Voices of Dissent:
Activists' Engagements in the Creation of Alternative, Autonomous, Radical and Independent Media

Alice Mattoni, Andrejs Berdnikovs, Michela Ardizzoni and Laurence Cox

Introduction

"Alternative media function as environments that facilitate the fermentation of identities and power positions. In other words, alternative media spin transformative processes that alter people's senses of self, their subjective positioning, and therefore their access to power." (Rodriguez 2001, 18)

In her seminal work on citizens' media in Latin America, Clemencia Rodriguez points out the pivotal role that alternative media practices have in empowering citizens to develop new understandings and images of themselves outside the corporate space of mediation created by mainstream media channels and outlets. The expression "citizen media", however, is only one of the many labels employed to speak about alternative media at large. For many years a marginal field of investigation, in recent decades many monographs, special journal issues and edited volumes have been devoted to alternative media. The emancipation of this subject, which is today considered a respectable academic topic across many disciplines, has gone hand in hand with the flourishing of terms and expressions related to those media messages, outlets and channels which are created and diffused outside commercial informational circuits (Atton 2007).

In the academic literature, various labels are used to name the grassroots creation of channels and/or contents outside commercial media and/or opposing the dominant system of meanings. These range from "radical media" (Downing 2001) to "citizens media" (Rodriguez 2001) and from "critical media" (Fuchs 2010) to "social movement media" (Atton 2003). Hadl (2007) has addressed the epistemological reasons for such diversity and richness in the academic field. Each expression, obviously, has different connotations and implies a different explanation of the main qualities characterizing alternative media. Without dismissing these important differences and the theoretical debates revolving around them, here we employ the broad and encompassing label "alternative media", which signals the existence of media that are alternative to corporate media in terms both of their production and their diffusion processes (Atton 2002).

Many expressions have also been generated by the conceptual work of alternative media practitioners, often at the crossroads between the field of progressive academia and radical social movement milieus. For instance, terms like "autonomous media" (Langlois and Dubois 2005), "tactical media", (Garcia and Lovink 1997), and "*media sociali*" (Chainworkers 2006) were first elaborated and circulated within the activist field, both online and offline, and testify once more to the importance of reflexive practices for the production of critical knowledge on the media environment and on its mechanisms.

The use of alternative media is frequently though not always linked to social movements and protest cultures. Progressive activist groups often employ alternative media as spaces to develop and share critical discourses on contentious issues. They become, therefore, important counter-public spheres where activists construct common understandings about mobilization, elaborate further reflections about themselves and propose an alternative point of view on their societies. Both in the latent and visible stages of mobilizations, alternative media serve as a space of counter culture which is intrinsically linked to the deconstruction of corporate media power. In this respect, alternative media practices often challenge mainstream / dominant discourses through the collective elaboration of powerful imageries that make visible alternative points of view about their societies. Alternative media, moreover, function as a space of socialization and organization for social movement practitioners around the world: they sustain connections across the inner borders of our globalized worlds and support the diffusion of activists' ideas and practices from one social movement culture to another.

Alternative media, however, do not develop in a void: they continuously challenge and are challenged by the presence of local, national and transnational media corporations and commercial platforms. They exist in a changing and evolving media environment, in which top-down and one-way communication flows develop in parallel and even intertwine with bottom-up, two-way communication flows. Always multifaceted and rich in communication channels, today's media ecology revolves around the intertwining of multiple platforms, applications, supports and outlets. Different levels of communication flows overlap: from the mass broadcasting of global television to the information provided by national print press; from local community street televisions to widespread user-generated content spread in social networking sites.

Furthermore, since the 18th century at least the history of alternative media has also been marked by processes where yesterday's (partially successful) alternative media become part of today's media establishment; where states and conservative forces have constructed their own media in the image of their grassroots opponents; and where the creative energy of popular media has been constantly commodified and turned into new sources of profit. This is at least as true for the relationship between early "Internet culture", Indymedia and so on and "Web 2.0" and social networking sites as it is for that between British and American subcultures of the 1950s and 1960s and the generation of today's

music industry, or indeed that between underground, democratic or working-class newspapers in 19th century Europe and the development of the "gutter press".

Another element of continuity, dating back at least to the European resistance if not the "Atlantic revolutions" of the 18th century and continuing to recent "colour revolutions" in the ex-Soviet bloc and current struggles in Asia, is the extent to which alternative media in particular can be attractive targets for funding from other states keen not so much to support popular protest in general as to destabilize the regime or support their own preferred alternative contenders. The combination of the small numbers usually needed to produce alternative media, the disproportionate impact of even limited amounts of funding and its potential for high visibility mean that it is routinely difficult, for local citizens as well as for outside observers, to distinguish between such "astroturf" (fake grassroots) media and media which are genuinely part of popular movements.

The diversity of alternative media, and the evolving nature of the political and media environment in which they are situated, demands that how they are defined, their role in society in general and in relation to social movements in particular, depends upon constant conceptual updates and critical reflections.

This issue of *Interface* gathers a range of contributions on alternative media as a shifting concept that acquires a diverse range of meanings across the globe, depending both on the activist political cultures involved and the types of media environment in which they develop and to which they relate.

