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❖ **Atton, Chris & James F Hamilton - Alternative Journalism, Sage, London, 2008, (pp. 192) ISBN 978-1-4129-4703-9**

Reviewed by Martin Hirst

I opened this book and it seemed full of promise. It claims to be the first "academic book-length study" of alternative journalism. It also claims to critique the very epistemology of mainstream news and it seeks to address the "imbalance of media power" that marginalizes and demonizes radical or non-mainstream social groups.

"This is my kind of book," I thought.

The central theme is that "alternative journalism" is generally a response to capitalism and imperialism "as the global dynamic of domination and consolidation". And, already, right here in the introduction, the authors seek to identify the "powerful dialectic" that exists between "the use of a neoliberal new technology that is largely in the control of Western economic forces, and its deployment as a radically reforming (if not revolutionary) tool for globalized, social-movement-based activism." (p. 4) This is a lot of responsibility on the shoulders of the "alternative" journalists – to be at the vanguard of resistance to imperialism and global capital. By page five I was wondering if the book could in fact live up to its early promises.

So, what is "alternative journalism", because surely any definition has to have more substance than as a response to the cultural logic of late capitalism? According to Atton and Hamilton, alternative journalism (I can drop the quotes now) is a broad and comparative term that embraces not only "journalisms of politics and empowerment", but also "those of popular culture and the everyday" (p. 4). Further, it is produced "outside mainstream media institutions and networks" and by amateurs "who typically have little or no training or professional qualifications as journalists" (p. 1). If this sounds remarkably like definitions of citizen-journalism, that's because it is. In fact, alternative journalists may well be writing and reporting in their capacity as "citizens, as members of communities, as activists or as fans" (p. 2).

Towards the end of the book in an interesting chapter about "theorizing" alternative journalism, a few more clues to this definition emerge. It seems that alternative journalism is about the ordinary (non-elite) people; it is by and for them, too. The authors suggest it might be "native

journalism", amateur reporters working to report their "community of interest" (p.127). The most solid definition builds on the fundamental characteristics of alternative media: relative autonomy from both capital and the State, the pursuit of progressive political goals and "horizontal communication" between members of marginalized, or oppressed groups (p.125).

This is a very broad definition and – I would argue – one that is contested and open to critique. But, Atton and Hamilton open it up further ... "there are examples of alternative journalism where professional journalists and professional techniques are employed, often in ways radically different from their conventional uses" (p. 2). In other words, it seems, anything that occurs outside the mainstream news media is, by virtue of its exclusion from the MSM, "alternative".

I have discussed this definitional issue at length here because it is important to understand the loose semantics around the whole conceptualisation of "alternative" (there's those damn quote marks again) journalism. Is it the same as "citizen journalism"? How do we differentiate it from "amateur" journalism? How close or distant to the mainstream can it be and remain "alternative"?

It is all too common in the emerging literature in this field to fudge or hedge the borders of alternative, amateur, citizen and accidental journalist. This confusion – or lack of agreed terminology perhaps – is evident in a recent journal article by Colleen Murrell and Mandy Oakham (2008, pp. 11-21) in which the emergence of user-generated content (UGC) on traditional news media websites, is described as a form of citizen journalism. In my view there has to be a clear distinction between interactive commentary, blogs, the broadening of journalistic sources, the flow of un-moderated UGC into news websites, the amateur who writes for a local paper or news outlet, and what we might properly call citizen journalism.

Perhaps Atton and Hamilton have a point when they argue that alternative journalism tends to have a political purpose. To me, a valid definition of citizen journalism should embrace this idea. This narrows citizen journalism to a smaller field – one characterized by news information that is produced outside mainstream newsrooms and that has a clear positional aspect in relation to its subject matter.

If we can hold with this definition it means that we can provide equally tight definitions for other forms of alternative journalism – the accidental journalist, for example, as someone who happens to be on-the-spot when a story breaks and provides some form of packaged content, or the amateur, an untrained but dedicated provider of local news.

