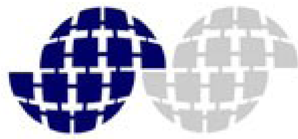

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‘Community Media’? ‘Alternative Media’?

Unpacking Approaches to Media By, For and Of the People

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Introduction

If, as political economists would have it, News Corporation, Globo and the BCC are 'the media,' how can we talk about media by, for and of the people, or *our media* as they are sometimes called? How do we frame them for research, activism or policy? Long dispersed and marginalized, the last few years have seen a "renaissance" of research on practices variously labelled 'alternative media' (cf. Downing 1984, Downing et al. 2001, Kidd 1999), 'citizens' media' (cf. Rodriguez 2001, 2004), 'community media' (cf. Howley 2001, AMARC & CMFE 2006, Carpentier, Lie & Servaes 2003) 'tactical media,' 'autonomous media' and more (Rodriguez 2004). Networks of research and practice are growing, prominent among them OURMedia/NUESTROSMedios (ourmedianet.org). Alongside a new wave of movements on communication, a field of *alternative media studies* is (re-)emerging (Rodriguez 2004, Dervin & Huesca 1994). However, its key terminologies and theories are still unformed. A variety of approaches, only vaguely aware of each other's histories (and even their own), are currently competing and merging into a post-modern pasticcio that obscures important differences of power and ideology. This lack of clarity on ideological position, historical context and definition of objects hinders the progress of the field. It also presents practical problems for those trying to network, lobby and build public awareness for the democratic relevance of alternative and community media practices (Ó Siochrú 1999). Activists recognized over a decade ago the need for a "recognizable identity" for the communication practices of social movements, local communities and socially engaged individuals. They argued that a clear idea of what this sector represents is critical to democratizing the international system of communication (Ó Siochrú 1999). What are the relative advantages of using one approach and its terminology over another? Research has so far avoided clear answers (cf. Downing 2001, Gumucio Dagron 2004, Rodriguez 2001). This paper begins to fill this knowledge gap by reviewing four of the prominent traditions of research, focusing on the key terms (or frames)

‘alternative’ and ‘community media.’[1] The result is a more nuanced and detailed picture of the options for approaches to *our media*, and thus for developing democratic theories of communication.

Context:
Movements against the Neoliberal Neoconservative Paradigm in Communication

Research in international communications over the last decade has documented some positive developments, including networking possibilities offered by new communication technologies. However, the major developments have been increasing ownership concentration and centralization, market de-regulation, re-regulation by market forces and new authoritarianism, homogenization, commodification, and the further marginalization of already marginalized voices (Chakravartty & Sarikakis 2006, Zhao & Hackett 2005, Ó Siochrú 2005, CRIS 2005, McChesney 2000). How did this come about? How did ‘the media’ get to be ‘the’ media? A standard explanation has economic neo-liberalism emerging by natural selection from the cold war, its superiority proven by the collapse of its (only) ‘alternative’ – Soviet communism. Cultural neoconservative policies for surveillance and censorship on the other hand are presented as natural responses to terrorist threats. However, the history of 20th century international media and communication policy reveals systematic suppression and marginalization of alternatives to corporate and state-centred systems of organizing media.

International communication policy has been one of many fronts in the battle for hegemony (Chakravartty & Sarikakis 2006). While democratic, citizens- and community-centred uses of media and communication technologies are among the oldest (Kidd 1998), a series of technological and political decisions has narrowed the options to favour commercial and governmental uses (Kidd 1998). In international communications, the ‘free flow of information doctrine,’ promoted by the US government and media industry, states that media contents, industries and technologies should not be regulated, equating ‘a free press’ with ‘free people’ (cf. WPFC 2003). Others, however, have pointed out that “freedom of the press is limited

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[1] Other important traditions center on ‘autonomous media’ and ‘tactical media.’ See Hadl (2006:101ff) for details.

