Towards a critical theory of alternative media

Marisol Sandoval *, Christian Fuchs

Unified Theory of Information Research Group, c/o University of Salzburg, Sigmund Haffner Gasse 18, 5020 Salzburg, Austria

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In this contribution, we warn against being too optimistic about the actual democratic effects of notions like "civil media", "community media" "alternative media", "grassroots media", "participatory media", or "participatory culture". We argue that in contemporary society, which is characterized by structural inequalities, an understanding of alternative media as participatory media is insufficient. As an alternative concept, we suggest the notion of alternative media as critical media. This concept is grounded in critical social theory. A typology of approaches for defining alternative media is constructed. We argue that alternative media need to be situated in the context of visions of an alternative society.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

This article deals with the question of how to define alternative media. Since "[e]verything, at some point, is alternative to something else" (Downing, 2001, p. ix), a theoretical conceptualization of the term alternative media is needed. A decisive question is whether the term alternative is only about posing an alternative to mainstream media, or if the term implies that such media want to challenge all forms of domination and foster societal alternatives to capitalism. Does the term alternative media exclusively refer to politically progressive, left-wing media that aim at challenging capitalism and corporate (media) power, or does the term also include conservative, right-wing, and repressive media (Downing, 2001, p. 88)?

As we will show, many alternative media scholars point out that alternative media differ from mainstream media in regard to their organizational principles. According to them, participatory, collective organization, horizontal structures and non-commercial financing characterize alternative media.

One very well-known alternative online medium, which upholds collective and grassroots organization principles, is Indymedia. Indymedia uses a "*democratic open-publishing system*", *is* "*collectively run*", and "*a decentralized and autonomous network*" (Indymedia, 2009). But not only progressive social movements and left-wing political activist employ "participatory" production principles. Also conservatives increasingly give attention to bottom-up media production. One example for a conservative participatory medium is the online community www.townhall.com, which brings together "*the grassroots media of talk radio, the internet, blogging and podcasting* [. . .] *to activate conservative political participation*" (Thownhall, 2009). Chuck DeFeo, who served as eCampaign Manager for Bush-Cheney '04, describes the aim of the web platform as follows: "*That is what our job is: to create a platform and to create opportunities for people to voice their opinions in political debate and participate in the arena of ideas*" (DeFeo, 2007). The self-descriptions of these two media are very similar as they both focus on participation (although, in practice, the level of participation may differ).

This shows that both, Indymedia as well as Townhall, want voice the intention to foster citizen participation in media production. However, they differ in regard to their political objectives: Indymedia wants to create "*radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of the truth*" in order to "*free humanity*" and to see through "*corporate media's distortions*" (Indymedia, 2009), whereas Townhall wants to uphold conservative values and to "*amplify those conservative voices*" (Townhall, 2009). Does it

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +43 662 8044 4809.
E-mail addresses: marisol.sandoval@sbg.ac.at (M. Sandoval), christian.fuchs@sbg.ac.at (C. Fuchs).

make sense to consider both as alternative media? Or should the term alternative help to distinguish the kind of movements, groups, interests, and worldviews that ground media production? Answering this question requires a detailed definition of alternative media, which needs to be based on alternative media theory.

The most widely used approach is an understanding of alternative media as participatory media. We first discuss examples of this model and then formulate a critique of it. Based on this discussion, we introduce our understanding of alternative media as critical media.

2. Alternative media as participatory media

Participatory media approaches stress that democratic media potentials can be realized by opening up access to media production. Ideas about a participatory organization of the media system can already be found in the work of Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who imagined a media system in which media enable dialogue and communicative exchange and in which every recipient can also become a producer. Many current approaches on alternative media pick up this vision of a democratic media system. So for example Nick Couldry points out that the most important task for alternative media is to challenge the highly concentrated media system and the resulting symbolic power of capitalist mass media by overcoming "*the entrenched division of labour (producers of stories vs. consumer of stories*") (Couldry, 2003, p. 45). According to Couldry, the emancipatory and progressive potential of alternative media lies in opening up access to media production to a broad public. This would allow challenging the mass media's power of naming by confronting the reality constructed by capitalist mass media with other versions of social reality. The strong emphasis on media actors that gain media power by producing alternative media shows the subjective orientation of this approach.

Community media approaches focus on collective actors and the empowerment of individuals. Community media are understood as media that serve a specific geographic community or a community of interest, and allow non-professionals to actively engage in media production, organization and management (Coyer, 2007; Jankowski, 2003, p. 8; KEA, 2007, p. 1; Lewis, 1976, p. 61; Peissl and Tremetzberger, 2008, p. 3). The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) for example stresses that community radio "*should not be run for profit but for social gain and community benefit; it should be owned by and accountable to the community that it seeks to serve, and it should provide for participation by the community in programme making and in management*" (AMARC, 2007, p. 63). Such participatory media approaches consider participation in processes of media production as well as in management processes as central defining feature of alternative media. In this context Nico Carpentier refers to participation in the production process as content-related participation, whereas involvement in decision-making processes is termed structural participation (Carpentier, 2007a, p. 88).

For Dagron participatory production processes are at the core of alternative media projects: "In my own view alternative communication is in essence participatory communication, and the alternative spirit remains as long as the participatory component is not minimized and excluded" (Dagron, 2004, p. 48). By using the term citizens' media, Clemencia Rodriguez wants to illustrate that alternative media can assist those who are engaged in their production in becoming active citizens (Rodriguez, 2003, p. 190). Another important representative of the participatory media approach is Chris Atton. He argues that alternative media should anticipate the idea of a society beyond capitalism in the present. In this context he speaks of "prefigurative politics", which in his view cannot be realized primarily on the media content level, but by alternative, anti-capitalist, and participatory organization practices (Atton, 2002, p. 21).