Degrees of media alternativeness and radicalization: regionalizing the analysis

Most of the academic literature on alternative media focuses on Western countries and focuses on progressive alternative media (Atton 2007; Couldry and Curran, 2003). One of the main contributions of this literature is its questioning of media power in the 21st century and the redefinition of sources of power in a globalized society. Thus, as Couldry and Curran argue, "media power" is a multiform and fluid concept that remains at the heart of current debates about the role of alternative media. It can be manifested through the media's representational power, which is rooted in the direct control of the means of media production. At the same time, though, media power is "an increasingly important *emergent theme of social conflict* in late modernity" (Couldry and Curran, 2003: 4).

Both aspects of "media power" are central to alternative media practices in Western Europe and North America. The creation of the Independent Media Center (Indymedia) is emblematic in this respect. Defined as "a network of collectively run media outlets for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of the truth", this centre was originally created in 1999 to

provide grassroots coverage of the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle (http://www.indymedia.org/en/static/about.shtml). During and after the demonstrations, IMC provided updated reports from the streets and broadcast some of its documentary footage through public access stations across the United States. While Western Europe and North America have seen the creation of multiple and, at times, very successful alternative media outlets in the past 10 years, the case of the Independent Media Center stands out in the history of alternative media in these areas because it represented one of the first efforts to open access to all sides of the conflict. Moreover, through its use of digital technologies along with traditional media, the IMC initiative demonstrated the potentially global reach of local media practitioners.

Alternative media models and technologies tend to spread across the globe, and in the process engage with a huge variety of social movements and protest cultures. In spite of their differences and their diverse contextualization, alternative media practices across the globe share some common traits. In a media-saturated environment, for instance, the use of information and communication technologies is increasingly frequent and diffused amongst activists and alternative media practitioners in a number of world regions. This trend also coincides with the creation of hybrid channels of radical communication, where different languages mix and a variety of technological supports combine (Cottle 2008; Gillan and Pickerill et al. 2008).

A good example of this is the creation of alternative icons to represent precarious workers in Italy. Subverting the Italian Catholic tradition, activists of the Milan-based Chainworkers collective invented *San Precario*, the patron saint of precarious workers, in 2004 (Tarì and Vanni 2005; Mattoni 2008). This icon, evoking an entire alternative system of meaning related to labour market flexibility, was first circulated during face-to-face meetings at protests against precarity in Italy and then at transnational preparatory meetings where small "saint's cards" were distributed amongst activists and people participating in protests. However, the icon also travelled digitally, across independent informational websites, activist blogs and radical publications. It became a physical statue to be brought into procession during protests against precarity in Italy; activists also created a Facebook profile to find yet another channel to spread their struggles against precarity.

This case is paradigmatic of recent trends in alternative media practices and outlets. On the one hand, they maintain solid linkages with the local communities from which they originate while simultaneously having a transnational and sometimes even global reach. On the other hand, such practices are originally conceived within a specific technological and discursive framework, but then frequently become "ubiquitous alternative media", linked through different technological sites and platforms. If these are the most striking similarities amongst alternative media, it is also important to highlight local differences and subtle meanings that this expression acquires across different regions.

In this context, it can be instructive to look at those geographical areas that have been largely neglected in alternative media studies. The case of Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet space is worth examining closely, not least because of its longer history: in the 1970s and 1980s in particular, "dissidence" was often particularly focussed on the production of alternative media of various kinds, which were also central to the global reach of movement actors who were often deeply isolated within their own societies. Since 1989, however, academic attention has largely ignored this region, despite the persistence in several states of a number of the same structural conditions which gave birth to "samizdat" and its many cousins. Even the persistence of essentially identical conditions in China has been fairly marginal to the discussion of alternative media, despite the massive quantitative significance of Chinese participation in contemporary media technologies.

In Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet space, social movements use digital communication and mobilization tools, including electronic alternative media, in much the same way as other social movements around the world. There are many web-based or web-facilitated networks of activists which function in similar fashion to their counterparts in the West. A good example of this is the Global Balkans Network — "an activist research, media, and organizing network that works in solidarity with Balkan social movements to investigate, publicize and impact political, social and economic struggles in the former Yugoslav and wider Balkan region" (http://www.globalbalkans.org/).

Another interesting example is the platform "Что делать? (Chto delat?) / What is to be done?" which was founded in Russia by a working group of left-wing artists, critics, philosophers, and writers with the goal of merging political theory, art, and activism. Chto delat? has a well developed bilingual (English/Russian) website which, besides other social activism-related information, contains electronic versions of the platform's newspapers (also bilingual) and films produced by Russian activists — some of which are subtitled in English (see http://www.chtodelat.org/).

Other than the deeper digital divide and generally lower levels of confidence in the success of protest actions in Eastern Europe, which certainly affect the prospects of any popular mobilization, there are no major differences in this respect between Western and Eastern European societies, at least in terms of the strategic use of digital and non-digital media by activists. The difference is more evident, however, between the West and some former Soviet Union countries; less in the *ways* in which digital and non-digital media are used than in the *circumstances* under which they are used.

Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet region: the contexts of alternative media

Firstly, in some authoritarian ex-Soviet regimes, protest organizers must calculate not only the potential success of their actions, but also consider strategies for escaping repression. Another problem is that to hold a protest action the organizers need the permission of state or local authorities, which is frequently impossible. These two factors often affect the choice of protest form. For example, in Russia during the last five years theatricalized forms of protest (happenings, performances, flash mobs etc.) have become increasingly popular. One of the reasons for this is that, by contrast with conventional forms of contentious politics (rallies, demonstrations, pickets, marches, strike actions etc.), performances don't require the permission of the authorities (Zaytseva 2010). They can also often leave the police confused, disoriented and with no idea of how to respond to such kind of actions.