to those who own one."[2] In the late 1950s, Latin American intellectuals began to denounce the free flow doctrine as serving the interests of Northern governments and transnational corporations (TNCs), and as leading to neo-colonial domination of recently decolonized peoples. This *dependista*/dependency critique, taken up by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), an organization of mostly then newly established 'third world' (i.e. neither capitalist nor Soviet communist) nations, stirred heated debates in the 1970s and 80s, most notably the discussion around a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) in UNESCO. When UNESCO officially endorsed the NWICO vision in the early 1980s, the US and the UK left the organization, backed by corporate media lobbies coordinated by the World Press Freedom Committee (Preston, Herman & Schiller 1989).[3] The lobbies remained at UNESCO as non-governmental actors and continued to cast NWICO ideas as pro-Soviet and anti-democratic (Nordenstreng 2005; cf. WPFC 2003), a task facilitated by the ambiguous stance of many NAM governments. By the late 1980s, the NWICO discourse was discredited, and the free flow doctrine reinstated (Hamelink 1996, CRIS 2005). The US rejoined UNESCO in 2003.

The *dependista* critique was silenced,[4] but the problems it had identified remained unaddressed– by governments at least. By the mid-1990s, a large number of social movements, NGOs and initiatives had emerged who worked on issues of social justice and communication (Ó Siochrú 2005). Their areas of concern can be roughly categorized as: (1) reform of governmental and commercial mainstream media (sometimes called *their media*), (2) creating, maintaining and improving *our media*, i.e. "media by, for and of the people" (a movement slogan, cf. Kidd 1998) and (3) promoting access to and critical and creative use of individualized media (*my media).*[5] Their actions ranged from micro (e.g. media making, awareness-raising) to macro (e.g. lobbying). In the mid 1990s, some of these groups began to discover and outline their common ground, for example as 'democratization of communication' (cf. CRIS 2005, Leon 2003, Ó Siochrú 1999, Sreberny 2005, Suzuki 2004). To challenge the neoliberal/neoconservative paradigm, they argued, critique is not enough:

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[2] This phrase is attributed to the US American journalist, A.J. Liebling.

[3] This was part of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations' move toward unilateralism, making an example of an 'unruly' UN organization (Preston et al. 1989, Nordenstreng 2005).

[4] It also suffered from internal weaknesses as discussed below, under "'Alternative Media' in Comunicación Alternativa (ComAlt) Discourse."

[5] These categories are adapted from Costanza-Chock (2005), and discussions at the MediaACT seminars, Seoul 2005. The terminology 'our' and 'their media' is used informally in the OURmedia/NUESTROSMedios network. The term 'my media' is taken from a Japanese colloquialism connoting strictly individual and personal use.

"coherent alternatives" are called for (Ó Siochrú 1999:144; also cf. Rodriguez 2004, Kidd 1998).

Researchers and citizens concerned about the democratization of communication see *our media* as "one of the conditions for democracy" (MacBride et al. 1980:55): *Representative* democrats value them for the diversity of information, views and opinions they offer, needed to supplement the increasingly commercialized and spin-doctored mainstream media (cf. McChesney 2000). For *deliberative* democrats, they are the means of expression of civil society (including social movements and local communities) and important infrastructure for 'creating counter-publics' (cf. McLaughlin 2004). From a *participatory* democracy perspective, *our media* are important for 'reinventing democracy' on a grassroots level, by empowering marginalized and disenfranchised people, and by allowing people to address each other horizontally, form identities through dialogue and have bottom-up effects on politics and culture (cf. MacBride et al. 1980:113ff.).[6]

While stressing the potential of *our media*, proponents of democratization of communication also emphasize that at present, a mere fraction of this potential can be realized. A partial cause, it is argued, is that the current neoliberal/neoconservative policy paradigm keeps practitioners busy battling commercial, right-wing and governmental attack and co-option (Kidd 2002) and hidden from sight of most people. Consequently, policy intervention is required to develop sustainable funding, access to means of distribution such as broadcast licences or cheap mailing options, public recognition, and media literate audiences and participants. Such efforts are under way in many countries and indeed transnationally (AMARC & CMFE 2006, CRIS 2005, Rodriguez 2004, Hadl & Hintz forthcoming). An especially important tool for such work is a "recognizable identity" for "democratic media" (sic) and a common framing of issues (Ó Siochrú 1999). However, the choice of terms and approaches so far has been haphazard, more informed by the tactics of the moment than by debate and analysis of the implications. For example, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC, http://amarc.org), currently the biggest organization of grassroots radio practitioners, primarily uses the label 'community media' for its members. Many academics and activists line up arrays of terms and approaches, implying that they

[6] Cf. Stein (2002) for discussion on 'democratic functions.' Note that the question of how and if grassroots deliberations can shape political decision-making is still unresolved in theories of democracy (Schmidt 2000).

are largely synonymous and complementary (cf. AMARC & CMFE 2006, Kidd 2002, Rodriguez 2004). However, confusion abounds: Is 'alternative media' "an ill-defined subset of community media" (Howley 2005:4), or an approach to 'community media' (Carpentier, Lie & Servaes 2003)? Is 'citizens journalism' and 'user provided content' as hailed by commercial Internet services 'alternative media'?

