scale is king. If you can spread your costs over a large base, you can outbid your competitors for programming and other assets you want to buy. (Hansell 2000)

By 2000, massive cross-border deals – like Pearson merging its TV operations with CLT and Bertelsmann, or Vivendi purchasing Universal – were increasing in prominence (Mermigas 2000b).

Chernin’s firm, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, may be the most aggressive global trailblazer, although cases could be made for Sony, Bertelsmann or AOL-Time Warner. Murdoch spun off Sky Global Networks in 2000, consolidating his satellite TV services that run from Asia to Europe to Latin America (Goldsmith and Dawtrey 2000). His Star TV dominates in Asia with thirty channels in seven languages (Jacob 2000). News Corp.’s TV service for China, Phoenix TV, in which it has a 45 per cent stake, now reaches 45 million homes there and has enjoyed an 80 per cent increase in advertising revenues in the past year (Groves 2000). And this barely begins to describe News Corp.’s entire portfolio of assets: Twentieth Century Fox films, Fox TV network, HarperCollins publishers, TV stations, cable TV channels, magazines, over 130 newspapers, and professional sport teams.

Why has this taken place? The conventional explanation is technology or, in other words, radical improvements in communications technology that make global media empires feasible and lucrative in a manner unthinkable in the past. This is similar to the technological explanation for globalisation writ large. However, this is only a partial explanation, at best. The real force has been a shift to neoliberalism, which means the relaxation or elimination of barriers to commercial exploitation of media, and concentrated media ownership. There is nothing inherent in the technology that required neoliberalism; new digital communications could have been used, for example, simply to enhance public service media, had a society elected to do so. With neoliberal values, however, television, which had been a non-commercial preserve in many nations, suddenly became subject to transnational commercial development and was thrust into the centre of the emerging global media system.

Once the national deregulation of media took place in major nations like the United States and Britain, it was followed by transnational measures like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), all intent on establishing regional and global marketplaces. This has laid the foundation for the creation of the global media system, dominated by the aforementioned conglomerates. Now in place, the system has its own logic. Firms must become larger and diversified to reduce risk and enhance profit-making opportunities, and they must straddle the globe so as never to be outflanked by competitors. The upside is high; this is a market that some anticipate will have trillions of dollars in annual revenues within a decade. If that is the case, those companies that sit atop the field will almost certainly rank among the two or three dozen largest in the world.

The development of the global media system has not been unopposed in elite policy-making forums. While media conglomerates press for policies to facilitate
their domination of markets throughout the world, strong traditions of protection for domestic media and cultural industries persist. Nations ranging from Norway, Denmark and Spain to Mexico, South Africa and South Korea keep their small domestic film production industries alive with government subsidies. In the summer of 1998 culture ministers from twenty nations, including Brazil, Mexico, Sweden, Italy and Ivory Coast, met in Ottawa to discuss how they could ‘build some ground rules’ to protect their cultural fare from ‘the Hollywood juggernaut’. Their main recommendation was to keep culture out of the control of the World Trade Organization. A similar 1998 gathering, sponsored by UNESCO in Stockholm, recommended that culture be granted special exemptions in global trade deals. Nevertheless, the trend is clearly in the direction of opening markets.

Proponents of neoliberalism in every country argue that cultural trade barriers and regulations harm consumers, and that subsidies inhibit the ability of nations to develop their own competitive media firms. There are often strong commercial-media lobbies within nations that believe they have more to gain by opening up their borders than by maintaining trade barriers. In 1998, for example, when the British government proposed a voluntary levy on film and theatre revenues (mostly Hollywood films) to benefit the British commercial film industry, British broadcasters, not wishing to antagonise the firms who supply their programming, lobbied against the measure until it died. If the WTO is explicitly a pro-commercial organisation, then the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has only become one after a long march from its traditional commitment to public service values in telecommunications (Molony 1999).

The European Commission (EC), the executive arm of the European Union, too, finds itself in the middle of what controversy exists concerning media policy, and it has considerably more power than the ITU. On the one hand, the EC is committed to building powerful pan-European media giants that can go toe-to-toe with the US-based giants. On the other hand, it is committed to maintaining some semblance of competitive markets, so it occasionally rejects proposed media mergers as being anti-competitive (Stern 2000c). The wave of commercialisation of European media has put the EU in the position of condemning some of the traditional subsidies to public service broadcasters as ‘non-competitive’, which is a source of considerable controversy (Stern 2000a, 2000b). Public service broadcasting, once the media centrepiece of European social democracy, is now on the defensive and increasingly reduced to locating a semi-commercial niche in the global system (Goldsmith 2000; Larsen 2000). Yet, as a quasi-democratic institution, the EU is subject to some popular pressure that is unsympathetic to commercial interests. Indeed, when Sweden assumes the rotating chair of the EU in 2001, it may push for its domestic ban on TV advertising to children under 12 to be extended across Europe. If it does, it will be the most radical attempt yet to limit the prerogatives of the corporate media giants that dominate commercial children’s television (Hatfield 2000).

Perhaps the best way to understand how closely the global commercial media system is linked to the neoliberal global capitalist economy is to consider the role of advertising. Advertising is a business expense made preponderantly by the largest firms in the economy. The commercial media system is the necessary
transmission belt for businesses to market their wares across the world; indeed
globalisation as we know it could not exist without it. A whopping three-
quarters of global spending on advertising ends up in the pockets of a mere
twenty media companies (‘Star turn’ 2000). Ad spending has grown by leaps and
bounds in the past decade as TV has been opened to commercial exploitation
and is growing at more than twice the rate of GDP growth (Tomkins 2000). Latin
American ad spending, for example, is expected to increase by nearly 8 per cent
in both 2000 and 2001 (‘Ad spend growth’ 2000). Five or six super-ad agencies
have emerged in the past decade to dominate this $350 billion global industry.
The consolidation in the global advertising industry is just as pronounced as that
in global media, and the two are related. ‘Mega-agencies are in a wonderful
position to handle the business of mega-clients’, one ad executive notes (Elliott
2000). It is ‘absolutely necessary . . . for agencies to consolidate. Big is the mantra.
So big it must be’, another executive stated (Teinowitz and Linnett 2000).

A second tier of less than 100 firms that are national or regional powerhouses
rounds out the global media market. Sometimes these second-tier firms control
niche markets, like business or trade publishing. Between one-third and one-half
of these second-tier firms come from North America; most of the rest are from
Western Europe and Japan. Many national and regional conglomerates have
been established on the back of publishing or television empires, as in the case of
Denmark’s Egmont. Each of these second-tier firms is a giant in its own right,
often ranking among the thousand largest companies in the world and doing
more than $1 billion per year in business. The roster of second-tier media firms
from North America includes Dow Jones, Gannett, Knight-Ridder, Hearst and
Advance Publications. Those in Europe include the Kirch Group, Mediaset,
Prisa, Pearson, Reuters and Reed Elsevier. The Japanese companies, aside from
Sony, remain almost exclusively domestic producers.