Such content will most likely be further mediated by newsroom gatekeepers, but it may include video and audio, still images and even the basics of a news story in text. I believe that these narrower definitions also help to clear up confusion about blogs and bloggers. While some blogs are clearly journalistic, most are commentary on events or other media. Very few blogs incorporate much in the way of original reporting, interviews, etc. in what we might call a 'news-like' manner.

It is equally common for promoters of alternative journalism to also proclaim that the revolution to create a truly democratic media has begun. Dan Gillmor's *We, the media* (2006) falls into this category, as does much of the material produced by Jeff Jarvis on his BuzzMachine blog and many others. I am not a pessimistic person, but I have not noticed

much of a revolution in my neighbourhood. Quite often such digital optimists fail to look beyond the technology. The toys and the speed tend to dazzle and distract from critical analysis. While I applaud many of the experiments carried out in the name of alternative journalism – such as beat-blogging and the hyper-local, or the use of Twitter and Facebook as journalistic tools – the question really remains: how alternative are they? They may well be new methods, or at least attempts to develop new methods, and they take full advantage of the new digital technologies, but too many of them fail to move beyond their small beginnings.

A recent attempt to use Facebook as a site for journalistic experimentation is a good example of the right idea (perhaps), but in the wrong time. While the group Journalists and Facebook has over 12000 members globally, there is very little activity on the site and most discussion board postings attract no responses. When I posted a thread on the 5th of March asking people to respond to a fairly provocative question about how useful Facebook is to journalists, it garnered only one response.

It seems that neither mainstream, nor alternative journalists, are all that interested in the discussion, or at least have nothing useful to contribute.

This leads me to the conclusion that the whole concept of alternative journalism is somehow flawed. Yes, it exists in the form of ezines, fanzines, community broadcasting (though that can also have a commercial aspect) and the political press, but these are miniscule and have no influence, while the mainstream media, for all its flaws, does have both reach and influence. This is not to doubt that, as Murrell and Oakham argue, citizen journalism (or, if you prefer, alternative forms of journalism) do pose a challenge to the mainstream media, but the bigger challenge is the failing political economy of the industrial journalism model. The challenge of UCG and alternative journalism is the problem of incorporation; the economics of the business are a problem of survival.

For all its claims to challenge the epistemology of journalism in a capitalist mode of production, alternative journalism remains a trickle next to the mighty ocean of the mainstream. Thus, my disappointment with Alternative Journalism begins with the first chapter which claims to trace the “breakdown of the authority of bourgeois journalism” (p. 10). I am totally in favour of breaking down the authority of bourgeois journalism, but I am not so sure that it has happened, or is even happening, at any real measurable pace. This is not to say that the business model is robust. As recent events have highlighted, the mainstream news media (particularly newspapers), is in spectacular financial free-fall.

The question here is again one of definition and semantics, but it is also about historical analysis. What do you mean by “bourgeois journalism”? The authors get off to a good start here by visiting the work of Raymond Williams from the 1970s and 1980s. At the time Williams was right to praise the bourgeoisie for the creation of the modern, free press and what Jürgen Habermas called the bourgeois public sphere. In the 1970s and 1980s, Williams outlined the possibilities of oppositional cultures – the ability of proletarian cultural forms, such as the trade union, to challenge capitalism. Folk music and punk were similar cultural challenges, but I do not see Twitter, or social networks, as offering much resistance to capitalism.

It is in relation to Williams, Habermas and the subsequent degeneration of both bourgeois journalism and the public sphere, under the relations of production of monopoly capitalism, that Atton and Hamilton begin to lose me. They do not deepen their analysis beyond

establishing "bourgeois journalism" as an essential category against which alternative journalism has become the "other", and hence their attempt to "historicize" alternative journalism founders. Instead "bourgeois" journalism is established as a fixed ideal that encompasses the whole of the mass media against which the alternative must constantly struggle.

The missing ingredient in their discussion of bourgeois journalism is any mention at all of the revolution which brought the bourgeoisie to power. A revolutionary class needs its own press to agitate, propagandise, organize and mobilize. The early bourgeois press played this role with great vigour in Western Europe – particularly France and the United Kingdom – and in the New World. Here this gets only a few words, but it must be explored more if we are to understand why the capitalist news media today no longer plays a revolutionary, or – in most cases – even mildly reformist, role in politics. The transition from radical party press to commercial mass production of newspapers was a necessary move by the bourgeoisie to harness the consumption of workers, while at the same time distracting them with apolitical and often salacious tidbits of "news" information that was totally stripped of any radical content.