Another way of causing confusion and disorientation amongst policemen, state officials and other representatives of repressive regimes, widely practiced in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe, are methods of subversive affirmation and over-identification. These methods or "tactics of explicit consent" are forms of artistic/political resistance which, in an apparently affirmative way, overemphasize elements of the prevailing ideology or excessively praise the existing political regime, and in this way undermine the affirmation and turn it into its opposite. According to German researchers Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse (2006), these methods of subversive affirmation and over-identification make visible the implications of a ruling ideology, in particular elements whose public formulation undermines the ideology's ability to reproduce itself. Arns and Sasse also argue that these methods were developed in Eastern European Socialist countries since the 1960s, subsequently became one of the few "Eastern imports" in the West during the 1990s, and finally penetrated many areas of contentious politics, including media activism (for more on this, see Arns and Sasse 2006; for analysis of the application of these methods in Russia, see Zaytseva 2010).[1]

Secondly, in ex-Soviet countries with authoritarian rule, political opposition forces have very limited access to the conventional forms of media; this makes the Internet and other ICTs the only device for organizing and reporting street protests. For instance, the Internet, cell phones and text messages were fundamental tool to incite protests in Ukraine in 2004, in Belarus in 2006, and in Moldova in 2009.

During the Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004, the Internet became an important tool of citizen journalism in a censored media environment.

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[1] There are strong reasons, however, to disagree with Zaytseva's interpretations of these methods. Thus, marches with ironic and overtly mocking slogans like "Putin is our king!", "We support a price increase!" or "Long live the police state!" hardly can be treated as instances of subversive affirmation and over-identification. The methods of subversive affirmation and over-identification are dangerous for the ruling ideology precisely because of their emphasis on an over-serious identification with this ideology, instead of the obviously ironic imitation of its elements (see, for example, Žižek 1993: 4).

Moreover, mobile phones and the Internet were used to coordinate a wide range of activities including election monitoring and large-scale protests. For example, one of the protagonists, the movement Пора! (It's Time!) was led by well-trained and technologically savvy activists who used the Internet as a major mobilization tool. Its website served both as a source to inform the public and as a forum for activists to communicate among themselves. Some observers even argued that the Orange Revolution would not have happened without the Internet (Goldstein 2007: 8-9).

In the wake of Belarus' presidential election in 2006, which the opposition believed was rigged in favour of President Lukashenko, critics of the government turned to the Internet to spread the word about their protests. Given the very limited media resources available for the Belarus opposition, the Internet became a crucial outlet for independent reporting. Several sites (for example Charter 97 at http://charter97.org) ran eyewitness accounts from the anti-Lukashenko protests and encouraged people to join the rallies. Pictures taken at the protests were also posted on image-hosting sites like Flickr (Usher 2006).

The role of ICTs (information and communications technology) during the "Twitter Revolution" in Moldova in 2009 has been well reported. Youth NGOs like Hyde Park and ThinkMoldova used a variety of social media tools to organize their protest actions and publicize the claims that the election, which returned the ruling party to power, was rigged. Relevant information was disseminated mostly through Twitter, Facebook, blogs, SMSs and e-mails (Barry 2009; Morozov 2009a). According to Evgeny Morozov, a researcher on the political impact of the Internet, it was the right decision for Moldovan students and activists to publicize the protests via Twitter, Facebook and YouTube and not via Friendster or LiveJournal, which are still the platforms of choice for many users in Eastern Europe. Had the protesters chosen these platforms, they wouldn't have gotten as much attention from the rest of the world (Morozov 2009b). The choice between external visibility and internal mobilization, however, does not always have such positive outcomes.

New Russian protest movements also increasingly use the web to mobilize support, a trend shared by movements as diverse as the older generations of human rights defenders, newer movements of young left activists (anarchists, anti-fascists (AntiFa), Trotskyists), and "Red-Brown" radicals (such as National Bolsheviks). These movements organize themselves through websites such as Facebook and LiveJournal. Video footages of protest events and government repression, normally with commentaries, are posted daily on the video blog Грани-ТВ (http://grani-tv.ru) at the Russian oppositional website Грани.Ру and on YouTube (Bowring 2010).

The theatricalized forms of protest in Russia discussed earlier in this editorial are normally aimed at gaining publicity and media attention rather than securing mass participation. Some activists see such spectacular media-oriented actions as the only way to awaken an apathetic and apolitical Russian society. For this reason, both mainstream and alternative media are becoming a crucial

part of activist strategy. Moreover, digital interactive media are often seen as the most appropriate means of gaining publicity. Some researchers even go as far as to say that if an action is not shot on video and immediately posted on the Internet, then there is no action at all (Zaytseva 2010).

Posting videos on the Internet, indeed, is becoming an increasingly popular form of protest among Russians. The goal of such video protests is usually to bring public attention to issues, stories or news which are not covered by corporate or mainstream media. Videos may show, for example, acts of violence by OMON (Special Purpose Police Unit in Russia) against demonstrators or abuses of various kinds by state officials. Thus, for example, one campaign challenged VIP cars using flashing blue lights to dodge traffic laws. To raise public awareness of the issue, activists disseminated a humorous video showing a man with a bucket on his head, who climbed on top of one such car, supposedly belonging to Russia's Federal Security Guard Service (Wave of web-protests ... 2010). Another example of this kind was two videos posted on YouTube in November 2009 by police officer Aleksey Dymovsky. In these videos the officer accused his chiefs and colleagues of corruption and asked Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to carry out an independent investigation of similar cases throughout Russia. The videos were viewed more than one million times and turned into a major scandal on the eve of Russia's national police day (ROAR: Cop goes online ... 2009).