This second tier has also crystallised rather quickly; across the globe there has
been a shakeout in national and regional media markets with small firms getting
eaten by medium firms and medium firms being swallowed by big firms.
Compared with ten or twenty years ago, a much smaller number of much larger
firms now dominate the media at national and regional levels. In Britain, for
example, one of the few remaining independent book publishers, Fourth Estate,
was sold to Murdoch’s HarperCollins in 2000 (Kirkpatrick 2000a). A wave of
mergers has left German television – the second largest TV market in the world
– the private realm of Bertelsmann and Kirch (Rohwedder 2000). Indeed, a wave
of mergers has left all of European terrestrial television dominated by five firms,
three of which rank in the global first tier (Reed 2000). The situation may be most
stark in New Zealand, where the newspaper industry is largely the province of
the Australian-American Rupert Murdoch and the Irishman Tony O’Reilly, who
also dominates New Zealand’s commercial radio broadcasting and has major
stakes in magazine publishing. Murdoch also controls pay television. In short,
the rulers of New Zealand’s media system could squeeze into a closet.

Second-tier corporations, like those in the first tier, need to reach beyond
national borders. ‘The borders are gone. We have to grow’, the chairman of
Canada’s CanWest Global Communications stated in 2000. ‘We don’t intend to
be one of the corpses lying beside the information highway’ (Brooke 2000).
'We have to be Columbia or Warner Brothers one day' (Cherney 2000). The CEO of Bonnier, Sweden’s largest media conglomerate, says that to survive, 'we want to be the leading media company in Northern Europe' (Brown-Humes 2000). Australian media moguls, following the path blazed by Murdoch, have adopted the mantra ‘Expand or die’. As one puts it, ‘You really can’t continue to grow as an Australian supplier in Australia.’ Mediaset, the Berlusconi-owned Italian TV power, is angling to expand into the rest of Europe and Latin America. Perhaps the most striking example of second-tier globalisation is Hicks, Muse, Tate and Furst, the US radio/publishing/TV/billboard/movie theatre power that has been constructed almost overnight. Between 1998 and 2000 it spent well over $2 billion purchasing media assets in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela (Sutter 2000).

Second-tier media firms are hardly ‘oppositional’ to the global system. This is true as well in developing countries. Mexico’s Televisa, Brazil’s Globo, Argentina’s Clarin and Venezuela’s Cisneros Group, for example, are among the world’s sixty or seventy largest media corporations. These firms tend to dominate their own national and regional media markets, which have been experiencing rapid consolidation as well. They have extensive ties and joint ventures with the largest media transnational corporations (TNCs) as well as with Wall Street investment banks. In Latin America, for example, the second-tier firms work closely with the US giants who are carving up the commercial media pie among themselves. Televisa or Globo can offer News Corp., for example, local domination of the politicians and the impression of local control over their joint ventures. And like second-tier media firms elsewhere, they are also establishing global operations, especially in nations that speak the same language. As a result, the second-tier media firms in the developing nations tend to have distinctly pro-business political agendas and to support expansion of the global media market, which puts them at odds with large segments of the population in their home countries.

Together, the sixty or seventy first- and second-tier giants control much of the world’s media: book, magazine and newspaper publishing; music recording; TV production; TV stations and cable channels; satellite TV systems; film production; and motion picture theatres. But the system is still very much in formation. The end result of all this activity by second-tier media firms may well be the eventual creation of one or two more giants, and it almost certainly means the number of viable media players in the system will continue to plummet. Some new second-tier firms are emerging, especially in lucrative Asian markets, and there will probably be further upheavals among the ranks of the first-tier media giants. And corporations get no guarantee of success merely by going global. The point is that they have no choice in the matter. Some, perhaps many, will falter as they accrue too much debt or as they enter unprofitable ventures. However, we are in all probability closer to the end of the process of establishing a stable global media market than to the beginning. And as it takes shape, there is a distinct likelihood that the leading media firms in the world will find themselves in a very profitable position. That is what they are racing to secure.

The global media system is fundamentally non-competitive in any meaningful economic sense of the term. Many of the largest media firms have some of
the same major shareholders, own portions of one another, or have interlocking boards of directors. When Variety compiled its list of the fifty largest global media firms for 1997, it observed that ‘merger mania’ and cross-ownership had ‘resulted in a complex web of interrelationships’ that would ‘make you dizzy’. The global market strongly encourages corporations to establish equity joint ventures in which the media giants all own a part of an enterprise. This way, firms reduce competition and risk and increase the chance of profitability. As the CEO of Sogecable, Spain’s largest media firm and one of the twelve largest private media companies in Europe, expressed it in Variety, the strategy is ‘not to compete with international companies but to join them’.

In some respects, the global media market more closely resembles a cartel than it does the competitive marketplace found in economics textbooks. This point cannot be overemphasised. In competitive markets, in theory, numerous producers work hard and are largely oblivious to one another as they sell what they produce at the market price, over which they have no control. This fairy tale, still regularly regurgitated as being an apt description of our economy, is ludicrous when applied to the global media system. The leading CEOs are all on first-name terms and they regularly converse. Even those on unfriendly terms, like Murdoch and AOL-Time Warner’s Ted Turner, understand that they need to work together for the ‘greater good’. ‘Sometimes you have to grit your teeth and treat your enemy as your friend’, the former president of Universal, Frank Biondi, concedes (Grover and Siklos 1999). The head of Venezuela’s huge Cisneros group, which is locked in combat over Latin American satellite TV with News Corporation, explains about Murdoch: ‘We’re friends. We’re always talking’ (Hoag 2000). Moreover, all the first- and second-tier media firms are connected through their reliance upon a few investment banks like Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs that quarterback most of the huge media mergers.

Those two banks alone put together fifty-two media and telecom deals valued at US$450 billion in the first quarter of 2000, and 138 deals worth US$433 billion in all of 1999 (Mermigas 2000b). This conscious co-ordination does not simply affect economic behaviour; it makes the media giants particularly effective political lobbyists at national, regional and global levels.

Global Corporate Media, Culture and Politics

But what about media content? Global conglomerates can at times have a progressive impact on culture, especially when they enter nations that had been tightly controlled by corrupt, crony-controlled media systems (as in much of Latin America) or nations that had significant state censorship over media (as in parts of Asia). The global commercial media system is radical in that it respects no tradition or custom, on balance, if it stands in the way of profits. But ultimately it is politically conservative, because the media giants are significant beneficiaries of the current social structure around the world, and any upheaval in property or social relations – particularly to the extent that it reduces the power of business – is not in their interest.
The ‘Hollywood juggernaut’, or the spectre of US cultural imperialism, remains a central concern in many countries for obvious reasons. Exports of US films and TV shows increased by 22 per cent in 1999 (Guider 2000), and the list of the top 125 grossing films for 1999 is made up almost entirely of Hollywood fare (D’Alessandro 2000). When one goes nation by nation, even a ‘cultural nationalist’ country like France had nine of its top 10 grossing films in 1999 produced by the Hollywood giants (Grey 2000). ‘Many leftist intellectuals in Paris are decrying American films, but the French people are eating them up’, a Hollywood producer noted (Lyman 2000). Likewise, in Italy, the replacement of single-screen theatres by ‘multiplexes’ has contributed to a dramatic decline in local film box-office revenues (Rooney 2000). The moral of the story for many European film-makers is that you have to work in English and employ Hollywood movie-making conventions to succeed (Foreman 2000). In Latin America, channels controlled by media giants overwhelm local cable television and the de facto capital for the region is Miami (‘US cable channels . . .’ 2000).