The industrial model of journalistic production and its attendant ideologies of professionalism and objectivity, were a necessary response to the needs of capital. On one hand, all production is organized this way in a capitalist mode of production; secondly, the expansion of consumer society requires (for some twisted reason), advertising; and thirdly, by framing the news according to its own social and cultural values, the ruling class was able to inculcate these ideas into the heads of workers, thus ensuring the ongoing loyalty of the proletariat. Thus, in Gramscian terms, the news media was part of the apparatus of bourgeois hegemony (Gramsci 1992).

Bourgeois journalism has actually been very successful. Not only has it maintained the news industry – the production of industrial journalism – it has also consistently delivered the ideological props that maintain commodity production and capitalism as the dominant social system. Perhaps the new crisis of global capitalism will alter this – certainly the business model seems to be failing.

Despite invoking the dialectic in the first few pages of this book, it is not carried through as a methodology. But it is precisely the contradictions within the bourgeois model of both journalism and the public sphere that drives alternative journalism in its various forms. What is missing from Atton and Hamilton's critique is an understanding of why the mainstream media today is so reactionary (of course there are exceptions, but few and far between). The key answer is that the bourgeoisie no longer needs a radical press (except at the more extreme ends of the business lobby), because the main function of the news media today is one of social control. The news media revolves around what Daniel Hallin (1989) calls the spheres of consensus and limited controversy – debate is limited to acceptable topics and boundaries, beyond which lies deviance (and perhaps alternative journalism).

It seems that alternative modes of address in journalism – radical, questioning journalism – have had little, if any, real impact on capitalist hegemony. Of course they have, at least around the margins. Today we see further attempts at incorporation, as Atton and Hamilton point out – blogs are now mainstream and embedded in most commercial news websites.

One particular and important role of the news media is to maintain the hegemony of capitalist social relations. This means that at its most base, the news media functions to dampen, if not destroy, any enthusiasm the proletariat might have for revolution against continuing – if unstable – bourgeois rule. To be fair, some of these issues are raised in the theory chapter where the Bourdieudian construction of journalism as a field of cultural production is introduced. I'm not necessarily a fan of Bourdieu's work and don't regard it as anything essentially new or enlightening. However, I think the idea of liminal (marginal) spaces in which alternative journalisms exist is useful as it relates directly to a dialectical understanding of journalism practice. These liminal spaces represent the margins of capital accumulation. That is why the industrial media is so keen to colonise them and to monetise the clickstream of blogs, social networking, UGC and amateur/accidental journalism.

If bourgeois journalism is essentialised, then so too is its counterpoint – alternative journalism. Alternative journalism is such a broad category that, to some degree, it loses any real analytical, or theoretical potency. Indeed, by page 131 the authors are finally dealing with the "imprecision of a term like 'alternative'". Alternative journalism, in this book, covers everything from Colombian community radios to the socialist press, samizdat pamphlets, music fanzines and local community media in northern UK and it may, or may not, have a working relationship with professional journalism. There is no key attribute – social, economic, cultural or ideological – that defines alternative journalism.

To some degree this diversity is a strength for loosely defined alternative journalism. It demonstrates that there are cultural spaces of liminality in which many forms of counter-hegemonic journalism can exist, if not flourish. The book's survey of these liminal gaps and niches demonstrates that non-mainstream media do have a rich history. What is missing is any real attempt to explain the lack of success that these alternatives have enjoyed beyond the cultural margins.

I'm not sure if this book should find a home in media studies courses, though I have no doubt that it will. It is, however, an important, if flawed, contribution to our understanding of the broad field of journalism. There is a need for works such as this to continue and deepen our collective critique of bourgeois journalism. After all, if you are a believer in democratic media and the empowerment of the disposed then you have to also believe in alternative journalism.

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