It is interesting to note that Internet-based media and other electronic information and communication tools were widely used during the recent battle for Khimki forest: videos showing protest actions, including attacks on the local government building, were placed on YouTube, calls to sign petition letters were circulated via mailing lists, online support groups (such as Facebook groups "Khimki: Save The Forest!" and "Defence of the Khimki Forest") were established, and special websites (http://www.ecmo.ru, http://khimkibattle.org) and a blog (http://ecmoru.livejournal.com) were created to provide regular and up-to-date information on the conflict.

In one sense it seems that social movements in Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet area tend to imitate and adopt media strategies generated in the West rather than produce their own innovative approaches. On the other hand, activists in some former Soviet countries are sometimes highly innovative in the ways they organize major illegal rallies or political performances under dictatorial conditions, and more generally as a response to police violence, political trials, repressive laws, ethnic nationalism, the manipulative tactics of local elites etc. Although the successful use of electronic communication tools by grassroots activists in the ex-Soviet region (for example, in Russia and Estonia) was documented as early as 1996 (O'Lear 1997; O'Lear 1999), internet-based alternative media in the region are definitely still less developed than in the West. Thus, during the Moldovan Twitter Revolution, mentioned above, there were relatively few Twitter users in this country: only about 70 twitterers registered Moldova as their location (Morozov 2009b). In this case, despite getting considerable attention via Twitter from beyond Moldova, protest

organizers largely failed to make the oppositional agenda visible to their Moldovan compatriots.

Another independent media-related problem in the ex-Soviet region and to a certain extent in all Eastern Europe (except for some countries) is weak or underdeveloped traditions of "old" non-digital alternative media (print, television, radio etc.). Although after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, such media have played a significant role in democratization processes, it seems that they still possess at least two considerable shortcomings.

Firstly, such media do not adequately show the diversity of the voices of dissent, being largely focused on the agendas of the major oppositional political forces. For example, the most influential Russian oppositional television station (RTVi) and radio station (Эхо Москвы) mostly represent the opinions of the liberal opposition, only rarely and very selectively covering the voices and practices of left-wing oppositional groups. A similar situation is found in Belarus. In Latvia, the most popular "dissident" television stations (Pirmais Baltijas Kanāls / Первый Балтийский канал, TV5) and newspapers (Час, Вести Сегодня) target exclusively the Russian-speaking minority, reflecting nothing but the activity of the quasi-oppositional political parties which claim to be defenders of this minority's rights and interests.

Secondly, non-digital oppositional media in Eastern Europe tend to operate in relation to "institutional content". This means that they offer criticism (sometimes severe) towards the establishment, but don't look beyond the narrow agenda of the establishment's practices and institutions. In other words, they set their news agenda by focusing mostly on the actions of the government or corporations and rarely cover social movements, unless these movements' activities are linked (directly opposed) to the actions of political and economic elites. As a result, there is a lack of genuinely movement-focused media, which would mean engaging not only in criticism of elites, but also in creating social alternatives, e.g. documenting the development of alternative models of decision-making, health care, food production, social networking etc.

The challenges for alternative media practitioners

Despite the distinctive features of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet countries, this discussion highlights some practical issues which are more generally relevant, such as the obstacles to creating and employing non-digital media - which on a global scale are still far more significant than digital media - by movements of the politically excluded (such as anarchists and autonomists) or the socially excluded (such as movements of the poors, *dalits*, or migrant workers). These issues - which amount to the question of the "ownership of the means of intellectual production" - are in some ways reproducing the old Soviet-bloc situation in the majority world, so that a politicized minority can use alternative technologies (today, digital means rather than carbon paper) to

challenge elites on their own terms, either around the political concerns of the dissident minority or through providing technical and intellectual support to the struggles of the marginalized.

Another challenge is the ability of new alternative media to overcome the general political apathy affecting wide sections of the population in many states - a particularly acute issue in the ex-Soviet region but a more general problem in the age of neo-liberalism, which relies on the relative demobilisation of the kinds of mass interest group politics that characterized Keynesian welfare states, national developmentalism in the majority world and (in its own peculiar way) state socialism.

Overcoming these challenges, in the ex-Soviet region and the majority world, may require a return to traditional awareness-raising practices such as mobilization in the workplace, grassroots organizing, street meetings, face-to-face oral agitation in public places, written / printed material (flyers, newssheets, brochures, etc.), visual material (posters, exhibits, etc.) and other forms of active interaction with the general public. It also may require charismatic leaders and dedicated agitators with a talent for persuasion and a readiness to be engaged in routine and exhaustive face-to-face meetings with various strata of society. The sporadic individual production and scattered diffusion of videos, photos and audio-recordings are hardly able to persuade wide sections of the population to change the way they think and act. In the same way, the producers of such videos, photos and audio-recordings can hardly play a role similar to that played by charismatic leaders in former times. In the ex-Soviet area, as well as in other regions of the world, contemporary independent media appear to address the organized, engaged and motivated parts of the population - although here as elsewhere studies of alternative media *audiences* are notable by their absence, most empirical research focussing on the far smaller group of active *participants*.