But there are problems with leaving the discussion at this point. The notion that corporate media firms are merely purveyors of US culture is ever less plausible as the media system becomes increasingly concentrated, commercialised and globalised. The global media system is better understood as one that advances corporate and commercial interests and values and denigrates or ignores that which cannot be incorporated into its mission. There is no discernible difference in the firms’ content, whether they are owned by shareholders in Japan or France or have corporate headquarters in New York or Sydney.

As the media conglomerates spread their tentacles, there is reason to believe they will encourage popular tastes to become more uniform in at least some forms of media. Based on conversations with Hollywood executives, Variety editor Peter Bart concluded that ‘the world film-going audience is fast becoming more homogeneous’. Whereas action movies had once been the only sure-fire global fare – with comedies considerably more difficult to export – by the late 1990s, comedies like My Best Friend’s Wedding and The Full Monty were doing between US$160 million and US$200 million in non-US box-office sales.

When audiences appear to prefer locally made fare, the global media corporations, rather than flee in despair, globalise their production. Sony has been at the forefront of this, producing films with local companies in China, France, India and Mexico, to name but a few (Brodesser 2000; Duke 2000b). India’s acclaimed domestic film industry – ‘Bollywood’ – is also developing close ties to the global media giants (‘Growing up’ 2000). This process is even more visible in the music industry. Music has always been the least capital-intensive of the electronic media and therefore the most open to experimentation and new ideas. US recording artists generated 60 per cent of their sales outside the United States in 1993; by 1998 that figure was down to 40 per cent. Rather than fold their tents, however, the four media transnationals that dominate the world’s recorded-music market are busy establishing local subsidiaries in places like Brazil, where ‘people are totally committed to local music’, in the words of a writer for a trade publication. Sony, again, has led the way in establishing distribution deals with independent music companies from around the world.
With hypercommercialism and growing corporate control comes an implicit political bias in media content. Consumerism, class inequality and individualism tend to be taken as natural and even benevolent, whereas political activity, civic values and anti-market activities are marginalised. The best journalism is pitched to the business class and suited to its needs and prejudices. With a few notable exceptions, the journalism reserved for the masses tends to be the sort of drivel provided by the media giants on their US television stations. In India, for example, influenced by the global media giants, ‘the revamped news media... now focus more on fashion designers and beauty queens than on the dark realities of a poor and violent country’ (Mishra 2000). This slant is often quite subtle. Indeed, the genius of the commercial media system is the general lack of overt censorship. As George Orwell noted in his unpublished introduction to Animal Farm, censorship in free societies is infinitely more sophisticated and thorough than in dictatorships, because ‘unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without any need for an official ban’.

Lacking any necessarily conspiratorial intent and acting in their own economic self-interest, media conglomerates exist simply to make money by selling light escapist entertainment. In the words of the late Emilio Azcarraga, the billionaire founder of Mexico’s Televisa: ‘Mexico is a country of a modest, very fucked class, which will never stop being fucked. Television has the obligation to bring diversion to these people and remove them from their sad reality and difficult future.’ The combination of neoliberalism and corporate media culture tends to promote a deep and profound de-politicisation. One need only look at the United States to see the logical endpoint (Perry 2000). But de-politicisation has its limits, as it invariably runs up against the fact that we live in a social world where politics has tremendous influence over the quality of our lives.

**Will the Internet Set Us Free?**

Finally, a word should be said about the Internet, the two-ton gorilla of global media and communications. The Internet is increasingly becoming a part of our media and telecommunications systems, and a genuine technological convergence is taking place. Accordingly, there has been a wave of mergers between traditional media and telecom firms and each of them with Internet and computer firms. Already companies like Microsoft, AOL-Time Warner, AT&T and Telefonica have become media powerhouses in their own right. It looks like the global media system is in the process of becoming a globally integrated, commercial communications system where six to a dozen ‘supercompanies’ will rule the roost. The notion that the Internet would ‘set us free’ and permit anyone to communicate effectively, hence undermining the monopoly power of the media giants, has not materialised. Although the Internet offers extraordinary promise in many regards, it alone cannot slay the power of the media giants. Indeed, no commercially viable media content site has been launched on the Internet, and it would be difficult to find an investor willing to bankroll any additional attempts. To the extent that the Internet becomes part of the commercially viable media system, it looks to be under the thumb of the usual corporate suspects.
For much of the 1990s even those who were alarmed by the anti-democratic implications of the neoliberal global economy tended to be resigned to these developments. The power of capitalism and the profit motive was such that it would inexorably establish a world system based on world markets and unchecked capitals flows. Likewise, the globalisation of the corporate media system was inexorable. As one Swedish journalist noted in 1997, ‘Unfortunately, the trends are very clear, moving in the wrong direction on virtually every score, and there is a desperate lack of public discussion of the long-term implications of current developments for democracy and accountability.’ It was presented as natural, as inexorable. And for those in power, those who benefited by the new regime, such thinking made their jobs vastly easier.

Conclusions

There is nothing ‘natural’ about neoliberal globalisation. It requires extensive changes in government policies and an increased role for the state to encourage and protect certain types of activities. The massive and complex negotiations surrounding NAFTA and the WTO provide some idea of how unnatural and constructed the global neoliberal economy is. Or consider copyright, and what has come to be considered intellectual property. There is nothing natural about this. It is a government-granted and enforced monopoly that prevents competition. It leads to higher prices and a shrinking of the marketplace of ideas, but it serves powerful commercial interests tremendously. In the United States, the corporate media lobby has managed to distort copyright so the very notions of the public domain or fair use – so important historically – have been all but obliterated. The US government leads the fight in global forums to see that the corporate-friendly standards of copyright are extended across the planet and to cyberspace. The commitment to copyright monopolies – now granted for ninety-five years to corporations – as the *sine qua non* of the global economy shows its true commitment is to existing corporate power rather than to a mythological free market.

The traditional myth of the relationship of the state to the private sector in US media has become the neoliberal myth on a global scale. The myth now has become transparently a tool of propaganda. The Enron affair – where a huge corporation made billions by paying off politicians to ‘deregulate’ utility markets and thereby fleece taxpayers, workers and consumers – highlights again how closely intertwined our government is with the largest private corporations. The widespread graft associated with neoliberal privatisations and deregulations – in telecommunications more than anywhere else – has augured in a wave of corruption of world historical proportions. If the market is God and public service is bunk, why on earth would anyone enter government, except to feather their own nest, by any means necessary? For those at the receiving end of neoliberal globalisation – the bulk of humanity – the idea that people need to accept neoliberal globalisation as a given is untenable. For those committed to democracy above neoliberalism, the struggle is to require informed public
participation in government policy-making. Specifically, in view of the importance of media, the struggle is to democratise communication policy-making.

In February 2002 in New York City, the World Economic Forum (WEF) held its annual meeting. Designed to gather together the leading visionaries and figures of global capitalism and government leaders eager to serve them, what was striking was the very high number of prominent media figures who participated in their panels. It was an indication of what a prominent role the global corporate media system plays in the new regime. Concurrently, several thousand miles to the south, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the alternative World Social Forum met to pose an alternative view for the global political economy. A central theme there, as well, was media. Much of the attention of the tens of thousands of people from around the world who participated addressed the limitations of the corporate media status quo for democracy, the need for democratic media policy making, and the need to develop viable alternative non-commercial media as the basis of a just and humane society. The overriding spirit at the WEF was that economic and media policies are too important to be trusted to the common people; the attitude in Porto Alegre was the opposite. Indeed, there are indications that progressive political movements around the world are increasingly putting media issues on their political platforms. From Sweden to France and India to Australia, New Zealand and Canada, democratic, generally left-wing political parties and social movements are beginning to make structural media reform – breaking up the big companies, recharging non-profit and non-commercial broadcasting and media – a part of their agenda. They are even finding out that this sometimes can be a successful issue with voters.