Our impression is that participatory media approaches,[1] which stress the importance of participation of non-professionals in media production and organization, dominate the field of alternative media studies. Therefore in the next part we will discuss if participation is a suitable concept for defining alternative media.

3. A critique of the participatory media approach

Representatives of the participatory media point at several emancipatory societal effects of participatory production processes. According to Servaes, participatory communication is "*an agent for social change, culture development and democratization*" (Servaes, 1999, p. 269). Carpentier points out that by fostering participation alternative media contribute to the strengthening of a civic attitude and "*allow citizens to be active in one of the many (micro-) spheres relevant to daily life and to put their right to communication in to practice*" (Carpentier, 2007a, p. 88). Participatory media would challenge the concentration of symbolic power (Couldry, 2003), empower ordinary people by giving them a voice (Carpentier, 2007b; Dagron, 2004; Girard, 1992, p. 13; Jankowski, 2003, p. 8; Rodriguez, 2003), and assist them in living a self-determined life (Rodriguez, 2003).

We agree that participation can have positive effects on those who are engaged in participatory production processes. Nevertheless we doubt that alternative media can effectively challenge corporate media power and dominant discourse by simply realizing participatory production processes. Using prosumptive participation as the central criterion for defining alternative media is problematic in three respects that will be discussed in the next three subsections.

---

[1] Examples are: Atton (2002, 2004), Beywl and Brombach (1982), Carpentier (2007a,b), Couldry (2003), Coyer (2007) Curran (2002) Dowmunt and Coyer (2007), Dagron (2004), Hüttner (2006), Jankowski (2003), Lewis (1976), Peissl and Tremetzberger (2008), Rodriguez (2003), and Weichler (1987).

3.1. The first limitation of participatory media: fragmentation of the public sphere

Small-scale participatory media often remain marginal, which brings about the danger of a fragmentation of the public sphere. Participatory, non-commercial media that reject professional organization processes often suffer from a lack of resources, which makes it difficult to gain public visibility and to establish a broad counter-public sphere. But public visibility is necessary for raising awareness regarding the repressive character of capitalism and for supporting radical social transformations. In the 1980s, the Comedia research group criticized approaches that define alternative media as participatory media. According to Comedia, the public marginality of many alternative media projects stems from a lack of professional organization structures (Comedia, 1984, p. 95). The disadvantages of collective organization structures would be high expenditures of time and resources. Alternative media would therefore remain in an "*alternative ghetto*". To avoid this, alternative media should recognize that "*capitalist skills as marketing and promotion can be used to further their political goals*" (Comedia, 1984, p. 101).

In this context Knoche (2003) argues that alternative media (like free radios) aim at being independent from state, markets, and capital, but are confronted with the antagonism between dominative structures and emancipatory goals. It is impossible to act outside of these structures within a capitalist society. The lack of funds, interested audiences, and participants, and the grounding in self-exploited precarious labour frequently results in pressures for commercialization, and marginalization or abandonment of radical content in order to reach broader audiences as well as the permanent threat of remaining insignificant non-profit-dogs (Knoche, 2003, p. 10).

One danger is that the marginality of many alternative media projects results in what Habermas (1991) has termed the fragmentation of the public sphere. Small couterpublics should be connected to each other and form a joint counter-public sphere. In this case they can become more visible in society and are more likely to effectively challenge the dominant discourse. For the realm of alternative media this means that self-sufficient alternative media projects that do not engage in wider political projects will become individualistic spaces of withdrawal, whereas networks of alternative media that develop political visions and practices and act together to form a larger political counter-public sphere have the potential to support larger-scale political change processes. Hence we consider a large counter-public sphere that is accessible for all exploited, oppressed, and excluded groups and individuals as an important foundation for political change processes. The implication of this is that small-scale individualized alternative media alone cannot become effective parts of large transformative social struggles or movements. In many cases, they will remain an expression of lifestyle politics that please and console their producers or even become ideologies that forestall collective political struggles because these producers find no time for political activism and consider their individual product as a sufficient statement. But a statement that does not reach the masses is not a significant statement at all, only an individual outcry that remains unheard and hence ineffective.

Some representatives of the participatory media approach like Rodriguez (2003) or Dagron (2004) stress that reaching broad audiences is not an aim for alternative media projects: "*Anyone asserting that alternative media are fine but their coverage is to limited geographically or in terms of users does not understand what alternative media really are*" (Dagron, 2004, p. 49f). Maybe this is true for a type of alternative media that aims at local community-building or enabling communication between existing social networks such as social movements or protest groups. In these cases it is important that alternative media are organized in a participatory manner and that every recipient can also become a producer of messages in order to allow exchange and dialogue. However, one can also think of another type of alternative media that aims at establishing a counter-public sphere by reporting about topics, which capitalist mass media tend to neglect and by criticizing structures of domination and oppression. Such alternative media need to gain public attention if they want to be successful in raising awareness and mobilizing social struggles. Such alternative media are in need of organizational structures and financial resources.

Definitions of alternative media as participatory media often also include non-commercial financing (see for example: Atton, 2002; Peissl and Tremetzberger, 2008). But under capitalism, without money, alternative media production rests on the self-exploitation of media producers, low-cost production techniques and the usage of alternative distribution channels. This creates problems for continuous production and for reaching a broad audience. Gaining public visibility requires financial resources for producing and distributing media products. Under capitalism it is difficult to obtain these resources without making use of commercial mechanisms of financing like selling space for advertisements. Using such capitalist techniques of financing contradicts the political aims of emancipatory alternative media that are critical of capitalism. However, alternative media are not located outside the capitalist system and therefore are dependent on financial resources for the production and distribution of their products, which can hardly be obtained without making use of commercial mechanisms of financing.