One obvious approach is to combine new alternative media with "old" forms of activists' interaction with society. It is certainly wise to avoid idealizing any single method or tool. In particular, the power imbalance *within* movements between those with the relevant technological skills and access to the necessary equipment and those who do not, needs to be more widely thematized. At present, many movements - while accepting arguments as to the increasing centrality of media - have paradoxically relinquished all control over their own media strategy to specialists with their own preferences and agendas; a process every bit as risky as allowing a movement's parliamentary or indeed military wing to set its own direction in isolation from the wider movement. While academics have been bitterly critical of organisational claims to "represent" movements and social groups, there has to date been little serious reflection on the appropriateness of allowing those who happen to have a computer and understand how to negotiate social media to "represent" particular movements.

Another important challenge in reflecting on contemporary alternative media is what in countries of the Global North is the increasingly ubiquitous presence of portable technological devices that allow people/citizens to reproduce slices of

social realities through audio-recording, photographs and video materials. At the dawn of the 2000s, the expression "media activism" was frequently employed to label activists involved in radical news-making processes which led to the production of accounts and reports presenting social movements' point of view on contentious issues and on grassroots mobilizations.

In the last 10 years, however, portable technologies have exploded. Mobile phones, in particular, have become a daily device of personal communication, while also offering the opportunity to record in different ways what is going on around the phone user. The last generation of mobile phones, moreover, combines this function with direct internet connections. Multi-media user-generated contents can thus be easily produced everywhere with sufficient wealth and can even be uploaded immediately on the web. Potentially everyone attending a demonstration, therefore, can produce her/his own personal account of the event.

On the one hand, this multiplies the digital memories related to mobilizations and creates a dispersed archive of documents related to protest events. At the same time, however, portable and personal digital communication devices also put into question the very notion of "media activism" and "alternative media". The challenge is, therefore, to rethink the place of alternative media practices and to deconstruct the very concept of alternative media. The idea that the production of alternative media is based on horizontal interactions and dialogues amongst people belonging to the same (protesting) collective actor, for instance, is challenged by the individual production and diffusion of short videos, audio-recordings and photographs. Are these contents still alternative media contents and according to which definition? Are the producers of such contents still alternative media practitioners and according to which definitions?

A key issue here is the ways in which the possessors of very traditional kinds of media power (often major newspapers, the digital giants and so on) construct spaces for "citizen journalism" which generate profits for their owners from this upsurge of popular participation in media production - while simultaneously censoring, constraining or marginalising both political content in general and the possibility of generating collective action in particular. Movements are certainly able to work within and around such constraints, but often the new technologies can produce the illusion of popular engagement while undermining active control.

A telling contrast might be that between the use of SMSs - widely effective *because of* their minimal formal elements in organising protests in a huge variety of different contexts - and YouTube, effective at diffusing images, but more commonly feeding into the substitution of opinion (in the privacy of one's own home) for action. An adequate *comparative* analysis of the different new technologies, however, has yet to be developed - not least because the investment, in time and emotional energy, in particular technologies and their associated social worlds, is substantial, and neither researchers nor activists who have invested heavily in one particular mode are keen to admit that it may

be rather less effective or significant than they hoped at the start. More generally, the investment in "new technology" per se is often one which marks an individual's academic career or movement position, and it is hard not to play up the significance of such an investment. Presumably as (or if) the new media landscape stabilizes and these new forms become less dramatically new it will be possible to develop more adequate assessments of their relative significance. In this respect, the broader "lay public" has a role to play vis-à-vis the interested claims of specialists.

Nevertheless, it is clear that - whatever final evaluation is made of the relative significance of digital media vs old media, and of different kinds of digital media, today's proliferation of digital activism has enabled a horizontal circulation of information, in western countries in particular, that often escapes the narrow frameworks of institutionalized media. This bottom-up approach has generated a more diverse and, perhaps, democratic use of media technologies to raise awareness and challenge the status quo in a variety of national and cultural settings.

At the same time, though, the enormous effort and energy put into this kind of activism, and the associated notion of "alternative media", has been challenged in two related ways. One is the activist concern that particular kinds of technology (such as digital petitions and online protests) can be a passive, living-room based substitute for real-world demonstrations and direct action. As with other kinds of media, it is clear that this is not always the case, and as noted most contemporary movements in western countries use digital media as part of their organising strategy. However, no observer can deny that - just as in the past some movements "only existed on paper" - we now have movements and organisations which "only exist on the Internet". This poses particular challenges to international solidarity (since outside observers are only rarely in a position to assess the significance of movements abroad separately from their online material) and for relationships between the metropolis and the periphery (since in peripheral contexts association with a virtual organisation may be a crucial lifeline for radicals or the marginalized, and what appears as instrumental political action may in fact be a form of personal support).

The other challenge is the observation that the relative efficacy of digital activism can be hampered by a generalized passivity of publics who feel disengaged or disempowered by the overwhelming role played by mainstream media. Present-day Italy is a case in point here. The duopolistic television system of the Rai and Mediaset groups, along with prime minister Berlusconi's stranglehold on both print and broadcast, seem to have generated a widespread indifference towards alternative forms of media. Hence, even interesting media initiatives such as the street television network Telestreet remain as localized experiments that hardly reach beyond the confines of their target neighbourhood and thus provide little resistance to popular mainstream media.