There are no simple solutions to the question of how best to organise media and communication to promote a healthy economy and democratic values, just as there is no simple answer to how best to structure the global political economy. Moreover, it is clear that the two debates are very closely related, in view of the significance of media and communication to both capitalism and democracy. That is why it is imperative that the debates on this topic be wide-spread and conducted in the light of day. If we know one thing from history it is this: if self-interested parties make decisions in relative secrecy, the resulting policies will serve the interests primarily of those who made them. As the old saying goes, ‘If you’re not at the table, you’re not part of the deal.’ Our job, as scholars, as citizens, as democrats, is to knock down the door and draw some more chairs up to the table. And when we sit at that table, we have to be armed with the most accurate understanding of what is taking place and what is possible that we can generate.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Political economy of communication examines the way media systems interact with capitalism and either promote or undermine democratic values.
- Political economy of communication is particularly concerned with how the profit motive, markets and advertising influence media performance. It provides a necessary context for the examination of most issues concerning media.

- Political economy of communication is premised on the notion that a media system is not natural; it is the result of explicit government policies that create it. In a democratic society, these policies are the result, ideally, of the informed consent of the citizenry.

- A global media system has emerged over the past two decades in conjunction with the global neoliberal capitalist system. The global media system is essential for global capitalism economically and ideologically.

- The global media system is dominated by a small number (8–10) of massive transnational conglomerates. These firms have grown dramatically in the past decade, mostly through mergers and acquisitions. Another 60–80 regional powerhouse firms round out the system. After that you are in the media bush leagues.

- The global media system is dependent upon major changes in media and economic regulations at the national level across the planet.

- The journalism and culture produced by the global media system are highly conducive to the neoliberal political economic order.
CHAPTER 3

Organisation and Production in Alternative Media

Chris Atton

To analyse practices of organisation and production in alternative media is not simply to explore a fascinating and generally overlooked area of media studies; it can also provide insights into mainstream practices. Through their emphasis on widening access to the processes of media production, alternative media practices highlight the limits of mainstream media practices. At the same time they demonstrate how some mainstream production techniques can be appropriated and redeveloped as parts of more inclusive, democratised media projects.

Before we can address questions of organisation and production in alternative media, we must first decide what we mean by ‘alternative media’. It is not possible in a single chapter to explore definitions in any depth (Downing 1984, 2001, and Atton, 2002 devote entire chapters to definitions alone). In any case the contemporary case studies and historical examples that make up the bulk of this chapter will tell us more about what alternative media are and what they do by examining their practices in detail. At this stage, then, it is enough to offer some general remarks on definition. John Downing has stated that ‘if . . . alternative media have one thing in common, it is that they break somebody’s rules, although rarely all of them in every respect’ (Downing 2001: xi). We can think of these rules as those governing content, form, organisation and production. In terms of content, Roger Silverstone (1999: 103) affirms that alternative media ‘have created new spaces for alternative voices that provide the focus both for specific community interests as well as for the contrary and the subversive’. Regarding form, Silverstone talks of the employment of production techniques borrowed from the mass media ‘to pursue a critical or alternative agenda, from the margins, as it were, or from the underbelly of social life’ (ibid.). As we shall see though, many alternative media employ techniques that are emphatically not of the mainstream; they often subvert mainstream techniques or abandon them completely.

The rich and diverse history of alternative media practices does not admit of any easy generalisations, yet in the West at least there is a discernible tradition of alternative media that has focused on projects that radically re-form three key aspects of communication: ‘skills, capitalisation and controls’ (Williams 1980:...
54). For the English Radical press (c. 1790–1830) this resulted in papers that were characterised by pauper management, where ‘journalists saw themselves as activists rather than as professionals’ and where there was an interest ‘in expos[ing] the dynamics of power and inequality rather than report[ing] “hard news”’ (Curran and Seaton 1997: 15). These features also appear at the heart of contemporary alternative media, as we shall see.

John Downing’s (2001) model of alternative media organisation provides a useful framework from which to explore Williams’s three foci of skills, capitalisation and controls. First, there is an emphasis on self-management, usually resulting in small-scale, collectively run projects. Second, such media often suggest a ‘socialist anarchist angle of vision’ which, Downing argues, sets contemporary alternative media apart from their Leninist precursors (still alive, of course, in some forms, as in the British Socialist Worker paper). Despite their revolutionary aims and content, Downing finds in the latter an unwelcome emphasis on vanguardism and party ‘correctness’. This is not to claim that self-managed media that reject the Leninist, transmission-belt model will easily and unproblematically be freed from concerns over control and correctness. Jo Freeman’s (1972) notion of ‘the tyranny of structurelessness’ reminds us of how even in avowedly non- or anti-hierarchical structures, hierarchies might still develop – an issue we shall explore later. Third, proceeding from this interest in socialist anarchism as an organising principle, alternative media embody ‘prefigurative politics, the attempt to practise socialist principles in the present, not merely to imagine them for the future’ (Downing 2001: 71). Downing’s emphasis here on socialism need not prevent us from applying these core principles to radical media organisations that do not appear to share the socialist aim explicitly. His notion of practising principles in the present does, however, help us understand the reasons behind choosing radical forms of organisation such as the collective, and non-professional approaches (even anti-professional, on occasion) to media production. Taken as a whole, Downing’s vision is that of a democratic, non-corporate media network comprising non-hierachically run, independent groups and individuals horizontally linked, and where whatever organisation and control do take place are necessarily light. We must first understand the range of organisational methods that have been employed by the alternative media.

Organisational Approaches in Alternative Media

Organisational approaches have been a major focus of accounts of the British alternative press (Comedia 1984; Fountain 1988; Minority Press Group 1980; Whitaker 1981), and it is with these that I shall begin, since they offer three clear types of organisational method. First, there is an organisational hierarchy that replicates that of the mainstream press, with an owner and editor overseeing reporters, staff writers and technical production staff. Examples range from the 1960s underground magazine Oz to working-class, Party newspapers such as the Morning Star and Socialist Worker. Second is the non-hierarchical organisation,
where individuals have equal control over the publication and where decisions – including editorial ones – are made collectively. In addition to an editorial function, each person will tend to have a specific task (editing, writing, paste-up, printing). Many of the community newspapers described in the Minority Press Group’s (1980) overview of the local alternative press are set up in this way. The third type is the loosest of all, where tasks and roles are not fixed, and where everyone is involved in all aspects of production and decisions are made collectively. This is a common organisational form in much contemporary alternative media centred on the new social movements, such as environmentalism and peace, and which privilege activists as editors and writers.