In regard to these financial problems it is often argued that with the internet new possibilities for a cheap, participatory media production (see Atton, 2004; Bennett, 2003, p. 34; Couldry, 2003, p. 45; Hyde, 2002; Wright, 2004, p. 90), for bypassing gate-keepers (cf. Bennett, 2004, p. 141; Meikle, 2002, p. 61; Rosenkrands, 2004, p. 75) and for reaching a potentially global audience arise (see Meikle, 2002, p. 60f; Vegh, 2003, p. 74). It is certainly true that the internet provides a broad range of tools, which allow easy and cheap media production. But at the same time with the internet another important problem for alternative media production becomes more evident: not every media content, which is produced and distributed receives public visibility and is consumed (see Curran, 2003, p. 227; Rucht, 2004, p. 53; Wright, 2004, p. 84). The hope that a communication apparatus that abolishes the distinction between producers and consumers would automatically lead to a more democratic media system that enables exchange and in which everybody's voice is heard has to be disappointed. Also on the

internet political and financial power are essential for gaining public visibility. Those projects that have the means for advertising their websites, e.g., established capitalist media institutions, have an advantage over those without resources, e.g., many alternative media projects. This shows that the abolishment of the distinction between media consumers and media producers is not enough for making an emancipatory media system reality. Public visibility is still stratified through power relations. In this context Pajnik and Downing point out that "*in the contemporary world it is not uncommon that being heard is more important than what is being said. The result is a cacophony of simultaneous monologues leading ultimately to uniformity and standardization, rather than exchange of ideas between equals*" (Pajnik and Downing, 2008, p. 7). Giving ordinary people a voice by opening up access to media production is not enough for a truly democratic media system to emerge. Participation remains very limited if people can only talk but are not heard. Thus, the discussion on emancipatory media potentials also has to consider structural inequalities as a central feature of capitalism.

3.2. The second limitation of participatory media: participation can be used as a means of profit accumulation or for advancing repressive political purposes

Participatory production processes need not necessarily be emancipatory, but can also be used for advancing repressive purposes. Some representatives of the participatory media approach argue that the emancipatory effects of alternative media arise from the production process itself (see for example: Dowmunt and Coyer, 2007; Rodriguez, 2003): "*The political nature of alternative media is often present irrespective of content, located in the mere act of producing*" (Dowmunt and Coyer, 2007, p. 2). We argue that participatory production should not be considered as emancipatory as such.

On the one hand participatory production processes can be used for producing conservative or even far right content. Viguerie and Franke (2004) highlight in their book *America's right turn: how Conservatives used new and alternative media to take power* the importance of "alternative media" for the rise of conservatism in the United States. By referring to a variety of case studies Hillard and Keith (1999) show how the radical right uses all types of media for communicating and legitimizing its political aims. Also Bart Cammaerts points at "*the extensive use of the internet (as well as other media) by non-progressive reactionary movements, be it the radical and dogmatic Catholic movement, the fundamentalist Muslim movement or the extreme right – post-fascist – movement*" (Cammaerts, 2007b, p. 137).

In the introductory part, we have already referred to Townhall.com as an example for a conservative participatory medium. Another example for conservative participatory journalism is FreeRepublic.com: "*Free Republic is the premier online gathering place for independent, grass-roots conservatism on the web*". "*Free Republic is a site dedicated to the concerns of traditional grassroots conservative activists*" (Free Republic, 2009). But not only conservatives, also far right groups make use of participatory tools on the internet. One example is the online forum of the National Democratic Party of Germany (National Democratic Party of Germany, 2009). Chris Atton, who himself stresses the importance of participatory production processes, warns against validating "*participation as good in itself*" (Atton, 2008, p. 217). Definitions of alternative media, which exclusively focus on participatory production processes, cannot distinguish between emancipatory and repressive media usages.

On the other hand participatory production processes are often subsumed under capital interest. This is especially the case on the internet. What is now termed Web 2.0, social networking platforms, and social software has not brought about a new era of participatory democracy as claimed by many. Smythe (1981) suggests that in the case of media advertisement models, the audience is sold as a commodity: "*Because audience power is produced, sold, purchased and consumed, it commands a price and is a commodity. (….) You audience members contribute your unpaid work time and in exchange you receive the program material and the explicit advertisements*" (Smythe, 1981 [2006], p. 233 and 238). With the rise of user-generated content and free access social networking platforms and other free access platforms that yield profit by online advertisement, the Web seems to come close to accumulation strategies employed by the capital on traditional mass media like TV or radio. The users who google data, upload or watch videos on YouTube, upload or browse personal images on Flickr, or accumulate friends with whom they exchange content or communicate online via social networking platforms like MySpace or Facebook, constitute an audience commodity that is sold to advertisers. The difference between the audience commodity on traditional mass media and on the internet is that in the latter the users are also content producers; there is user-generated content, the users engage in permanent creative activity, communication, community-building, and content-production. That the users are more active on the internet than in the reception of TV or radio content is due to the decentralized structure of the internet, which allows many-to-many communication. Because of the permanent activity of the recipients and their status as produsers, we can, in the case of the internet, argue that the audience commodity is a produser commodity (Fuchs, 2008, 2009, 2010 – see also Terranova, 2000). The category of the produser commodity does not signify a democratization of the media towards participatory systems, but the total commodification of human creativity that negates and is the complete opposite of participatory democracy. During much of the time spent online, users produce profit for large corporations like Google, News Corp. (which owns MySpace), or Yahoo! (which owns Flickr).