In view of this, a key challenge faced by alternative media practitioners is that of engagement with social movements that question the practices of mainstream media. Another challenge, therefore, consists in the attention that needs to be

paid to the evolving relationship between alternative and mainstream media because it is only by engaging in a dialogue that reassesses the power of institutionalized media that a more constructive critique and more effective alternatives can be proposed.

We have, of course, been here before, and in many different ways. The overthrow of absolute monarchies, dictatorships and empires has almost always taken place in the teeth of the official or mainstream commercial media (and usually in a context of severe censorship). Media monopoly is not new, even if its relative significance may now be greater; and most if not all successful movements have managed to generate their own media. Indeed, it is only in the last two or three decades that western European newspapers in particular have lost their traditional characters as representatives of particular parties, interest groups, ethno-religious constituencies and so on. The generation of newspapers, magazines and radio stations created by the upheavals of 1968 and subsequent years have taken very different routes in different cases: here reproducing the "movement-representative" character of earlier epochs, there speaking to a "niche market" defined by age and social class, and elsewhere again "mainstreaming" themselves to the point of homogeneity. Thus an over-insistence on the absolute newness of the current situation (whether in terms of monopoly or in terms of technology) can lead to an inability to evaluate its actual characteristics, which can only be done historically and comparatively.

Two yet broader questions can be raised, if hardly (at the present stage of research and activism) answered in any definitive way. One is the implications of the "digital divide", that of access to the capital, equipment and skills required to adequately produce and consume the new technologies. Shaped by gender, class, age and education in western countries, this divide becomes acute - and politically debilitating for movements - in many majority world countries, where it is a huge struggle to hold together the oral, face-to-face technologies characteristic of much indigenous, peasant and shanty-town organising in particular, the "old media" structure of many political parties, trade unions and NGOs, and the "new media" world. In some cases, these gaps are papered over rather than fully addressed, with the result that what is said on the ground, what is done in parliament and what is produced on the Internet can be three radically different things, particularly for large movements like the Brazilian landless people's movement MST or the Indian NBA movement against the Narmada dam projects. In other cases, these different worlds exist side by side, overlapping but rarely fully.

This overlap is heightened by the tendency in contemporary capitalist production towards the generation of niche markets - in media, and in technology, as in everything else. Increasingly, the *movement* problem is one of creating relationships between (say) groups of middle-class teenagers skilled in the use of social media; subcultures oriented towards the production and consumption of particular clothing and music styles; on-the-ground organisations capable of distributing large numbers of flyers and posters; popular milieu oriented around particular styles of talk and sociability;

academic or political professionals able to negotiate the worlds of technical discourse; and so on.

All too often, alliances fail *here:* in the fact that different movements, or organisations, represent such different "ways of doing things" - in the first instance, such different media and modes of discourse - that meaningful conversations *across* media (as opposed to the branded diffusion of a single message on multiple platforms, which is not at all the same thing) do not develop. These gaps have been bridged before; and perhaps, in the face of large-scale economic crises, they can be bridged again. This is of course in part the hope represented by the *Interface* project in the slightly different context of modes of discourse and article formats.

In this issue

This issue of *Interface* seeks to provide answers to some of the abovementioned challenges and proposes some thought-provoking articles about alternative media in different regions of the world.

Focusing on Scandinavian countries, Tina Askanius and Nils Gustafsson investigate what happens to alternative media contents when they are circulated/publicized through social networking sites. The article focuses on the use of Facebook and Youtube during the demonstrations during the 2008 European Social Forum in Malmö, Sweden and the 2007-2008 grassroots mobilizations before and after the eviction of the Youth House in Copenhagen, Denmark. In doing so, the article raises important questions related to the activists' use of commercial social networking and content sharing sites to spread radical and alternative messages. Grounding their theoretical reflections in empirical material, the authors explicitly address critical questions about the commodification of protest cultures and the mainstreaming of alternative media messages.

Patrick McCurdy's article explores the media politics of the Dissent! group around the 2005 Gleneagles G8 summit. While a binary opposition, celebrating activist media and demonizing mainstream media, certainly existed within Dissent!, McCurdy argues for the emergence of a pragmatic orientation within which mainstream media are seen as a site of struggle and alternative media are seen as complementary to the mainstream. He notes the distinction between the formal rules of the Hori-Zone convergence space and (some) activist-level talk which articulates this latter perspective. Criticising the "spiral of silence" which excluded debate on interaction with mainstream media, he argues that it serves to mask the existence of more pragmatic approaches and give the illusion of consensus around "anti-media" positions.

Italian artistic activist projects are the main subjects of Tatiana Bazzicchelli's article, exploring politically oriented forms of art which rest on (social) networking practices. She does so from a cross-temporal perspective and by

taking into consideration the use of different technological supports: from the practice of mail art to Neoism, from the Luther Blisset Project to the creation of Anna Adamolo. Tracing the origins of (social) networking in politically oriented artistic practices, Bazzichelli puts social networking sites and the practices associated with them in a historical perspective. Her contribution is therefore a first step towards the development of a critical model to single out and compare different types of (social) networking in contemporary societies.

The long-lasting experience of the media art platform Public Netbase, in Vienna, is at the centre of Clemens Apprich's article, which discusses practices of urban resistance through media art interventions. Already active at the beginning of the 1990s, Public Netbase engaged in seminal public performances related to the digital network culture and became a relevant artistic and political actor in the Viennese urban space and beyond. In 2006, however, the City of Vienna severely cut its financial resources. Apprich analyzes the practices of Public Netbase in the re-appropriation of urban space after its marginalization within the Viennese artistic scene and discusses the importance of such projects for the development of counter-hegemonic engagement in the public space.