This emphasis on the collective springs from a notion of ‘equality . . . interpreted and evaluated in terms of sharing’ (Landry et al. 1985: 7; emphasis in original). In this instance, ‘sharing’ emphasises collective organisation without any thought to the size of the collective, or whether it is possible to work collectively regardless of the numbers involved. Furthermore, such sharing rejects the formal, bureaucratic and hierarchical methods of doing business. It often rejects entirely the importance of business and with it the value of individuals taking responsibility, acquiring specific skills and exercising authority (which are seen as autocratic features of despotic hierarchy). The abandonment of business practices as capitalist and reactionary produces, according to Landry et al., an organisation where the quest to be ‘maximally democratic’ is achieved at the expense of the organisation’s ‘economic imperatives’ (ibid.: 31). This inevitably leads to financial stringency, to a reliance on self-exploited, voluntary labour, cheap materials and even squatted office space; in short, what Landry et al. term ‘barefoot economics’ (ibid.: 24).

By contrast, we can see how more hierarchical and centralised forms of alternative media have succeeded. The Big Issue is an example of an alternative ‘advocacy’ publication that speaks on behalf of the homeless and through its unique distribution system (the magazine is sold by the homeless on the streets, who each make 45 pence per copy sold) aims to ‘help the homeless help themselves’. The Big Issue was founded in 1991 and currently has four separate fortnightly editions in London, Scotland, Wales and the north of England. The financial buoyancy of the Big Issue is in large part due to the subsidies it received during its first two years. These were provided by businesses, most conspicuously in the form of the Body Shop, whose Gordon Roddick provided half a million pounds to launch the paper. It has successfully sought and retained advertising from a wide range of companies producing consumer products – music and film are prominent (though it does not appear to accept advertising for alcohol or tobacco) – and it runs pages of classified advertisements focusing on jobs in education and social services. Its success is due in large part to its ability to ‘sell a good cause’, one that, to judge from its circulation (at the time of writing the audited circulation for its Scottish edition is over 40,000 – its London edition is over three times that) reaches far more readers than the ‘grassroots’ alternative media. This success must also be understood in terms of the magazine’s organisation and production. Its structure is similar to that of any mainstream title; it has sizeable editorial, advertising and sales departments; business, finance and personnel managers. Despite being printed on news print
(apart from its glossy cover), its liberal use of colour and its layout (reminiscent of a Sunday newspaper’s magazine supplement) speaks ‘professional’ – this is no experimental or amateurish endeavour. Whilst some of its writers might have cut their reporting teeth on alternative grassroots papers such as SchNEWS and Squall, the Big Issue only employs professional writers; the raison d’être of the paper – the homeless – contribute only poems and (very) short stories to a ‘City Lights’ column – they never report on their own circumstances.

By contrast, the organisational methods of grassroots alternative media seek to privilege the role of ‘ordinary’, unskilled people in their production. What the Minority Press Group (1980) term the British ‘radical populist’ press of the 1970s attempted to establish regular grassroots alternatives to local community newspapers which, their organisers argued, denied the people in those communities their own voice. The Minority Press Group (1980) and Whitaker (1981) focus on these radical community newspapers and between them offer a range of case studies of radical organisation. It is worth attending to their findings in some detail. For all their diversity of organisational approach, all exhibit similar problems. The Liverpool Free Press, examined in Whitaker’s account, was headed by a small group that retained the editorial focus throughout the six years of its life, though many others were involved in production and writing work. This group developed open meetings for readers and supporters, though these were held ‘for discussions rather than decisions’ (Whitaker 1981: 104). Decisions were made by the editorial group through a system of collective responsibility that required unanimity for all decisions. Failure when it came was financial, rather than directly organisational. In the case of the Aberdeen People’s Press, a truly open method of organisation – an open editorial group that anyone could attend (however temporarily) yet have the same power as a regular attendee – has been shown to be problematic. The paper foundered after only three years, when the open-group method both introduced writers that the core group found distasteful (for example, racists) and failed to reconcile each individual’s differing commitment to the paper. An attempt to restart the paper with a closed group based on ‘clear responsibilities’ was proposed, but never materialised (Minority Press Group 1980: 38).

Other papers, such as Brighton Voice and the Islington Gutter Press, lasted longer than the Liverpool Free Press, ostensibly as open collectives, though both collectives note that they were led by a small core group. The Islington Gutter Press also found its open meetings too time-consuming and unable to make decisions; these were gradually reduced in frequency and eventually dropped. The main feature of all these cases is the desire to involve as many people as possible in what was, after all, a community initiative, whilst enabling productivity: hence the philosophy of the open meeting and the involvement of people as volunteer writers, layout artists, etc. Only one paper – Alarm in Swansea, Wales – operated a full collective throughout its existence: between twelve and thirty people were involved in editorial meetings and ten people in a rota operated the printing press. It lasted less than two years.

These studies bear out the criticisms of Landry et al. to a degree. They show that small groups with clear responsibilities tend to work better than large diffused groups and that papers based on small groups tend to survive longer.
Such small groups are not incompatible with more inclusive methods of discussion and decision-making, as long as flexibility exists. Discussions involving large numbers of people are possible, these case studies show, but decision-making is best left to smaller groups.

In a study of self-managed media that covers two continents, John Downing (1984) offers a more comprehensive survey of the collective approach to alternative media. Within his twenty-odd case studies there is much diversity: collectives that disguised their elitist hierarchy (the triumvirate that ultimately controlled the American National Guardian and was the source of an acrimonious split in the paper’s collective); collectives that encouraged full discussion involving all staff (and volunteers) and employed majority voting for decision-making (the radical radio station KPFA in Berkeley, California); those who eschewed majority-voting as ‘a concession to male power structures’ (Union Wage; Downing 1984: 100), yet who abandoned consensus decision-making and reverted to majority-voting since the former was exceedingly time-consuming. Interestingly, the only fully successful consensus decision-making in the organisations covered by Downing are in the two Mohawk Nation publications, Akwesasne Notes and Erin Bulletin, whose success is put down to the ‘traditional cultural commitment’ to such a practice (ibid.: 109). In some organisations, skills are shared and jobs rotated; others prefer members to develop expertise in a specific area: job ‘prestige’ is equalised by a standard wage (though often all are unwaged). Downing is not uncritical of the collective approach; he recognises the limitations (especially social and cultural) that different forms of collective activity place on an organisation and that prevent it from operating efficiently and effectively, especially over the entire life of a publication. The Portuguese paper Republica, for instance, was only able to remain self-managed for a brief period, due to external political conditions. Others failed in the collective effort because the method was simply not suited to other aspects of doing business in the economic and social contexts in which they found themselves. Downing is critical of those organisations who adopted ‘ultra-democratic’ forms of organisation for abstract reasons, without tying them to social and political realities (ibid.: 355–6). He notes that the most successful ultra-democratic organisations were those which either had a clear cultural role (such as Akwesasne Notes and Erin Bulletin) or a highly developed social situation (such as in the Polish underground media of the late 1970s, where editorial group members were already extremely familiar with each other and their working patterns from many years’ direct personal experience). In short, Downing’s collective, self-managed media is about participation and communication within an alternative public sphere.