Leading researchers in this emerging field have derided concern about terminology and approaches as a pathological obsession with neat labels (cf. Downing 2001, Gumucio Dagron 2004, Rodriguez 2001). However, case studies have found real-world implications of framings: At the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), AMARC tried to create a broad-based lobby for citizens-centred practices under the banner of a Community Media Working Group. However, this approach actually privileged some types of *our media* groups[7] and failed to attract, in fact alienated, others (Hadl & Hintz forthcoming). Attempts at common framing must first recognize historically grown differences between existing approaches and concepts.

This paper addresses this need. Taking a historical, comparative and theoretical approach, I map four influential traditions: The study of 'community media' in *development communication* (DevCom) and *community communication* (ComCom) and research on 'alternative media' in Latin American *comunicación alternativa* (ComAlt) and Anglo-American *radical alternative* media studies (RadAlt). Other important approaches, notably those using 'autonomous' and 'tactical media' frames have been discussed elsewhere (Hadl 2006: Chapter III), as has 'civil society media,' a potential new umbrella term (Hadl 2006: Chapter V, Hintz & Hadl forthcoming). 'Citizens' media' will be discussed below as an extension of the ComAlt tradition. Approaches to 'feminist' and 'indigenous media' will be investigated in the future. For many other popular terms, including 'grassroots media,' I could not identify a tradition of research of any continuity. As far as I could confirm, this is the first attempt to analyze different strands of research in this field in their historical and institutional context, though some have pointed to a variety of approaches (cf. Carpentier et al. 2003).[8]

The method combines theoretical meta-analysis (cf. Dervin & Huesca 1997) with institutional and historical comparison of strands of research (cf. Colle 2003).

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[7] Notably 'community media' in the sense of DevCom and ComCom as (discussed below).

[8] For a discussion of the limitations of Carpentier et al. (2003) cf. Hadl (2006: Chapter IV).

Presenting 'alternative media' and 'community media' frames as part of distinct approaches is an analytical device. I neither imply their independent evolution, nor that they are always distinct in practice. With this caveat, the method yields a basic map to different types of uses of 'community' and 'alternative media' frames, and enables a critical evaluation of their theoretical, ideological and philosophical residual meanings. To avoid a common source of confusion (cf. Carpentier et al. 2003, Howley 2005), I write frames in single quotes (e.g. 'alternative media'), practices in plain text (e.g. alternative media practice), and approaches in italics (*community communication)* or in bumpy style (ComCom). The only exception is *our media*, written in italics but denoting practices, not an approach.

The analysis addresses the following questions: What is the difference between 'community' and 'alternative media' frames and between the approaches that use them? What range of practices does each of them cover? In which institutional, political and funding contexts have the approaches evolved? And what ideological baggage do they carry? I review research in English, but try to take into account the historical contributions of Latin American research. This paper aims to enable researchers and activists to make more informed choices about terminology and approach.

'Community Media'

'Community media' is a concept increasingly used in transnational policy (cf. Buckley 2004, AMARC & CMFE 2006), networking and scholarship (cf. Lewis 1993, Howley 2005, Carpentier et al. 2003). 'Community' originally referred to local and national communities, and later expanded to include non-geographical communities, 'interpretative communities' and 'communities of meaning' (Carpentier et al. 2003). Some authors also distinguish between voluntarily joined communities and 'communities of fate' (Young 2000).

'Community media' originally referred to local broadcast media (cf. Berrigan 1977), but is currently also used to projects using other technologies, with varying levels of access or participation, complex relationships to government, funding organizations and business, and a variety of social aims and goals (cf. Carpentier et al. 2003, AMARC & CMFE 2006, Howley 2005). The current usage of the term 'community media' been influenced by two historically different fields of media and

communication research: *development communication* and *community communication*.