The result is that participatory production processes underpin capitalist media power instead of challenging it. Thus, the notion of "participatory culture" can easily turn into an ideology that affirms the capitalist economy. It is questionable if one should even speak of participation in this case. Based on Herbert Marcuse, we can say that today the notion of participatory culture functions as repressive tolerance: "*Other ideas can be expressed, but, at the massive scale of the conservative majority (outside such enclaves as the intelligentsia), they are immediately 'evaluated' (i.e. automatically understood) in terms of the public language. (…) The antithesis is redefined in terms of the thesis*" (Marcuse, 1965, p. 96). "Participatory media", such as call-in shows, blogs, wikis, and alternative media allow citizens to express their ideas, but these ideas are not automatically

effective because capital concentration gives huge advantages to large corporations in reaching the public. "Alternative media" should be discussed in relation to the role they play in capitalism and therefore in the context of capitalism.

3.3. The third limitation of participatory media: exclusivity

Using participatory production processes as decisive criterion for defining alternative media excludes many oppositional media that provide critical content, but make use of professional organization structures. Examples for such a type of media are: The New Internationalist, Z Magazine, Rethinking Marxism, Historical Materialism, New Left Review, Le Monde Diplomatique, or Monthly Review. Defining alternative media as participatory media excludes such oppositional publications, although they provide critical content and contribute to the establishment of a counter-public sphere.

The argument that participatory production is not a suitable criterion for defining alternative media does neither mean that participatory media should not be considered as alternative media, nor that alternative media should not strive for employing participatory components in the organizational structure, but that under capitalism this is not always possible to the desired extent. As participatory processes are not emancipatory as such, but can also be used for advancing repressive purposes, we think that a different criterion for defining alternative media is needed.

4. Alternative media as critical media

Our understanding of alternative media as critical media is based on a dialectical understanding of the media system, on the assumption of a dialectical relationship between media actors (producers and recipients) and media structures (economic product form, media content, media technologies, media institutions, etc.). This means that media structures enable and constrain the actions of media actors, who again through their actions shape the media structures. The complex, dialectical interrelations between media actors and media structures constitute the societal impacts of the media system in a certain historical period or concrete situation. Based on this dialectical understanding of media systems one can contrast capitalist mass media with ideal-type alternative media. This ideal-type model of alternative media differs from capitalist mass media respect to the actor as well as to the structural level (see Fig. 1).

(a) At the structural level, ideal-typical alternative media differ from capitalist mass media in regard to the economic form of media products: ideal-typical alternative media provide non-commercial media products instead of commodities. They also differ in regard to media content and form: ideal-typical alternative media provide critical content and/or complex form instead of ideological content in a standardized form.
(b) At the actor level, ideal-typical alternative media abolish the distinction between producers and consumers, all consumers of alternative media products can also actively engage in the production process. The prosumer has to be critical in the sense that (s)he critically interprets existing media content and is able to produce new critical media content.

The model of capitalist and ideal-typical alternative media that is shown in Fig. 1 is dialectical because through the production process the subjective knowledge of media producers becomes objectified in media products. Subjective knowledge of the producers turns into an objective structure. Media products again become subjectified through the process of reception: the objective media products turn into subjective knowledge. Reception also enables further production. This shows that the actor and the structural level do not form completely separated unities but encroach upon each other.

The comparison in Fig. 1 contains a strict dichotomy between capitalist mass media and alternative media. But since alternative media production today takes place under the conditions of a capitalist society, the ideal model that is imaginable to a full extent under fully transformed societal conditions cannot be realized to the desired extent. In part 3, we have
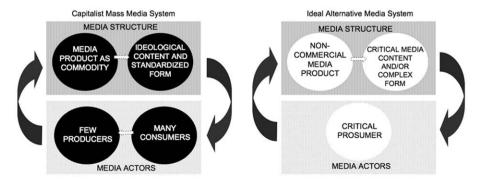

Fig. 1. A model of capitalist mass media vs. an ideal model of alternative media.

criticized those models of alternative media that exclusively focus on exercising prefigurative politics and collective organization practices and therefore often fail in reaching an audience for their media products. This means that under capitalism non-commercial, participatory, and collective organization can often only be sustained at the cost of public visibility and political effectiveness. Gaining public visibility under capitalism requires financial resources for producing and distributing media products. Realizing an ideal model of alternative media presupposes different societal conditions. This means that it requires that people have enough time and skills for not only consuming, but also producing media content and that the necessary technologies for media production are freely available. Alternative media that try to realize the ideal model to the full extend within capitalism are therefore likely to fail in reaching a broad audience. But reaching a broad audience is necessary if alternative media want to effectively contrast the ideologies produced by capitalist mass media with critical knowledge. Under capitalism the ideal model of alternative media can hardly be politically effective. In order to advance alternative media strategies that support societal transformation and emancipation, the strict dichotomy between capitalist mass media and alternative media cannot be successfully practiced. Therefore minimum requirements for speaking of an alternative medium have to be defined. This means that alternative media at some levels can also employ capitalist techniques of media production in order to advance their political aims. Alternative media can make use of capitalist structures and at the same time criticize these structures. Herbert Marcuse in this context spoke of "*working against the established institutions, while working in them*" (Marcuse, 1972, p. 55).