Amateur Journalism and Native Reporters

Participation does not only come from being part of the ‘management structure’ (however loose a structure that might be) of an alternative media project. Alternative media have throughout their history privileged amateur journalists
who are writing from a position of engagement with the event or process that is their subject. Here I use the term ‘amateur’ as Edward Said uses it to describe the amateur intellectual; one who is ‘unestablished’, that is, with no formal relationship to a profession or institution (Said 1994). ‘Amateur’ here has everything to say about commitment to radical intellectual and social practices, it has nothing to do with the common notion of the amateur as the ignorant, self-deceived dabbler. These amateur journalists – explicitly partisan – report from the ‘front line’, from the grassroots, from within the movements and communities they thus come to represent. At this more specific level of journalistic practice, the principles of self-management, organisational and ideological independence, and prefigurative politics are played out in what we can think of as ‘native reporting’:

‘Native reporting’ can usefully define the activities of alternative journalists working within communities of interest to present news that is relevant to those communities’ interests, presented in a manner that is meaningful to them and with their collaboration and support. ‘Native-reporter’ also evokes those local grassroots journalists of the South by whom Michael Traber sets so much store, whose value lies not in their role of message-creators for a passive audience, but as members of a community whose work enables the entire community to come together, to ‘analyse one’s historical situation, which transforms consciousness, and leads to the will to change a situation’. [Traber 1985: 3] (Atton 2002: 112–13)

The reporters’ active, lived presence within events, whilst no guarantor of impartiality, enables the production of news that tells other stories from those reported in the mainstream: ‘our news, not theirs’. This is a radical process of reporting where activists become journalists, and where grassroots reporting and analysis take place within movements and communities. The work of grassroots activists exemplifies the passage of native reporters from participants in a demonstration to activist-journalists, whilst remaining positioned as ‘rank and file’ within those movements.

The partisan, first-person narratives and commentaries of the native reporter inhabit an uneasy terrain. The sustained first-person narrative in the mainstream is typically the province of the senior reporter or the columnist; partisan commentary will also come from the columnist or the op-ed writer: these are roles of significant status. The native-reporter, by mainstream criteria, is unauthoritative and marginal, at the bottom of the hierarchy of access. Under the radical conditions of alternative media, these reporters become central: the role and function of the journalist are transformed and hybridised. Further, the demotic approach of the native reporter, whether evinced by the gritty camcorder footage shot in the heat of protest or by a ‘public-colloquial’ style of textual discourse (Fairclough 1995: 72), emphasises a radical populism in visual and written language. Peter Golding (1999: 51) has argued that ‘the demotic and casually convivial tone of the popular press [is] rooted in the evolution of a journalism of the market from a more socially anchored journalism of community or movement’. We might consider the radical populism of native reporting as both an acknowledgement of and a return to the roots of popular
journalism (say, in the English Radical press), springing from its location and status as a communication technology for communities and protest movements.

**Contemporary Case Studies in Organisation and Production**

We have seen how the alternative media, or at least that part of them we have called grassroots, are primarily interested in involving a wide range of people in their organisation. Such media appear less interested in the media skills of those people; instead they value them for their experiences, for what stories and perspectives they can bring to issues that concern them in their communities (whether geographic communities or communities of interest). Such people might be activists, involved in demonstrations or protests against, say, the siting of telecommunications masts on school buildings, or trials of genetically modified crops in local fields. They might be involved in the worldwide protest against the nexus of governmental and corporate power evinced at meetings of the World Trade Organization in Seattle (1999) or the G8 summit in Genoa (2001). Such people might also be ‘ordinary’ people, not actively involved in protest, but certainly interested in what is taking place ‘in their name’ in their local area, by local or national politicians or by businesses. Whatever their interests or levels of commitment, alternative media are interested in giving a voice to these, perhaps otherwise voiceless, people. In the words of the Glasgow University Media Group (1976: 245), such media seek to invert (even subvert) the ‘hierarchy of access’ (Glasgow University Media Group 1976: 245) that normally pertains in the mainstream media, where an elite of experts and pundits tends to have easier and more substantial access than do dissidents or protesters to a media platform for their ideas. Writing for the alternative media is less an elitist construct; it is transformed into an egalitarian, devolved communication tool.

How does this work in practice? The rest of this chapter will examine three distinct approaches to organisation and production in contemporary alternative media, in order to explore how such people are able to contribute their experiences, opinions and beliefs, and how they contribute to the production of those media. These three cases will help us understand how different alternative media work in practice. I shall explore a radical newspaper (*Counter Information*), an activist video magazine (*Undercurrents*) and a radical Internet project (*Indymedia*). Each case focuses on a different aspect of organisation and production: the study of *Counter Information* emphasises the role of the collective and the multi-skilled nature of its participants (as reporters, editors and layout artists) throughout the production cycle of a typical issue. With *Undercurrents* I examine the role of the native reporter as both broadcaster and technician, and highlight the necessity for the centralisation of some of the professional aspects of production. My examination of *Indymedia* aims to explore the global reach of a radical Internet project which can offer unlimited, largely unedited creative space to activists across the world. My overall focus in this section is on the radical, grassroots media, since they offer both a striking contrast to established, hierarchical approaches (as in the *Big Issue* or in any mainstream media) as well
as a variety of approaches to production within themselves. There is not space to offer a detailed historical or geographical survey here. These examples do, however, demonstrate a wide variety of organisational and production features which, whilst being far from exhaustive, do at least demonstrate the ingenuity and creativity (and the limits) of alternative media projects.

**Counter Information**

*Counter Information* calls itself a ‘class struggle anarchist’ news-sheet which has as its primary aim ‘social change towards a more egalitarian society’. It was founded in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1984 to provide a news digest of the national miners’ strike of that year, based on information from the miners themselves and ‘collated as a service by anarchists and revolutionaries from Edinburgh and Clydeside’. Within a year its aim had broadened to include reports of ‘workers’ resistance’. The role of the activist as providing ‘personal accounts of resistance to this rotten system’ (*Counter Information* 6, July 1985) is stressed.

The format of *Counter Information* has remained largely constant, each an A4 news-sheet of 2–4 pages, appearing only quarterly. Its circulation fluctuates at around 12,000, which is high for this kind of publication, though evidence suggests that this figure represents instead a fluctuating print run, determined by available financial resources (the paper frequently asks for donations to keep afloat). Finance is also one determinant of its frequency – the others are time and a shortage of volunteer staff – which is very low for a publication dealing with ‘news’.

The writing, editing and production of a quarterly issue of *Counter Information* typically take six weeks. This period is punctuated by three editorial meetings and one layout meeting. All meetings are open to all members of the collective but out of a collective of ten, there is a core of half who attend most meetings. Since all decisions are taken collectively and consensus is sought on all matters, such a reduction in size facilitates those processes. The first meeting is held at the beginning of the six-week period. Here material that has been received since the last issue went to press is assessed for inclusion in the forthcoming issue. That is, a month-and-a-half to two months of material is assessed. The sources of this material are many: primary sources will typically include reports from other revolutionary and alternative papers; some small articles from the mainstream press (which may be followed up by contact with those directly involved); the occasional unsolicited article.

The assessment of the sources is twofold. First, this meeting enables the editorial collective to identify what it calls the main ‘struggles’ and events taking place that are significant in the wider (national and international) context. Significance is measured in terms of amount of material received on a particular struggle and in terms of (the lack of) coverage the struggle has received in the mainstream press. To this end, specific individuals hold a watching brief on the mass media. Second, the material is assessed for currency. Since *Counter Information* appears only quarterly and is only four pages in extent, items must be chosen that are not only deemed to be significant to a wide audience but which also, it is hoped, will retain their significance in the months to come. A local
story is not necessarily out of the question, but it must demonstrate wider relevance or be part of a wider phenomenon (for example, the many local protests against road-building), but must also be ongoing. A protest that is just being planned might not have generated enough material, whilst one on the point of winding-up might already have been ‘done to death’ in other sources.