'Community Media' in *Development Communication* (DevCom) Discourses

The following sketch of a highly complex field is based on Servaes & Malikhao (2005), Dervin & Huesca (1997) and Riaño (1994).

Development communication (DevCom) is one of the main areas in communication research concerning 'developing countries.' DevCom discourse is typically directed from 'development experts' (researchers and development workers) at funding organizations. 'Community media' in the DevCom context is a type of governmental or donor-initiated media designed to "change critical behaviour," such as health practices or farming methods (Riaño 1994:5) or, more generally, support economic development. DevCom is thus not an approach to *our media*. However, it merits discussion as a major influence on the usage of 'community media,' especially in international and third world policy discourse, on the self-definition of 3rd world practitioners looking for funding, and for research institutions.[9]

Development communication developed in three strands. The oldest, the *diffusionist* or *modernization paradigm* dominated in the early cold war era (1940s-70s). In this paradigm, the mass media, especially radio and print were considered important instruments for modernizing 'backward' societies (Beltrán 1998:para.78). Communication was viewed as a top-down (sender to receiver) process, with messages and technologies diffused from a central source. 'Community media' or 'development support communication' in this context were small-scale governmental media, arguably 'for' but neither 'by' nor giving space to the voice 'of' the target community. Research and practice were driven by governments of 'developed' countries, especially the US, as part of their foreign political and economic strategy (Beltrán 1998).

Under the influence of the *dependista* critique and with NWICO-related funding from UNESCO and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the *participatory communication* (PartCom) paradigm emerged in the 1980s (Servaes 2003:15). This second paradigm emphasized that the intended beneficiaries should be involved in

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[9] For example, the Participatory Communication section of IAMCR (http://www.iamcr.org/content/blogcategory/52/139/) includes research on social movement and community media (among many other things), though this area is covered by the Community Communication section (http://www.iamcr.org/content/blogcategory/51/201/).

defining their own development process, e.g. by using 'participatory community media,' such as organized listening, and radio or video production with target groups. While these projects were not usually initiated 'by the people,' they tried to create an "interface of information flow from the top down (institutions and development experts) and the bottom up […] (communities)" (Riaño 1997:9). However, the top-down approach remained influential beneath the rhetoric of 'participation' (Dervin & Huesca 1997:47).

The end of the cold war and the drying up of funds due to the US withdrawal from UNESCO left the field looking for new directions. Funding now came mostly from FAO, development oriented NGOs, US-based foundations and Christian organizations. By the mid-nineties, a new paradigm began to emerge, called *communication for social change* (C4SC). 'Social change' here means 'development,' albeit revised in the light of "complex globalization processes" (Servaes & Malikhao 2005:93). C4SC favours local communication projects (Servaes & Malikhao 2005:95), especially community radio, with varying levels of community participation. Collections of case studies attempt to include more radical media uses, e.g. of left social movements (cf. Gumucio Dagron 2001, Hemer & Tufte 2005). 'Alternative media' and 'media rhizome' concepts are also occasionally mined for new theoretical angles (cf. Carpentier et al. 2003).

Critical observers have suggested that contrary to appearances, the field has not essentially changed, merely "absorbed and diffused" critical challenges to make it more people-centred (Huesca 2003). DevCom retains an implicit view of communication as a relatively static process involving senders and receivers and media as channels for sending messages. In addition, the newer paradigms still fail "to account for differences of class, ethnicity, patterns of organization, age or gender" among members of the community, often leading to "unequal distribution of benefits, violation of traditional practices, and creation of conflict" (Riaño 1994:10). *Communication for social change* is commendable for its attention to local context and complexities, and to the immediate needs of the target community. However, it lacks an analysis of the role of transnational corporations and international organizations such as the World Bank in causing the problems of poverty and disenfranchisement, and recognition of social movements already addressing them. A basic tension remains between DevCom and leftist or feminist understandings of 'social change.' The former identifies 'change' with individual and small group 'development,' the latter with a form of political change. In spite of some openings in

the DemCom field, it continues to enclose *our media* practices in an ideological framework that offers few critiques and fewer alternatives to the global neoliberal/neoconservative paradigm.