We argue that critical content should be considered as minimum requirement for defining alternative media: capitalism is a societal system, which brings about social inequality. In a capitalist society participation is only possible to a very limited extent: private property of the means of production means centralized control that is incompatible with the idea of a democratic economy. For representatives of participatory democracy theory, such as Macpherson (1973) and Pateman (1970), participatory democracy is not only about discourse, but also and most importantly about democratic ownership and grassroots decision-making. These authors argue that democracy is only true if it is not limited to the political realm, but extended all over society so that systems like the economy are based on participatory ownership and decision-making. This means that the realization of a participatory society presupposes societal conditions that cannot be found today. In order to contribute to societal transformations towards a participatory society critique is necessary. Critique is a means for pointing at the unequal, dominative, and non-participatory character of contemporary society. It is understood as radical humanism, opposition to all domination, and as struggle for participatory democracy. We argue that by providing critical content alternative media can help advancing societal transformations and contribute to the realization of a truly participatory society, because critical content expresses progressive political interests and tries to give attention to the realization of suppressed possibilities of societal development. Critical media are negative in so far as they relate phenomena to societal problems, to what society has failed to become and to tendencies that question and contradict the dominant and dominative mode of societal operation and have the potential to become positive forces of change towards a better society. Critical media in one or the other respect take the standpoint of oppressed groups or exploited classes and make the judgement that structures of oppression and exploitation benefit certain classes at the expense of others and hence should be radically transformed by social struggles. They aim at advancing social struggles that transform society towards the realization of co-operative and participatory potentials. Horkheimer (2002) argues that the central goal of critical theory is "*the happiness of all individuals*" (p. 248), which requires "*a state of affairs in which there will be no exploitation or oppression*" (p. 241). Participation is not just discourse and raising one's voice, it is much more material and universal. Philosophically idealistic notions of participation, as frequently encountered in alternative and community media studies and practice, are based on reductive notions of participation that exclude economic qualities of democracy by strictly focusing on discourse. Critique of society as a whole is needed for establishing participatory democracy. Alternative media have potentials for making viable contributions in the struggles for participatory democracy, which means that they should act as critical media. We therefore situate the notion of alternative media as critical media at the heart of our alternative media approach. An alternative media soul without a heart will never work for alleviating human suffering.

For us, the minimum requirement for speaking of alternative media is that on the structural level critical media content and/or complex form is provided and that on the actor level media producers produce critical content. At the level of economic product form and at the level production processes alternative media need not necessarily be alternative. This means that also commercial and non-participatory media can be understood as alternative as long as they produce and distribute critical media content (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 shows that at the structural level the economic form of media products should not be considered as decisive for the alternative character of media. The minimum requirement for speaking of an alternative medium is critical content and/or complex form. Some critical political economists have argued that it is hardly possible that media are at the same time commercial and critical (see for example Garnham, 2006; Knoche, 2003; Smythe, 1981, 2006). Commercial financing in their opinion leads necessarily to ideological content because it creates dependencies on the ruling class. Ideological content in this context is understood in the sense of many critical theorists who have pointed out that the exchange value character of cultural commodities is likely to result in a standardization of reception and the resulting ideas, and that the consciousness of humans is instrumentalized for dominant interests so that potential resistance would be forestalled. The argument that commercial organization necessarily leads to ideological content is based on a simple deterministic cause–effect model of base-superstructure, in which the economic base fully determines culture. A dialectical model of base-superstructure sees both levels as co-dependent, mutually producing, and relatively autonomous (Fuchs, 2008, p. 62–71). Therefore commercial financing as base and critical content as superstructure of alternative media do not necessarily come into fundamental

Fig. 2. Characteristics of alternative media.

conflict. Nevertheless, becoming subsumed under the political interest of their financiers certainly constantly endangers alternative media that employ commercial mechanisms of financing. The danger is that alternative media could loose their independence at the organizational as well as at the content level: at the organizational level this could result in restrictions in access to media production and organization; at the content level a results could be the reduction of critical content and the standardization of formats (Dunaway, 1998). Thus it is a difficult, but a very important and not impossible task for alternative media to maintain independence at least at the level of content from interests that can represent their economic base. If they fail in doing so and their political aims get lost their alternative character vanishes. The concept of "*working against the established institutions, while working in them*" (Marcuse, 1972, p. 55) is always accompanied by the danger of getting subsumed under the interests of the established institutions. But at the same time it is often the only chance to step out from marginality and to increase the societal impact of alternative media. It certainly is desirable that alternative media are critical, reach a broad public, and are at the same time non-commercial. Karl Marx considered the independence from commercial mechanisms as crucial for a free press: "*The primary freedom of the press lies in not being a trade*" (Marx, 1842, p. 71). But under the existing societal conditions, mobilizing financial resources often is the only way for overcoming marginality. As Marcuse pointed out, counter-institutions "*have long been an aim of the [left] movement, but the lack of funds was greatly responsible for their weakness and their inferior quality. They must be made competitive. This is especially important for the development of radical, 'free' media.* [...] *They can be competitive, that is to say, apt to counteract Establishment education, not only where they fill a vacuum or where their quality is not only different but also superior. The collection of large funds for the operation of effective counter-institutions requires compromises*" (Marcuse, 1972, p. 55f).

Fig. 2 also shows that at the actor level media need not necessarily abolish the distinction between media producers and media consumers for being alternative. At the actor level, the minimum requirement for speaking of an alternative medium is that media producers produce critical media content. Furthermore, alternative reception is not included in the definition of alternative media because alternative media cannot determine whether or not media content is critically interpreted. Critical content can also be interpreted in an uncritical way. Especially in a capitalist society, in which the constant distribution of ideologies hampers critical consciousness, it cannot be assumed that critical media content is always interpreted critically.

