Media at the margins?
After the mainstreaming of participatory media practices

Arne Hintz[*]

Cardiff University

The *Journal of Alternative and Community Media* is being launched at a point in time that is both interesting and challenging. Key practices and value propositions of what used to be niche media have reached the mainstream and have become cornerstones of everyday communication. Yet many alternative and community media are struggling, and academic attention often remains focused on the classic margins of the media ecology. What has changed, and what does this mean for our academic field?

A particularly striking aspect of the transformation of the media environment is the rise of the notion of participation and interaction. Among the many classic characteristics of alternative and community media – from alternative information to experimental formats to a non-profit approach – openness for public participation has consistently played a key role. While commercial media have been criticised for increasingly concentrated structures, alternative newspapers and community radio have provided opportunities for members of the public to get involved in media production and management, and to run a media organisation themselves. While mainstream journalism has concentrated the ability and authority to provide information about the world in the hands of a specific profession, alternative and community media started to practise 'citizen journalism' long before the term was invented. And as new commercial empires emerged on the internet, Indymedia offered alternative open-publishing opportunities and activist-run internet service providers offered non-commercial access to cyberspace (e.g. Atton, 2002; Coyer, Dowmunt and Fountain, 2007; Downing, 2001; Howley, 2005; Kidd, Rodriguez and Stein, 2009; Milan 2013).

However, these classic divisions started to crumble in the early 2000s. Participatory and interactive content production moved from the sphere of alternative and community media to the mainstream of everyday practice, and thus from the margins of the media ecology to its centre. Most prominently, commercial social media platforms allowed people to publish and share their own stories, and thereby transformed the previously niche practice of activist and citizen journalism into a mass phenomenon. 'Citizen witnessing' (Allan, 2013) increasingly became part of the broader media environment, as well as a key news source for traditional media, and the 'demotic turn' (Turner 2011) in the media highlighted the role and contribution of the 'ordinary citizen'. The (albeit controversial) role of social media in protests and political change (Dencik and Leistert, 2015; Diamond and Plattner, 2012) elevated the status of participatory communication platforms to the point where they were a transformative tool in world politics. These developments became embedded in a broader trend towards participatory culture (Jenkins, 2008). Cultural production was opened up to a broad range of amateur creations through remix practices and fan projects (Lessig, 2008), and the niches of (open-source) peer production expanded with the rise of Wikipedia and many other successful

* Email: HintzA@cardiff.ac.uk

endeavours to influence broader economic processes (Benkler, 2006). With the advent of the 'sharing economy', notions of participation, sharing and decentralisation have seemingly reached the centre of the public as well as social-political-economic discourse. Meanwhile, community media have been elevated to the official status of 'third media sector' in many parts of the world, on an equal footing with commercial and public service media (Hintz, 2014; Lewis, 2015), and the wide range of diverse citizen media is increasingly seen as integral part of a 'networked fourth estate' (Benkler, 2013).

As the values and practices for which community and alternative media have traditionally been known are forcefully entering the mainstream of the social-political-economic discourse, we may wonder whether we are observing the victory of what have long been niche phenomena. Do we see the final stretch of a march from the margins to the centre? Paradoxically, the mainstreaming of interactive media has caused problems for alternative and activist projects. Several Indymedia and other grassroots media groups have pointed to the role of commercial social media as a reason for their demise. As activists moved to Facebook and YouTube to mobilise for actions, upload their protest videos and provide alternative information, self-organised non-profit platforms have suffered, and in many cases closed. The expansion of 'free' (advertising-based) interactive media has often marginalised non-commercial grassroots projects, and instead led to the birth of vast new media empires. While the language of participation and sharing has become omnipresent, its social and economic implications have been very different from what practitioners and scholars of community and alternative media may have foreseen.

All this points to an interesting (and busy) but transforming agenda for scholars of citizen-based, radical and participatory media. The discipline is uniquely positioned to engage critically with the discourse of sharing and participation, and thus to intervene in key debates of our times. However, this requires a shift in our understanding of community, alternative and citizen media practices and a departure from the classic niches of both research and practice. First, as noted above, these media are no longer the sole sphere of participation and interaction, and while the old binary opposition between closed corporate media and alternative participatory media has not been eradicated, it has been transformed. Second, many of the media that we would traditionally have situated at the margins of the media ecology have left their niche existence and have become part of mainstream practices and media systems. While the old deficiencies of mainstream journalism undoubtedly persist, and many marginalised sectors of the population still require community and alternative media to make their voices heard, the media environment has changed quite drastically.

Of course, none of this will come as a surprise after a decade of social media. Nor is the critique of a limiting focus on 'alternative' niches particularly new. Criticisms of mainstream–alternative binaries (e.g. Rodriguez, 2001) and of the self-marginalisation of community communication have been widely discussed in the field and have been accompanied with an interest in concepts such as tactical media (Garcia and Lovink, 1997) and the rhizome (Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2008). Yet the more recent developments in social media platforms, participatory culture, the sharing economy and emerging challenges of pervasive data collection and analysis call for renewed attention from both scholars and practitioners of alternative and community media.

Combining an interest in mainstream developments with an understanding of the histories and specific characteristics of community and alternative media, scholars of this field have a lot to contribute to contemporary challenges. How can alternative social media address the deficiencies of their commercial counterparts? What is the role of self-organised and non-profit media practices, such as hacking and making, civic mapping and so on, and how do these interact with larger institutions? Which new models – from leaks activism to platform cooperativism – are emerging in the grey zones between mainstream and alternatives? And, perhaps most significantly, how do both meanings and practices of participation, interaction, sharing, openness, collaboration and

decentralisation shift; how do we unpack these changes; and how can community and alternative media help us move beyond limited understandings of such concepts?

References

Allan S (2013). *Citizen Witnessing: Revisioning Journalism in Times of Crisis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Atton C (2002). *Alternative Media.* London: Sage.

Bailey O, Cammaerts B and Carpentier N (2008). *Understanding Alternative Media*. New York: Open University Press.

Benkler Y (2006). *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Benkler Y (2013). WikiLeaks and the networked Fourth Estate. In Brevini B, Hintz A and McCurdy P (eds), *Beyond WikiLeaks: Implications for the Future of Communications, Journalism and Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Coyer K, Dowmunt T and Fountain A (eds) (2007). *Alternative Media Handbook.* London: Routledge.

Dencik L and Leistert O (eds) (2015). *Critical Perspectives on Social Media and Protest: Between Control and Emancipation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Diamond L and Plattner M (2012). *Liberation Technology: Social Media and the Struggle for Democracy.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Downing JDH (2001). *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements.* London: Sage.

Garcia D and Lovink G (1997). The ABC of tactical media. Nettime. Available at: http://www.ljudmila.org/nettime/zkp4/74.htm.

Hintz A (2014). Towards non-profit and community media legislation in South America: Challenging media power through citizen participation. In: Martens C, Vivares E and McChesney RW (eds) *The International Political Economy of Communication: Media and Power in South America*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Howley K (2005). *Community Media: People, Places and Communication Technologies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jenkins H (2008). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Kidd D, Rodriguez C and Stein L (eds) (2009). *Making Our Media: Global Initiatives Toward a Democratic Public Sphere.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Milan S (2013). *Social Movements and Their Technologies: Wiring Social Change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lessig L (2008). *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*. London: Bloomsbury.

Lewis PM (2015). Community media policy. In: Atton C (ed.) *Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media*. New York: Routledge.

Rodríguez C (2001). *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens' Media*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Turner G (2010). *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn*. London: Sage.