Once the main ‘struggles’ have been identified, these will form the basis of the longer articles in the paper (there are two to four of these in each issue; each can be anything between 350 and 500 words). The length of each article will also be decided at this first meeting. These will be written up, based on the information received, by a member of the collective who has ‘a deep knowledge of the field or who is directly involved in the event, struggle or action’ (all quotations in this section are taken from an interview with a member of the editorial collective, conducted by the author). Where there is no expertise within the collective, the collective will ‘commission’ (though no money changes hands) a first-hand account of the struggle or action from another group already known to them. This first meeting will result in the commissioning of such articles and the allocation of other articles to members of the collective, who will write most of the articles in any issue.

The second meeting, usually two weeks later, is considered a ‘progress meeting’. Occasionally the main articles are ready for this meeting, but that rarely happens. Here the number and type of smaller articles are decided, and with these the collective is able to be more precise about word lengths across the range of articles. Any new information and reports received since the first meeting are also reviewed, and decisions made on how (if at all) such news needs to be covered. The third and final editorial meeting (held two weeks after the second) has one aim: that all articles agreed upon should be written, typed and copied to the collective for editing. Once again, new information and reports are examined. Changes in length, perspective and content are suggested and agreed for all articles under consideration. The main articles are discussed in most depth; the rest are only examined in any depth if a member of the collective ‘feels strongly about an article going in or not going in’. Typically, individuals leave this meeting with the task of cutting articles or changing their content. After a further two weeks, the layout meeting takes place. ‘Theoretically, this shouldn’t involve editorial discussions, but in practice it does’, because articles are often not ready for the final editorial meeting. Consequently, the first couple of hours of the layout meeting is a last-minute editorial meeting. The rest is layout proper, ‘a marathon’ usually lasting twelve hours (‘from 1 pm to 1 am’; other meetings, by contrast, last between two and three hours); some material is even written during this time, if promised copy fails to turn up, for instance. The layout is undertaken by three members of the collective only, though others often stay around or come and go, inevitably contributing to the process. The organisation of Counter Information exhibits similar interests to those we have met in the radical community press of the 1970s. The preference for a small editorial group is noticeable and there is clearly an interest in developing a close-knit group of trusted editors and contributors. Whilst the collective appears comfortable with its size, it is willing to admit new members as long as they are prepared to get involved and develop the necessary skills.
**Undercurrents**

*Undercurrents* is a video magazine produced by activists across the world involved in campaigns that include environmentalism, the peace movement, human rights campaigns, anti-capitalism protests, squatting and coverage of other alternative media projects. Or rather, this is what it was – its final, tenth issue was produced in 1999 and it is unlikely to resume production, unless, as its editors state in the liner notes to that issue, ‘we find a way to clone ourselves and survive without sleep or financial support’. This is evidence indeed of the unsustainable pressures on alternative media projects brought on by self-exploited labour and ‘barefoot economics’. The magazine was founded in 1994 by Small World Media, ‘a film production company specialising in environmental and political features’ (Malyon 1995: 24), from whose commercial activities *Undercurrents* was subsidised. We should note the presence of professional film-makers in this activist undertaking. Whilst the unedited reports are all shot by amateurs, the jobs of editing, production and distribution are undertaken centrally by a small group of professionals based in London.

This hybrid model of alternative media production differs from those we have already encountered. This organisational model is in large part forced on the project through the necessity for professional editing facilities; most grassroots groups would not have access to such facilities and even if they did, would be unlikely to have the skills to use them. Moreover, even if local groups could afford the services of a local, professional editing suite, they might well find their amateurish efforts deemed unfit for editing; for example, whilst Hi8 video stock is broadcast quality, VHS or Video 8 is not. A professional studio specialising in broadcast work might well reject poorer-quality video stock. In addition, such a studio might find the unprofessional nature of the footage shot – or indeed its content and perspective – unacceptable. *Undercurrents* requires a sympathetic editing team, sympathetic to both the variable standards of film stock and techniques employed, and to the aims and ideologies of the activists themselves. In Small World Media activists were able to find both, for its members are both professionals and activists. The organisation also offered training to activists: ‘Britain’s only dedicated training programme to those who want to produce their own news and use video as tool to bring about real change’ (liner notes to issue ten).

*Undercurrents* edited and presented the work of international activists to a largely British audience; the content of its ten alternative news videos were all shot by amateurs – activists, native reporters – from their side of the story. Unlike the bulk of mainstream news television footage, these are not shot from behind police lines; instead they graphically show a version of events from the other side, and do not flinch from presenting elite groups (politicians, police) as violent, unreasonable or inequitable. They also demonstrate vividly both the imagination and commitment of protesters, at the same time as they show those protesters as vulnerable, as both oppressed and activist. Camera operators and reporters alike celebrate the vast differences in production and news values from the mainstream. Thomas Harding, a founding member of the *Undercurrents* editorial collective, has emphasised these aspects of ‘native production’ as
central to the aims of the magazine. It is not enough for activists to display their attitude towards an issue, to the oppressive relations of the situation; their work will be all the more powerful when they show the work’s position within those relations (Benjamin 1982 [1934]). Walter Benjamin’s notion of the ‘author as producer’ is a valuable way to understand this process. He argued that the political position of content alone is not enough. To mobilise others to join with you, and to encourage them to produce their own dissenting work, you must show how the form of the medium may be radicalised. In the case of Undercurrents, this is to encourage the amateur video-maker to use the domestic camcorder to record their own experiences and their attitude towards oppressive relations, using techniques that critique those relations. As Harding emphasises, this can mean eschewing professional standards. activist video can accrue power through ‘underproduction’:

Keep those long shots. Don’t worry if it’s a bit wobbly; it will feel more authentic. In general, turn your weaknesses (few resources, little experience) to an advantage by keeping your feature simple but powerful. (Harding 1997: 149)

In her study of AIDS video activism, Alexander Juhasz (1995) argues for the employment of mainstream media forms such as the documentary to claim authority over the radical content of a programme, content that would never be thus presented through mainstream channels. Like Harding, though, she emphasises production processes that involve members of the communities for which (and in which) the video is being produced:

Alternative AIDS media . . . actively situates itself within the object of study . . . to look is to see and know yourself, not the other – an entirely different route to pleasure and power. (Juhasz 1995: 138; original emphases)

The video activist should also present herself against the dominant frames of the mainstream representation of protesters and reporters. As in all grassroots alternative media, these two roles are combined in Undercurrents. In an exploration of one such native reporter (‘Jen’), I showed how she positions herself as both activist and reporter in her feature on the British government’s contradictory attitude in its human rights policy and its promotion of the British arms trade:

In a little over seven minutes Jen moves from conventional reporter to activist, throughout representing herself not as a simple professional, not even as a simple activist, but as a vulnerable, brave individual, situated in the everyday yet capable of remarkable actions, whether interviewing a senior politician or taking direct action against the military-industrial complex. She is oppressed and activist; witness and critic. Her words and actions are, in the end, those of her audience, her movement through identities and relationships in this brief feature as complex as any in everyday life. (Atton 2002: 115–116)

