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What is This?

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EDITORIAL

What is 'alternative' journalism?

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The recent flurry of research into alternative media (most significant being the book-length studies by Atton, 2002, Downing, 2001, Rodriguez, 2001, and Part 3 of Couldry, 2000) has illuminated contemporary practices within alternative media that present ways of reporting radically different from those of the mainstream. Rodriguez (2001) has conceptualized such media as 'citizens' media'. By this she means a philosophy of journalism and a set of practices that are embedded within the everyday lives of citizens, and media content that is both driven and produced by those people. Approached in this way alternative media may be understood as a radical challenge to the profession-alized and institutionalized practices of the mainstream media. Alternative media privileges a journalism that is closely wedded to notions of social responsibility, replacing an ideology of 'objectivity' with overt advocacy and oppositional practices. Its practices emphasize first person, eyewitness accounts by participants; a reworking of the populist approaches of tabloid newspapers to recover a 'radical popular' style of reporting; collective and anti-hierarchical forms of organization which eschew demarcation and special-ization – and which importantly suggest an inclusive, radical form of civic journalism.

Whilst recent scholarship has provided us with richly theorized empirical accounts of alternative media praxis (and, in particular, the use of such media by new social movement actors), it has had little to say about the historical conditions under which these media enact their journalism; it offers little understanding about the role and status of these alternative journalists; much less does it present what such journalism actually looks like. The aim of this issue of *Journalism* is to address these absences. Alert to the journal's subtitle, we hope to present contributions that critically assess the nature of alternative journalism and propose theoretical bases from which to explore both histor-ical and current practices.

By way of laying some groundwork for what follows, let us begin with those dimensions of alternative media practice that have to do with economics

and organization. These emphasize structural imperatives within which alternative journalism takes place that are quite at odds with the market-driven institutions of the mass media. They are radical in the sense that they are opposed to hierarchical, elite-centred notions of journalism as a business – this is an ideology that holds that it is only through more egalitarian, inclusive media organizations is it possible to even think about a socially responsible journalism. This is to go well beyond the reformist notions of the civic or public journalism movement in the US. As recent contributions to journalism studies have emphasized, it is this very reformism that has so far prevented the advocates and practitioners of public journalism from making anything but piecemeal interventions in the dominant practices of journalism. Despite its claims, public journalism, working as it does within the market and within long-standing organizational, institutional and professional structures, operates in similar ways to mainstream journalism (of which it is, after all, a part): 'traditional and public journalisms adopt similar narrative strategies to effect essentially the same ends: placing the power of telling society's stories in the hands of journalists' (Woodstock, 2002: 37). There is also scepticism towards the motives of those executives and journalists who support public journalism; Steve Davis (2000) has suggested that their attempts at 'community outreach' and 'reader responsiveness' are morally dubious, conflating civic responsibility with public relations and the desire to increase circulation and sales.

A number of the articles presented in this special issue address what Theodore Glasser has termed the 'predicament of public journalism . . . how to reclaim a political purpose for a thoroughly depoliticized press' (Glasser, 2000: 686). Kevin Howley finds correspondences in the aims of street papers with those of the advocates of public journalism. Both began in the 1990s and sought to redress what they saw as a democratic deficit in journalism by producing journalism that was more responsive and meaningful to its audiences in terms of forms and practices. Both suggested a fundamental re-aligning of writer and reader, a re-coupling of 'community' within which practitioners and audiences might engage. Public journalism, Howley argues, stops short, however, of explicit advocacy, which is where its aims and those of street papers diverge. Moreover, the latter's practice of publishing material written by homeless people offers a much more radical reworking of the 'community' of writer and reader. Street papers thus have the capacity to become 'instruments of progressive social change'; public journalism's capacity to critically and substantively challenge the conditions of capitalism is severely curtailed by its very location within capitalism.

Capitalism, understood as a system of economic, social and political relations, may also be considered historically as the armature that effectively

forced out pre-existing modes of media participation in early modern England. James Hamilton identifies a variety of hybrid media practices that drew on communal conceptions of property, that pre-dated the notion of journalism as specialization and that were quite disinterested in professional status and individual identity. To recover these histories of media participation is, as Hamilton suggests, to do two things. First, these histories may function as challenges to the prevailing histories of journalism that emphasize 'commercialization . . . professionalization, commitment to maximizing audience size as an indication of success, authorship as personal ownership, and rights of intellectual property'. Second, by pushing these challenges to their limits, such histories propose that the recent history of journalism within the institutions of the mass media might be little more than an aberration and deeper historical essays such as Hamilton's may present opportunities for remaking the conceptual and practical frameworks on which to base an alternative journalism.