From South Korea, Dongwon Jo addresses how activists used different types of media outlets and technological platforms during the 2008 Chotbul Protests in Seoul. These lasted about four months, initially against the U.S. beef import negotiations and then widening to a broader criticism of the government. Activists and protest participants employed information and communication technologies creatively. The combination of mobile phones, websites and offline demonstrations resulted in multifaceted media practices that went beyond the development of grassroots journalism. Beyond the 2008 experience, this article also illustrates the peculiarities of media activism's relationship to the South-Korean media and political systems.

Brigitte Geiger and Margit Hauser discuss the complexities of creating and recording feminist knowledge and history. The approximately 40 archives in German-speaking countries, operating within movement contexts such as women's centres, face challenges in defining what should be included and have gone through lengthy processes of professionalisation. The article offers histories of feminist and lesbian media production since the 1970s as well as discussing changing issue focuses. The article's methodology, highlighting the practicalities of developing movement-centred archives, offers valuable insights both into the construction of feminist and lesbian movement knowledge over time, and into the contemporary construction of movements' own historical sense of themselves.

Margaret Gillan's exploration of working-class community media in Ireland, drawing on an extended interview with community activist Robbie Byrne, highlights the difficulty of developing media which are accountable to, and produced by, marginalized communities in struggle. The combination - in broadcast media in particular - of capital costs, technical requirements and state regulation poses enormous challenges. Such communities have often gone through a double disappointment: first in discovering the barriers to their

organized voice posed by the mainstream media, and secondly in the encounter with radical, independent producers who are keen to produce *about* the community but accept (or impose) technical and production requirements which in practice disempower and exclude working-class people. The article outlines some of the choices and strategies which have been used to enable media production on the terms of communities in struggle rather than those of the state or the independent / arthouse sector.

Maria Cristina Guimarães Oliveira and Odalisca Moraes' action note "Communication: historical and cultural indicators of Pina" explores the communicative dynamics in processes of cultural resistance within grassroots development projects in the "Comunidade do Bode", a shantytown in the neighborhood of Pina, Brazil.

The action note "Extension or Communication? Audiovisual technologies as facilitators of communication in the Olga Benário MST settlement" by Lívia Moreira de Alcântara and Elder Gomes Barbosa, discusses the effects of using audiovisual technologies for communication within the Olga Benário MST settlement, located in the Brazilian municipality of Visconde do Rio Branco, Minas Gerais.

Peter Waterman opens the special section on on alternative international labour communication by computer with discussion of an online survey which he carried out in early 2010. Waterman has developed the ideas expressed by respondents, providing his own vision of the relationship between labour movement and computer-mediated networking. In the last part of the article, under the rubric of "What is to be done?", the author offers 26 propositions on networking, labour and solidarity in the context of a contemporary globalized and informatized capitalism. Waterman's propositions and his general approach assume the priority of networking activities over other mobilization strategies.

Waterman's article is followed by two responses to his survey, which suggest radically different orientations. Both respondents represent web-based international labour media projects (LabourStart and Netzwerk IT). The first response is provided by Eric Lee and it takes a sceptical view of global solidarity movement based on the web as an alternative to traditional trade union organizations. It also casts doubt upon the claim that the new media would create something utterly new, something different from and even opposed to the existing trade union movement.

The second response is offered by Dave Hollis, who prefers the network form, non-hierarchical structures and the newest global social movements rather than traditional trade union organizations. Moreover, he believes in the ability of alternative labour media to challenge, subvert or overcome union hierarchy. Unlike the first respondent, Hollis thinks that the new media, their power and effects, are underestimated.

The "key document" section includes a declaration on politics, knowledge, and art by the interesting Russian group "Chto delat / What is to be done?" which unites activists, artists, researchers and philosophers. The document outlines

the main principles of organization and coordination within the group, its basic program and ideological platform. A special focus in the declaration is on the tasks of contemporary art, the importance of twentieth-century avant-garde thought for the rethinking and renewal of the leftist philosophical and political tradition, and the place of revolutionary art in a time of reaction.

Stefania Milan's review of Rodriguez, Kidd and Stein's *Making our media: global initiatives towards a democratic public sphere* highlights how this two-volume collection, documenting and reflecting on the experiences of movements involved in the OURMedia / Nuestros Medias network, deepens the field of alternative media research and creates a participatory conversation between a vast range of experiences and approaches in the service of praxis. Tomás MacSheoin's review of Clifford Bob's *The marketing of rebellion: insurgents, media and international activism* reads it as a "cookbook" for local groups seeking international (above all NGO) support and highlights the realism with which Bob reads the relationships between local campaigns and international NGOs - and the ways in which the former "market" themselves to the latter, while noting that matters might be different when the international solidarity in question is social movement rather than NGO-based.

As usual, there are also articles, notes and reflections not directly related to the main topic of the issue.

Philippe Lucas' article highlights the structural similarities between the "CSX" movement of consumers, survivors and ex-patients in mental health institutions and the medical cannabis movement. Both organized around struggles over cognitive liberty and the right to make core decisions about one's health without incarceration, the article discusses these movements' struggles to position their participants as central to public debate and policy rather than mere objects. Lucas also discusses characteristic differences in the psychological orientation of these movements' participants, and concludes by proposing that cognitive liberty and freedom of thought may provide core principles around which alliances could be forged.