This stress on the everyday, on situating oneself and one’s media work within the complexities and multiple identities we all adopt in everyday life, is central to an understanding of the production mechanisms of alternative media.
Indymedia

The network of Independent Media Centres has become a highly visible feature of the media landscape of the global anti-capitalism movement at the turn of the millennium. The Independent Media Centres (IMC) or Indymedia network came to prominence during the demonstrations in the American city of Seattle against the World Trade Organization summit meeting there on 30 November 1999. The Seattle IMC acted as an independent media focus for the broad coalition of social justice groups, trade unions, anarchists, socialists, communists, environmental groups and others – a coalition that has come to be known as the anti-capitalist movement. In Seattle the Centre had both a physical and a virtual presence. Its virtual presence on the Web enabled its small core staff to distribute streaming audio and video footage of the demonstrations, as well as written reports, across the world. Technically this was achieved through the use of open publishing software, where any independent journalist (any activist, for that matter, though the two were often the same) could upload their reports using a pro-forma on the IMC website. No prior approval was needed from the core group; nor was that group responsible for editing the content of reports in any way. Hundreds of hours of audio and video footage and hundreds of thousands of eyewitness reports, analyses and commentary became available to activists, supporters, detractors – to ‘global citizens’ at large.

Since Seattle, the Indymedia network has expanded. There are currently seventy-eight IMCs in thirty-one countries. The concentration remains greatest in the US (thirty-six) and Europe (one in each of seventeen countries, with two in the UK). Other regions are far less well represented. There is one IMC in India and only two in Africa (Nigeria and South Africa). The Seattle IMC remains the network’s de facto centre, and it is from its collective that the bulk of technical information about uploading comes, as well as proposals for managing the substantial flow of information the network generates. For example, the network now operates a unique form of editorial control. Whilst reports may be uploaded from or by any source, the editorial group reserves the right to remove contributions judged unsuitable. The ‘Publish’ page of Indymedia (http://www.indymedia.org/publish.php3) states that ‘The Independent Media Center is a collectively run media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of the truth’ (author’s emphasis). Towards this aim the collective states that ‘while we struggle to maintain the news wire as a completely open forum we do monitor it and remove posts’. The large majority of these posts are removed for ‘being comments, not news, duplicate posts, obviously false or libelous posts, or inappropriate content [such as hate speech]’. Indymedia do, however, still make these posts available in a separate page titled ‘hidden stories’ (http://www.indymedia.org/search-process.php3?hidden=true). Whilst editing does take place, it does not prevent voices from being heard, nor prevent users from accessing that content. Neither does this quasi-editorial function of the core group extend to the editing of individual pieces of work: if they do not breach the criteria set out above, then pieces will remain on the ‘open’ pages of the site. These limitations apart, IMC/Indymedia enables any activists to contribute their work. The use of open source software bypasses the
need for an editor or webmaster to upload contributions: writer and producers may do this themselves, using the pro-forma on the ‘Publish’ page. The effectiveness of this method has been shown most recently by its approach to the coverage of the events of September 11 and the ensuing Operation Enduring Freedom. ‘9–11: Peace & Justice’ is the title of a feature page on the Seattle site (http://www.indymedia.org/peace) that links to news, analysis and comment posted to many of the sixty-four IMCs, as well as providing links to news and features appearing on other independent media organisations. These include local radio stations offering streaming audio and independent media monitoring projects such as Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR).

Indymedia connects local work to a global struggle, and it is from within this global context that the movement perceives itself. Despite the presence of some editorial control, open source programming erodes any centralisation of Indymedia that might otherwise occur. From the perspective of both producers and consumers (often the same people when we are talking about activists), Indymedia functions as a content aggregator of independent journalism, organised by country, issue and medium (text, audio, video, multimedia). Not only do journalists place original, previously unpublished work there, but IMCs themselves will often link to already broadcast or published reports. To consider Indymedia as an organisation is to consider a network of independent, collectively run ‘nodes’ through which independent journalists may circulate their work, largely unimpeded by the gatekeeping of those collectives. It is not only the scale (in terms of geographical spread, global reach and volume of material) that makes the Indymedia network an interesting moment for the study of alternative media; it is the most thorough working-out on the Internet of the conditions and processes of alternative media projects.

Conclusion

From the examples above, we have seen how different alternative media (print, video, Internet) have radicalised Raymond Williams’s three core aspects of communication: skills, capitalisation and controls. In the case of skills, we have seen how the native reporter can bring a radical, personal perspective to both the content of their work and the style in which it is produced (as in the case of Undercurrents). We have seen how many alternative media projects are poorly financed, relying largely on donations and voluntary, unpaid labour to survive – a restraint that is only overcome by the advocacy media, such as the Big Issue, which is better placed to attract prominent financial backers through its promotion of an issue that is less radical, through a medium that is more professionally produced. Organisationally, the controls on advocacy media resemble those of the mainstream media. By contrast, the grassroots media prefer radical forms of organisation, particularly the collective, the better to meet their political aims (broadly speaking, socialist) and to practise those aims in the present – what John Downing terms ‘prefigurative politics’. These practices come at a cost however: collective methods of organisation and production are often unwieldy;
they can make decision-making very difficult and often lead to the collapse of alternative media projects. From our case studies, we have seen that those grassroots alternative media projects that flourish tend to be the ones with a small, committed collective that is responsible for the day-to-day running and planning of the publication, leaving a larger pool of contributors free from this administrative burden. Where technological expertise is required (as in Undercurrents), this core collective might well include people with a high level of professional training.

Finally, Indymedia's diffuse, decentralised network suggests a significant future for alternative media projects. Lightly organised by a small collective that privileges the creative freedom of its contributors, Indymedia's non-hierarchical methods of organisation and its democratisation of production techniques encourage thousands of contributors, all taking responsibility for their own work. This global network of native reporters has only become possible through the radical deployment of Internet technology. It has become a largely self-sustaining medium, one that appears to have successfully overcome the economies of scale that have for so long bedevilled print-based alternative media projects.

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**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

- Alternative media encourage self-management. A wide range of 'ordinary', non-professional people will be in charge of organisation and production, as managers, editors, designers.

- There is an emphasis on collective organisation, in order to involve as many people as are willing to contribute. Collective organisation, though, is not without its difficulties – a large, unwieldy collective can prevent the efficient organisation of production.

- The most effective form of organisation tends to be a small collective, but where individual contributors still have creative freedom.

- To achieve this egalitarian aim of involving a wide range of people, alternative media radically redefine the organisational and writing skills necessary to produce a publication.

- 'Amateur', non-professional writers ('native reporters') can subvert the hierarchy of access to media by foregrounding themselves as activists and developing reporting techniques that demonstrate not only a radical attitude to 'oppressive relations' but also radical forms of production.

- In alternative media that require a professional understanding of production techniques (e.g., video), there will still be a role for professionals. These people also tend to be activists, sympathetic to and working with the 'amateur' staff of the organisation.
Through these practices, alternative media are able to ‘give voice to the voiceless’, that is, to give media access to those who find themselves under-represented in mainstream media (whether those people are in local communities or part of a community of interest, for example, a protest movement).

Organisation and production practices within alternative media highlight the limits of mainstream media practices. They demonstrate how mainstream production techniques can be radically redeployed to serve more inclusive aims.