‘Community Media’ in *Community Communication* (ComCom) Discourse

A second approach that uses the ‘community media’ concept has been called *community communication* (ComCom). Its protagonists are usually local groups, NGOs, citizens associations, or faith-based organizations who press policy makers for legislation and funding for their practices.

In *community communication*, ‘community’ usually refers to urban settings, and ‘participation’ to civic involvement in (local) politics. Typical practices taken up by ComCom research are local broadcast media, such as public access television and community radio (cf. Lewis 2002, Halleck 2002), though more recent research tries to integrate print and web based community media as well (cf. Howley 2005). ‘Community media’ in ComCom discourse can have almost any content. The defining characteristics are the origin in and distribution to a specific community and some form of community participation in production and distribution (Carpentier et al. 2003, AMARC & CMFE 2006).

One important inspiration for the *community communication* tradition was the Challenge for Change Project, a Canadian rural communication experiment in the 1960s-70s, and early Canadian cable radio legislation (Lewis & Booth 1989). These experiences influenced the US public access TV movement (Halleck 2002:146) and 1980s lobbying for local public broadcast policies in the UK (Lewis & Booth 1989). Academic writing on “first world community media” began in the 1970s with UNESCO funding (cf. Berrigan 1977), and a *community communication* field emerged in the 1980s with a wave of broadcasting reforms in Europe (Lewis 2002, Lewis & Booth 1989). However, ComCom, lacking funding and institutional infrastructure, never developed a sustained debate on theory and method like DevCom's.

One characteristic of *community communication* discourse is its emphasis on *localism.* This approach sees community media as a response to the centralization and homogenization of media ownership and content on national and global levels (cf. Howley 2005, Lewis 2002). Localism also has practical uses, for example for “alliance[s] of interest” with commercial broadcasters (Stein 2001:302, Halleck 2002)

or local governments. On the other hand, focus on the local may prevent “ties to larger spheres of discussion and debate” (Stein 2001:321) and a perspective on the global media system. This problem is beginning to be addressed practically, by increased attention on networking, especially forming of associations (CRIS 2005; cf. AMARC & CMFE 2006), and in research by expanding ComCom to include non-local community media. However, adapting concepts developed for local broadcasting to internet-based communication is proving difficult and only partly fruitful (Howley 2005).

Critiques point out that ComCom’s romanticized use of ‘community’ papers over existing power inequalities within the community, and that community media projects often unintentionally reproduce them (Howley 2005:264, Matellart & Piemme 1980). In addition, not all ‘imagined communities’ are of the feel-good variety, but can include nationalist, religious missionary and racist types. Recent research suggests, “community media provide […no] unproblematic solution to the deep-seated anxieties and very real antagonisms associated with increasingly pluralistic societies” (Howley 2005:38).

The political philosophy behind ComCom is a type of *participatory democracy*, stressing that citizens should have a voice in politics. Participatory democracy can help to reduce citizens’ alienation, develop solutions respected by all involved and tackle complex problems (Schmidt 2000). Conversely, participatory decision-making is time-intensive, requires communication tools and skills, and high education levels (Schmidt 2000:297ff). Community media can fulfil functions of “democratic talk” (Stein 2002), however, without effective feedback loops between ‘the’ community, other communities and the wider culture, and between public deliberation and political decision-making, the result can be ghettoization or a false sense of empowerment.

‘Alternative Media’

The root meaning of ‘alternative’ is ‘other.’ The adjective can mean (1) ‘different from the usual and conventional’ or (2) ‘another’/‘one more’ or ‘additional.’ The noun means ‘an additional option’ (a supplement), or ‘something which can be chosen instead’ (a replacement). ‘Alternative media’ thus implies a binary. They are ‘the other media’ in contrast to ‘mainstream media,’ ‘different’ most obviously in terms of text (form/content), but also on other levels, such as production/organization,

technology use, distribution, audiences and purpose. Some usages emphasize the negative– that they are not the mainstream, while others emphasize the positive– that they offer options.

Below I discuss two approaches that have developed the concept 'alternative media': a broadly Marxist Latin American *comunicación alternativa* (ComAlt) tradition, and an Anglo socialist-anarchist *radical alternative* (RadAlt) media studies tradition. My description of the RadAlt approach is based on my reading of John Downing (1984, 1990, 2001). For the vast Latin American tradition I draw on introductions in English by Brenda Dervin and Robert Huesca (1994), and Clemencia Rodríguez (2001).