Or rather, on which to base alternative journalisms, for if the articles presented here tell us nothing else it is that alternative journalism is practised in a multiplicity of hybridized, context-specific and contingent ways. In terms of practice, however, as Hamilton's histories and Howley's current examples show, all share an interest in transforming social roles and responsibilities and (implicitly at least) in asking who gets to be – or even deserves to be – a journalist and what such a role should entail. In their study of Indymedia journalists on the web, Deuze and Platon emphasize a 'close and non-hierarchical relationship between reader and content'. To that we might add a close relationship between reader and writer, even to the extent that the two become fused, resulting in hybrid forms such as the activist–journalist and the native reporter, where the distinctions between actors in social movements and 'journalists' are quite eroded. This is to take the social responsibility of public journalism and even the advocacy of Howley's street papers to a further radical end: to present and produce interested, 'partial' members of a community (whether that be a community of interest or a geographic community) as journalists, as recorders of their own reality (Atton, 2002). Technologically this is achieved by Indymedia's 'open-publishing' software, which enables contributors to post their own writing directly to Indymedia websites without the mediation of any editorial direction. In practice, this striving for transparency, 'openness' and freedom of expression has brought with it problems of offering access to viewpoints antithetical to the Indymedia project. For some, though, the 'freedom' that Indymedia's journalistic practices seek to promote is a freedom that floats free of any explicitly ideological basis. It is as if in its rush to privilege non-hierarchical, ultra-democratic and non-professionalized ways of doing newswork, the Indymedia project has ignored the threats to its

independence that come through its open-publishing technology. When racists, anti-Semites and homophobes can 'publish' on its sites as easily as can the human rights campaigner, the environmental activist or the social anarchist, are we truly seeing a socially responsible journalism in action? When even the liberal mainstream press does not permit such unfettered access to its pages does alternative journalism even get close to its ideal of progressive social change?

Perhaps Indymedia's problems stem from their focus on promoting access to the dissemination of content per se above access to the means of broadcasting by a specific, already existing community. In their study of contemporary Australian community broadcasting, Forde, Foxwell and Meadows propose that it is 'through the lens of the local', that is, that we should consider alternative journalism as a '*process* of cultural empowerment . . . [where] content production is not *necessarily* the prime purpose [and] what may be as (or more) important are the ways in which community media outlets facilitate the process of community organization'. Journalists working within and for a specific local community can come to 'both produce and maintain the culture of a community'. Their evidence and arguments come closest to demonstrating how contemporary practices of alternative journalism can create local, empowering public spheres.

The desideratum of alternative media practitioners as creators and maintainers of alternative public spheres has long been considered central to an understanding of the grassroots, civic-oppositional functions of their work (Downing, 1988). Tony Harcup offers a further local perspective on the work of these 'native reporters' in his comparative analysis of the treatment of a major 'riot' story by two local, northern English papers, one an established evening daily, the other a radical community publication. He finds in the 'different cast of voices' used by the latter a consistent tendency to privilege voices from below, news sources at the bottom of the news hierarchy over the traditional spokespeople taken from elite, professional groups in society. Such journalism not only finds common cause with its community through advocacy; its explicit connections with the public sphere of that community serve as its rationale for seeking amongst that community for its news sources.

Sujatha Sosale's scope takes us from the local to the global, where she takes as her starting point the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debates of the 1970s. In calling for academics and journalists to re-imagine journalistic practices for the 21st century, she is laying down a challenge that is familiar to us from the histories and contemporary studies already discussed. She urges the return of 'sociality' to journalism and argues for the 'reinscription of community into journalistic practices'. Our case studies from Australia and the UK show how this might work at a local level

and offer compelling evidence for the efficacy of an alternative journalism that is at once both oppositional and constructive. It is Sosale's hope that such mechanisms might be employed at a macro-social level. Her vision is not simply for a rejuvenation of the NWICO debates but for radical shifts through media praxis.

To conclude on such a grand vision would be to leave us open to charges of impossibilism at worst, naivety at best. Changes have been wrought, projects have been successfully essayed but a global shift is surely too much to hope for. There is at least one missing element: journalism education. In general, journalism educators ignore the ethics and practices of alternative journalism, or else they present them as 'extreme' case studies. There is another way: that such practices be deployed within journalism education *as practices*. The methods by which 'ordinary people' witness political events in which they play an active, dissenting role and how they present their witnessing as native reporters working within alternative media offer possibilities for rethinking the epistemology of news production in the classroom. Such a rethink is long overdue. In their insightful and necessary challenge to journalism educators, Skinner et al. (2001: 345) argue that the rote learning of news values by students has led to a recognition of news that is craft-based and 'denies any relation to epistemology'. Instead they propose methods of journalism education that foreground questions of epistemology, emphasize the social construction of 'facts' and knowledge and develop critical thinking and reflexivity. Whilst finding some value in public journalism's critical approach, for them – as for many of the contributors to the present issue, including this author – the location of public journalism within the market prevents it from essaying any rigorous challenge to the deep structural, institutionalized and professionalized power relations of the mass media. By contrast, alternative journalism works outside the corporate division of labour and capital and affords us an opportunity to introduce radical forms of criticism and reflexivity into journalism education. The study of alternative journalism can have a threefold purpose: (1) to function as a critique through praxis of institutionalized and routinized forms of journalism; (2) to suggest 'other' ways of doing journalism; and (3) to offer skills – and open up possibilities – to those who might want to work in 'citizens' media'. By embedding the concepts and practices of alternative ways of doing newswork into the curriculum we might invigorate ourselves, our students and the profession, in whatever forms it might take.

The contributions in this issue are all, in their different ways, beginnings: historical beginnings, the beginnings of local practices, technological beginnings and the beginnings of a global vision. As the site for journalism

education we might also re-imagine the academy as the locus for another beginning.

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Biographical notes

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