John Downing speaks of alternative media as radical media that "*express an alternative vision to hegemonic politics, priorities and perspectives*" (Downing, 2001, p. v). For Downing too, radical media need not necessarily be participatory media. He points out that sometimes professional organization is important for challenging hegemony: "*Some forms of organized leadership are essentially for coordinate challenges to the ideological hegemony of capital and to put forward credible alternative programs and perspectives*" (Downing, 2001, p. 15). Also Tim O'Sullivan has given a definition of alternative media that is more oriented on political projects rather than on participatory interaction. He describes alternative media as "*forms of media communication that avowedly reject or challenge established and institutional politics, in the sense that they all advocate change in society, or at least a critical reassessment of traditional values*" (O'Sullivan, 1994, p. 10).

In summary, alternative media can be understood as media that try to contribute to emancipatory societal transformation by providing critical media content, content that questions dominative social relations. We argue for politically effective alternative media that in order to advance transformative political can include certain elements of capitalist mass media as well as elements of the ideal type of alternative media.

Media can be understood as alternative only as long as there are critical producers that objectify their subjective critical consciousness into objective critical media content that is distributed and can be consumed. Alternative media are critical

media. The notion of critique that underlies our concept of alternative media is the Marxian one as laid out in the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*:

> "*Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates ad hominem, and it demonstrates ad hominem as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself (. . .). The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest essence for man – hence, with the categoric imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence, relations which cannot be better described than by the cry of a Frenchman when it was planned to introduce a tax on dogs: Poor dogs! They want to treat you as human beings!*" (Marx, 1844, p. 385).

There are different degrees to which certain dimensions are alternative in alternative media and alternative culture. The only necessary stipulation for critical mass media is that there is critical content in the sense just discussed. We propose a model of alternative media as critical media that pursue radical criticism at the level of content, but are not necessarily alternative at the level of economic product form and production processes. For such alternative media to be successful reaching a broad audience for their critical ideas is of central importance. The success of alternative media depends on their ability to gain public visibility for their critical media content. This argument is based on a dialectical understanding of social transformations: Herbert Marcuse pointed out that in order to transform society the negativity of the existing societal relation has to be actively negated by critical political actions (Marcuse, 1962: p. 276). Critical political actions can only take place if the people are aware of the oppressive character of the existing capitalist relations and want to negate them. Small-scale alternative media can be fruitful tools for communication and coordination between political activists who are already aware of the dominative character of capitalism, but they are not able to effectively contrast ruling ideas and bring about large-scale political changes.

An example for a dialectical alternative media strategy is the Canadian Adbusters magazine. It is financed by donations and sales and has a paid circulation of about 120.000. Adbusters is critical of capitalism, supports social movements and calls for political activism. Through critical reporting the journal wants to contribute to "*topple existing power structures and forge a major shift in the way we will live in the 21st century*" (Adbusters, 2009). The bimonthly journal Mother Jones has a paid circulation of 240.000 and is financed by donations, sales and advertising. It aims at supporting social change by critical reporting and investigative journalism (Mother Jones, 2009). These examples have in common that they use mainstream distribution channels and have an appealing design. This makes them more accessible for a broad audience. Rodney Benson conducted a content analysis of four Californian alternative Newsweeklies (LA Weekly, New Times LA, San Francisco Bay Guardian, SF Weekly) that are entirely financed by sales and advertising. The study showed that especially the San Francisco Bay Guardian is critical of capitalism and reports on political activism. Benson concludes: "*This study has called into question the common research assumption that commercialism, especially advertising, necessarily undermines the critical, oppositional stance of the press. Although relying on advertising to a greater extent than U.S. daily newspapers, many urban newsweeklies offer news and views ignored by the mainstream media, as well as encouraging passionate democratic debate and, in some cases, active political involvement*" (Benson, 2003, p. 124).

5. Conclusion

We have argued that the discourse on alternative and participatory media should be situated within the context of the analysis of capitalism. Capitalism brings about structural inequalities that shape the limits and potentials of alternative media projects. Power relations and the unequal distribution of resources stratify public visibility of actors and opinions. Giving people a voice by involving them in media production does therefore not mean that their voice is also heard. Participatory production processes can also be used for advancing repressive purposes and profit accumulation.

Therefore an understanding of alternative media as participatory media is insufficient. Instead we have introduced an understanding of alternative media as critical media. We have constructed a model of ideal-type alternative media. The focus of alternative media on collective organization and non-commercial financing often creates difficulties in resource allocation and in attaining public visibility. Such media therefore often remain small in scale and invisible for many people. They are suited for local community-building and for enabling communication within existing social movements and activist groups.

Alternative media have the potential "not only to 'preach the converted' but to broaden the worldviews of ordinary citizens who were literally just looking for a movie on Saturday night" (Benson, 2003, p. 124). If alternative media want to do more than to "preach the converted", they have to try to increase their public visibility and to attract as many recipients as possible. This is often only possible by not strictly adhering to the dogmas of participatory organization and non-commercial financing. Thus we have argued that media that use commercial financing or professional organization should not be excluded as alternative media as long as they produce critical content. Critical media content should be used as minimum requirement for defining alternative media. Critical content shows suppressed possibilities of existence, antagonisms of reality, potentials for change, questions domination, expresses the standpoints of oppressed and dominated groups and individuals and argues for the advancement of a co-operative society.