'Alternative Media' in *Comunicación Alternativa* (ComAlt) Discourse

Latin American scholarship has a strong tradition of research on alternative media as part of an alternative system of communication *(una comunicación alternativa)*. 'Alternative media' in this context are both 'different' and 'additional:'

1. They are different from (even opposed to) the TNC- and nation state-based media in terms of (a) production processes and structures (self-managed vs. centralized, horizontal vs. vertical, democratic vs. elite etc.), (b) content and goals (i.e. tied to social movements and Freirean *conscientização* /conscientization etc.) and (c) their assumptions about the essence of communication (monologue vs. dialogue, etc.).[10]
2. They represent additional options, beyond the neo-colonial system with its web of domination by transnational corporations and national authoritarian governments, and its hierarchical model of communication (Dervin & Huesca 1994:55).

The *comunicación alternativa* (ComAlt) approach emerged from the *dependista* critique in the 1970s. Its goal was to develop theory, policy and practice that could effectively analyze, challenge and ultimately replace the neo-colonial communication system. It took as axiomatic that dominant processes (of media production, communication flow, distribution, etc.) reproduce the status quo, and that alternative processes challenge it (Dervin & Huesca 1994:65). By the mid-80s, *comunicación alternativa* included a large body of work on the communication processes of social movements, video and radio in popular education, feminist communication, Bolivian miners radio, indigenous video activism, participatory journalism, alternative news sources, and many more (Dervin & Huesca 1994, Rodriguez 2001).

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[10] See Dervin & Huesca (1994:56ff) for a complete list and discussion of (a), (b) and (c).

However, in the late 80s, the defeat of NWICO, the re-affirmation of the power of transnational corporations in economics and policies, the crisis of Marxism, and the economic crises in Latin America made sustaining alternative practices and research at once more urgent and more difficult. In addition, empirical research had turned up little evidence that alternative communication practices had the hoped effects of balancing the flows of information. For these and other reasons, the study of alternative media practices was largely abandoned (Rodriguez 2001, 2004). Rodriguez argues the problem was less with the practices than with the ComAlt approach, its “big media-small media binarism,” unrealistic “David and Goliath scenarios” and “essentialist notions” of “power, citizenship and political action” (Rodriguez 2001:10).

By the early 90s, three streams of research were challenging the binarisms of *comunicación alternativa*, Dervin & Huesca (1994:59ff) explain: First, research on *popular culture* (i.e. people’s culture) stressed that audiences make meaning from dominant cultural forms in a combination of passive acceptance and moments of resistance. In this view, ‘alternative communication’ includes ambiguous content in dominant genres, while participatory media with oppositional content are ‘alternative’ only if they take into account active audiences. Second, *transnational studies* focused on transnational alternative communication strategies, which could incorporate and appropriate the technologies and contents of transnational corporations, and develop networks of production and distribution of alternative media (Dervin & Huesca 1994:61f). Third, *social movements and praxis*, influenced by liberation theology and Paulo Freire’s pedagogy, emphasized that rather than proselytizing, alternative communication (with or without media technologies) should support people in developing their own process of *conscientizacao* (Dervin & Huesca 1994:63f).

These critiques deconstructed *comunicación alternativa,* though without suggesting coherent alternatives (Dervin & Huesca 1994:66). Throughout the 1990s, documentation of alternative communication practices – which were beginning to surge again with movements against neoliberalism (Kidd 1998)– continued without reference to bigger contexts (Dervin & Huesca 1994:66, Rodriguez 2001).

In 2001 several important publications came out, among them Clemencia Rodríguez’ *Fissures in the Mediascape* (2001), which blends *participatory communication*,

reflections on NWICO, and *praxis* and *popular culture* critiques of *comunicación alternativa*. Cautioning against tight definitions, and totalizing and prescriptive theories, Rodriguez instead suggests that theories should serve an analysis of what the practices are actually doing and how. The 'effects' of the practices, she argues, cannot be measured with conventional yardsticks such as audience sizes, sustainability, changed information flow, or political relevance. Their function lies in renegotiating the power relationships and identities of the participants – especially marginalized people and their communities. Abandoning the binary lens of 'alternative media,' Rodriguez uses the concept 'citizens' media' which she ties into theories of radical democracy. In conclusion, she encourages both practitioners and researchers to accept and embrace the disconnected localism and cultural ghettoization of the practices and the fuzziness of the theories (Rodriguez 2001:161).