William K Carroll's article analyses the potential for the creation of a counter-hegemonic bloc within which practices and social visions capable of fashioning a post-capitalist economic democracy could begin to flourish. In the context of the current crisis of neoliberal capitalism and the deepening ecological crisis, the author seeks to discern elements of practice that might weld the present to an alternative future. The objective of the article is to show how a Gramscian problematic furnishes activists with an analytical and strategic lens that can illuminate practical answers.

Raphael Schlembach's article on "anti-German" activism explores this controversial strand of "pro-Israeli, anti-German" communism. Those taking this position have evolved from anti-fascism, via the critique of anti-Semitic and nationalist positions in the German peace movement and the left more generally, to a position of unconditional support for the Israeli state and for US foreign policy - as well as provocatively celebrating the firebombing of Dresden.

Schlembach argues that "anti-Germans" represent not only an identity politics in the supposed defence of modernity against barbarism, but also in some ways a logical development of Frankfurt School-derived critical theory.

Tomás Mac Sheoin's bibliography introduces the main theme of the next issue of Interface, which will be devoted to repression and social movements. The bibliography provides a comprehensive set of resources on the policing and repression of the anti-globalization protests and movement, assembling a variety of material from the news media, the movement, academia and the security forces. The bibliography includes classic contributions to the literature on the policing of protests, pieces dealing in general with policing and repression of the anti-globalization movement, and references concerning the relevant events in particular countries. Wherever possible, a free downloadable Internet address is given for material.

Iyad Burnat's action note comes from the resistance in Bil'in, a small Palestinian village to the west of Ramallah, against the wall being constructed by the Israeli state, isolating 29 Palestinian towns from the West Bank and separating many Palestinians from their homes and land. The note describes the forms and methods of protest used, discusses the factors that contributed to the success of the resistance, shows Israeli military response and highlights the sacrifices made by the residents of the village.

In a short piece, Peter Waterman responds to Colin Barker's article on Solidarnosc in Poland in *Interface* (2/1). Waterman criticizes Barker's assumption that Solidarnosc had the potential to be a socially revolutionary movement, and highlights nationalist and religious elements within and around Solidarnosc, as well as the problematic mediating role of the dissident intelligentsia in the movement. Barker's response highlights the internal diversity of Solidarnosc and hence the genuine choices it faced. In a situation where workers across Poland had built alternative institutions in opposition to the official ones, these were understood by the regime as posing a challenge to existing social power structures; the Solidarnosc leadership shared this understanding and sought to limit the challenge. Barker defends the importance of intra-movement debate and the continuing value of arguing for different strategies.

Maite Tapia's review of Jo Reger, Daniel Myers and Rachel Einwohner's *Identity work in social movements* stresses the relationship between the "identity work" carried out by movements and the dialectic of "sameness" and "difference" that activists use to construct the sense of collective similarity and opposition. Finally, Laurence Cox's review of John Charlton's *Don't you hear the H-Bomb's thunder? Youth and politics on Tyneside in the late 'fifties and early 'sixties* highlights the importance of such oral histories of movement generations and movement participation in shaping our own lives as activists.

This issue, finally, sees the launch of our new website, which we hope will make Interface easier to use and enable a deeper dialogue between the activists and researchers who read the journal. Our next issue (3/1, publication date May

2011) will focus on repression and social movements; the editors are Lesley Wood and Cristina Flesher Fominaya. The final item in the current issue is the call for papers for issue 3/2 (publication date November 2011) on the topic of "Feminism, women's movements and women in movement" (editors Catherine Eschle, Sara Motta, Cristina Flesher Fominaya and Laurence Cox).

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About the authors

Alice Mattoni is a precarious researcher in social sciences, with a particular interest in social movements and political communication. She did her PhD at the European University Institute in Florence, where she studied activist media practices within local, national and transnational mobilizations against precarity. She recently co-edited a book on the Italian students' movements of 2008 (*Alla ricerca dell'Onda. I nuovi conflitti nell'istruzione superiore*). Her current interests and efforts as an activist-researcher focus on precarious workers in universities.

Andrejs Berdnikovs is an activist and a researcher at the University of Latvia. As an activist, he is particularly dedicated to raising the voices of the urban poor, academic solidarity initiatives and alternative science communication. His current efforts are aimed at bringing public attention to the problems of Latvian slum dwellers.

Michela Ardizzoni is an assistant professor at the University of Colorado - Boulder (USA). She received her M.A. in American Studies from the University of Iowa and her Ph.D. in Communication and Culture from Indiana University – Bloomington. Her research focuses on Italian television and cinema, multiculturalism in Italy, media about and by migrants and the Italian urbanscape, and Mediterranean cultures. She is the author of *North/South, East/West: Mapping Italianness on Television* and the co-editor of *Beyond Monopoly: Globalization and Contemporary Italian Media*. She can be reached at michela.ardizzoni AT colorado.edu

Laurence Cox has edited or co-edited eight different activist, academic or amateur periodicals over the years as well as doing media work for the 2004 EU summit protests in Dublin and a range of other projects, and writing for a wide range of activist and academic media, online and off. He has just published (in *Contemporary Buddhism*) an organisational analysis of the publishing and distribution work of U Dhammaloka (?1856 - ?1914), an Irish "hobo" who became a Buddhist monk and anti-missionary activist in colonial Burma. He can be contacted at laurence.cox AT nuim.ie