Partisanship for the oppressed is an aspect of alternative media that was expressed by Marx in his writings on the press: the press would be "*the public watchdog, the tireless denouncer of those in power, the omnipresent eye, the omnipresent mouthpiece of the people's spirit that jealously guards its freedom*" (Marx, 1849, p. 231). "*It is the duty of the press to come forward on*

behalf of the oppressed in its immediate neighbourhood", the "*first duty of the press now is to undermine all the foundations of the existing political state of affairs*" (Marx, 1849, p. 234). To practice alternative media as critical media allows to question ruling ideas and to contribute to the realization of suppressed societal alternatives. Such alternatives are based on the vision of a truly democratic society without oppression, in which grassroots participation is not restricted to interaction, but shapes all realms of society.

References

Adbusters. About us <http://adbusters.org/network/about_us.php> (18.05.2009).
AMARC (World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters), 2007. Community Radio Social Impact Assessment. AMARC Global Evaluation.
Atton, Chris, 2002. Alternative Media. Sage, London.
Atton, Chris, 2004. An Alternative Internet. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
Atton, Chris, 2008. Alternative media and journalism practice. In: Boler, Magan (Ed.), Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, pp. 213–227.
Bennett, W. Lance, 2003. New media power: the Internet and global activism. In: Couldry Nick, Curran James (Eds.), Contesting Media Power. Alternative Media in a Networked World. Rowman and Littlefield, London, pp. 17–38.
Bennett, W. Lance, 2004. Communicating global activism: strengths and vulnerabilities of networked politics. In: De Donk Wim van, Loader Brian D., Nixon Paul, Rucht, Dieter (Eds.), Cyberprotest. New Media, Citizens and Social Movements. Routledge, New York, pp. 123–146.
Benson Rodney, 2003. Commercialism and critique: California's alternative weeklies. In: Couldry Nick, Curran James (Eds.), Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World. Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, pp. 111–127.
Beywl Wolfgang, Brombach, Hartmut, 1982. Kritische Anmerkungen zur Theorie der Alternativpresse. Publizistik 27(4), 551–569.
Cammaerts Bart, 2007b. Blogs, online forums, public spaces and extreme right in North Belgium. In: Carpentier Nico et al. (Eds.), Media Technologies and Democracy in an Enlarged Europe. The Intellectual Work of the 2007 European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School. Tartu University Press, Tartu, pp. 137–151.
Carpentier Nico, 2007a. Participation and media. In: Cammarts Bart, Carpentier Nico (Eds.), Reclaiming the Media. Communication Rights and Democratic Media Roles. ECREA Book Series, pp. 87–91.
Carpentier Nico, 2007b. Theoretical frameworks for participatory media. In: Carpentier Nico et al. (Eds.), Media Technologies and Democracy in an Enlarged Europe. The Intellectual Work of the 2007 European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School. Tartu University Press, Tartu, pp. 105–122.
Comedia, 1984. The Alternative Press: The Development of Underdevelopment. Media, Culture and Society, vol. 6. pp. 95–102.
Couldry Nick, 2003. Beyond the hall of mirrors? Some theoretical reflections on the global contestation of media power. In: Couldry Nick, Curran James (Eds.), Contesting Media Power. Alternative Media in a Networked World. Rowman and Littlefield, London, pp. 39–54.
Coyer Kate, 2007. Access to broadcasting: radio. In: Dowmunt Tony, Coyer Kate, Fountain Alan (Eds.), The Alternative Media Handbook. Routledge, Oxon, pp. 112–122.
Curran James, 2002. Media and Power. Routledge, New York.
Curran James, 2003. Global journalism: a case study of the Internet. In: Couldry Nick, Curran James (Eds.), Contesting Media Power. Alternative Media in a Networked World. Rowman and Littlefield, London, pp. 227–241.
Dagron Alfonso Gumucio, 2004. The long and winding road of alternative media. In: Downing, John H. (Ed.), The SAGE Handbook of Media Studies. SAGE, London, pp. 41–63.
DeFeo Chuck, 2007. Call in now! How Townhall.com merged online community with a talk radio audience. Paper presented at the We Media Conference 2007. Online: <http://wemedia.com/2007/01/05/call-in-now-how-townhallcom-merged-online-community-with-a-talk-radio-audience/> (22.04.2009).
Dowmunt Tony, Coyer Kate, 2007. Introduction. In: Dowmunt Tony, Coyer Kate, Fountain Alan (Eds.), The Alternative Media Handbook. Routledge, Oxon, pp. 1–12.
Downing John H., 2001. Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements. Sage, London.
Dunaway, David, 1998. Comunity radio at the beginning of the 21st century: commercialism vs. community power. Javnost - The Public 5(2), 87–103.
Free Republic, 2009. About us <http://www.freerepublic.com/home.htm> (20.04.2009).
Fuchs Christian, 2008. Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age. Routledge, New York.
Fuchs Christian, 2009. Information and communication technologies and society. A contribution to the critique of the political economy of the Internet. European Journal of Communication 24(1), 69–87.
Fuchs Christian, forthcoming. Class, knowledge, and new media. Media, Culture and Society, 32.
Garnham Nicholas, 2006. Contribution to a political economy of mass-communication. In: Durham Meenakshi Gigi, Kellner Douglas (Eds.), Media and Cultural Studies. KeyWorks. Blackwell, Malden/Oxford/Carlton, pp. 201–229.
Girard Bruce, 1992. A Passion for Radio: Radio Waves and Community. Black Rose Books, Montreal.
Habermas Jürgen, 1991. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
Hillard, Robert L., Keith, Michael C., 1999. Waves of Rancor: Tuning in the Radical Right. M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY.
Horkheimer, Max, 2002. Critical Theory. Continuum, New York.
Hüttner Bernd, 2006. Alternative Meden sind tot, es leben die alternativen Medien. In: Hüttner Bernd (Ed.), Verzeichnis der Alternativmedien 2006/2007. AG SPAK, Neu-Ulm, pp. 13–22.
Hyde Gene, 2002. Independent Media Centers: Cyber-subversion and the alternative press. In: First Monday 2002; 7:4 Online: <http://www.firstmonday.org/Issues/issue7_4/hyde/index.html> (2.01.2008).
Indymedia, 2009. About us <http://www.indymedia.org/en/static/about.shtml> (22.04.2009).
Jankowski Nicholas, 2003. Community media research: a quest for theoretically grounded models. Javnost – The Public 10(1), 5–14.
KEA, 2007. The State of Community Media in the European Union. Online: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/expert/eStudies.do?language=EN> (2.12.2008).
Knoche, Manfred, 2003. Freie Radios – frei von Staat, Markt und Kapital(ismus)? Medien Journal 27(4), pp. 4–19.
Lewis Peter M., 1976. Bristol Channel and Community Television. IBA, London.
Macpherson, Crawford, 1973. Democratic Theory. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Marcuse, Herbert, 1962. Vernunft und Revolution. Hegel und die Entstehung der Gesellschaftstheorie. Luchterhand, Neuwied am Rhein/Berlin-Spandau.
Marcuse, Herbert, 1956. Repressive tolerance. In: Wolff Robert Paul, Moore Barrington Jr., Marcuse Herbert (Eds.), A Critique of Pure Tolerance. Beacon Press, Boston, pp. 95–137.
Marcuse, Herbert, 1972. Counterrevolution and Revolt. Beacon Press, Boston.
Marx, Karl, 1842. Debatten über Pressfreiheit und Publikation der Landständischen Verhandlungen. In: MEW, vol. 1. Dietz, Berlin, pp. 28–77.
Marx, Karl, 1844. Einführung in die Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. In: MEW, vol. 1. Dietz, Berlin, pp. 378–391.
Marx, Karl, 1849. Der erste Preßprozeß der "Neuen Rheinischen Zeitung": Verteidigungsrede von Karl Marx. In: MEW, vol. 6. Dietz, Berlin, pp. 223–234.
Meikle Graham, 2002. Future Active. Media Activism and the Internet. Routledge/Pluto, New York.
Mother Jones, 2009. About us <http://www.motherjones.com/about> (18.05.2009).
National Democratic Party of Germany, 2009. Forum <http://forum.deutscher-netzdienst.de/Deutschlandforum/> (20.04.2009).