'Alternative Media' in *Radical Alternative Media* (RadAlt) Discourse

Unlike their Latin American counterpart, the European and North American left failed to develop an activist theory of communication (Enzensberger 1970, Matellart & Piemme 1980, Downing 1984, Kidd 1998). 'Alternative media' first became a keyword within 1960s-70s US and European social movements. The 1980s saw a commercialization of the term 'alternative media,' and a re-emergence of 'alternative publishing' in youth-culture movements like punk, and social movements like ecology and feminism. The 1990s continued these simultaneous trends of commercialization and radicalization, making 'alternative' a buzzword. In research, however, alternative media continued to be marginalized (Rodriguez 2001, Kidd 1998, Downing 1984, 2001). Mainstream scholars derided or ignored them (Rodriguez 2001). Critical media research focused on criticizing the status quo, but neither attempted to develop alternative theories, nor to study existing alternative practices (Rodriguez 2001). Cultural studies focused on creative consumption (Downing 2001).

For over a decade, John Downing's (1984) was the only comprehensive attempt in English at formulating an approach. What he calls 'radical alternative media' are "politically dissident media that offer radical alternatives to mainstream debate" (Downing 1990:181). Characteristics include a close relationship to social movements, self-management (including internal democratic decision-making processes) and independence from "capital, the state, the church and other agencies of oppressive power" (Downing 1984:10). Downing's (1984) case studies include 1960s-70s feminist, labour, peace, American Indian and other social movement

media in North America, far left free radio in Portugal and Italy, and anti-Soviet *samizdat* publishing in Czechoslovakia and Poland in the late 60s. Using socialist anarchism, feminism and an analysis of the "false binaries" of the cold war, he positions 'radical alternative media' as the 'third media,' representing possibilities apart from capitalist and Soviet communist systems of media making.

Downing (1984) was critical of Marxism and largely unaware of Latin American research, however, the approach he develops shows many parallels to ComAlt. His 'alternative media' are alternative not only in terms of texts and goals, but also in their attempts to transcend the top-down communication model, to develop internally democratic organizing methods and to support social movements. He also stresses that alternative media practices offer a way beyond the political East and West, framing them as part of a bigger movement for media democracy and ultimately another, better, world.

In the 1980s and 90s, few followed his lead. Downing himself taught and worked on the media studies field in general, quietly raising awareness of alternative media in the academic mainstream (cf. Downing et al. 1990, 2004). By the late 90s, major academic publishers began showing interest. In 2001, Downing published a revised edition of *Radical Media* that covers a much broader spectrum of geographic and historical settings, technologies, and ideologies, ranging from overtly political and ideologically hybrid to repressive media of the left and right. The theoretical section surveys important contemporary communication and art theories for their relevance to the study of alternative media, resulting in a "tool box" (Rodriguez 2001:14) rather than a theoretical attempt. Responding to concerns similar to those raised by the *popular* and *praxis* critiques of *comunicación alternativa*, Downing (2001) largely succeeds at overcoming the binaries of his cold-war era approach. However, the picture does not come back together. References to transnational dimensions of practice, movements, corporations and policies remain scant. Downing (2001) comes up with a more nuanced and dynamic analysis of how alternative communication works, though at the cost of clarity: The 'alternative media' concept of 2001 is stretched, weakening its descriptive and analytical meaning. The 'big' picture of democratization of communication has faded from sight, at least temporarily.

RadAlt and ComAlt have developed parallel arguments providing important insights into alternative media practice. They also face similar limitations:

The Propaganda Problem. If, as ComAlt and RadAlt imply, 'alternative media' are symbiotic with social movements, two questions arise: First, are the media of repressive social movements 'alternative media'? Downing (2001) and Gumucio Dagron (2004) grudgingly include them, since they are 'different' from the mainstream, oppositional in terms of content, tied to social movements and may even have self-organized and democratic structures. Second, are media that use the propaganda model (one-way flow of information in a didactic, hierarchical, sender-receiver system) included? Both Downing (1984, 2001) and ComAlt scholars are inclined toward "yes," but contradict themselves when they speak of 'alternative media' as practical examples of a better communication model.