O'Sullivan Tim, 1994. Alternative media. In: O'Sullivan Tim, Hartley John, Saunders Danny, Montgomery Martin, Fiske John (Eds.), Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies. Routledge, New York, p. 10.

Pajnik Mojca, Downing John, 2008. Introduction: the challenges of nano-media. In: Pajnik Mojca, Downing John (Eds.), Alternative Media and the Politics of Resistance. Peace Institute, Ljubljana, pp. 7–16.

Pateman Carole, 1970. Participation and Democratic Theory. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Peissl Helmut, Tremetzberger Otto, 2008. Community Media in Europe: Legal and Economic Contexts of the Third Broadcast Sector in 5 Countries. English Summary. Online: http://www.communitymedia.eu/images/publications_books/2008_rtr_community_media_in_europe_eng.pdf (15.02.2008).

Rodriguez, Clemencia, 2003. The bishop and his Star: citizens' communication in southern Chile. In: Couldry Nick, Curran James (Eds.), Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World. Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, pp. 177–194.

Rosenkrands Jacob. Politicizing homo economics: analysis of anti-corporate websites. In: De Donk Wim van, Loader Brian D, Nixon Paul G., Rucht Dieter (Eds.), Cyberprotest. New Media, Citizens and Social Movements. Routledge, New York, pp. 57–76.

Rucht Dieter, 2004. The quadruple 'Á. Media strategies or protest movements since the 1960s. In: De Donk Wim van, Loader Brian D., Nixon Paul G., Rucht Dieter (Eds.), Cyberprotest. New Media, Citizens and Social Movements. Routledge, New York, pp. 29–56.

Servaes Jan. Communication for Development: One World, Multiple Cultures. Hampton Press, Cresskill, NJ.

Smythe Dallas W., 2006. On the audience commodity and its work. In: Meenakshi Gigi Durham, Kellner Douglas (Eds.), Media and Cultural Studies. Blackwell, Malden, MA, pp. 230–256.

Terranova, T., 2000. Free labor: producing culture for the digital economy. Social Text 18(2), 33–58.

Townhall, 2009. About us http://townhall.com/AboutUs.aspx (20.04.2009).

Vegh, Sandor, 2003. Classifying forms of online activism: the case of cyberprotest against the world bank. In: McCaughey Martha, Ayers Michael D. (Eds.), Cyberactivism. Online Activism in Theory and Practice. Routledge, New York, pp. 71–96.

Viguerie Richard A., Franke David, 2004. America's right turn: how conservatives used new and alternative media to take power. Bonus Books, Santa Monics, CA.

Weichler, Kurt, 1987. Die anderen Medien: Theorie und Praxis alternativer Kommunikation. Vistas, Berlin.

Wright Steve, 2004. Informing, communicating and ICTs in contemporary anti-capitalist Movements. In: De Donk Wim van, Loader Brian D, Nixon Paul G., Rucht Dieter (Eds.), Cyberprotest. New Media, Citizens and Social Movements. Routledge, New York, pp. 77–93.