Binarism/Oppositionalism. The propaganda problem partly arises from the limitations of the concept 'alternative' (in both senses– 'different' and 'additional'). 'Alternative' helps distinguish alternative media practices from mainstream media– their content, styles, organization, relationships with their audiences and modes of production. Yet, is being 'different' or 'additional' an end in itself? By relying on the concept 'alternative,' one can defer defining what these efforts stand for. However, the question of purpose cannot be deferred indefinitely. Kidd (1998, 2002) suggests that the goal is to expand spaces for communication commons, but remains content to use the label 'alternative media' despite its limitations. Concepts signalling that democratization is the goal include 'citizens' media' (Rodriguez 2001) and 'civil society media' (Hintz & Milan 2004, Hadl & Hintz forthcoming, Hadl 2006).

Happy Ghettoization and the Love of Fuzziness. Since 2001, definitions of 'alternative media' have become inclusive and fuzzy. Downing (2001) and Rodriguez (2001) point out that previous theorizing on alternative media has been narrow-mindedly normative (prescribing how they should be) and try to develop an open, flexible, analytical framework for describing how they actually are. What, then, of activist theory[11]? Can we foster change when practices are ghettoized and terms open to wide interpretation? How about framings for political intervention? To practitioners struggling for policy intervention, academics' pathologizing of the need for clarity and preaching the beauty of fragmentation (cf. Downing 2001:ii, Rodriguez 2001, Gumucio Dagron 2004) is of little help. It has become increasingly clear that a way must be found to connect nuanced analysis and effective practice.

[11] See Hadl (2006:7f) for differences between analytical, normative and activist theory frameworks.

Indeed, Rodríguez and Downing began addressing fragmentation and ghettoization in 2001, co-founding OURMedia/NUESTROSMedios (ourmedianet.org), a global network of 'community, alternative and citizens' media' practitioners and researchers. Bringing together a wide range of approaches and constituencies was facilitated by the inclusive (if colloquial) umbrella term *our media*. Several publications have come out of the network, including a two-volume collection of research (Kidd, Rodriguez & Stein, forthcoming) and collaboration with academic and practitioners' associations has helped legitimize the field. The listserv has proven a lifeline for many dispersed practitioners, especially those under oppressive regimes.

However, recent developments in the OURMedia steering committee (of which I am part), indicate that fuzziness of concepts is an obstacle to taking the work to the next level. Though over 300 participants are expected for the 6th conference in 2007, the infrastructure of the network remains weak in terms of funding, institutional base, governance and self-definition. The diversity of the network is its greatest strength, but a common vision is still elusive. Many members consider *communication for social change* a friendly field and embrace its rhetoric, not least because it represents a source of funding and recognition. Likewise, parts of the OURMedia network identify with *community communication* rhetoric that gets a positive response from some governmental agencies. There is so far little debate about where to draw the line between the merely 'non-mainstream' and more 'radical alternative,' or between democratization of communication in general (including mainstream reform) and issues around *our media*. In this situation of muddled terms and tangled means and ends, the prospects may be good for OURMedia/NUESTROSMedios as a space for information swapping, but less so for galvanizing sustained dialogue and historical memory, let alone political action.

Differences in Scope of ‘Community’ and ‘Alternative’ Frames

The above meta-analysis of existing approaches and their terminology yields a number of clarifications.

USAGE of FRAMES in classic period (pre-2001)	'community media' in DevCom	'community media' in ComCom	'alternative media' in ComAlt & RadAlt
• 1 practices 'framed in'	development support communication (government- and donor-initiated)	community participation projects incl. with government provided funding and infrastucture	social movement media
• 2 practices 'framed out'	self-initiated media	?	media not self-initiated
• 3 definition emphasis (content/text, audiences, production/organization, purpose)	purpose	audiences, organization	content, purpose, organization
• 4 purpose of practices: 'change'	economic modernization, poverty alleviation	toward local participatory democracy	away from corporate capitalism
• 5 defining characteristic of practices	for target groups' benefit	by and for community	by social movements
• 6 stance towards corporate globalization	uncritical (some critical voices integrated)	response/countermeasures: decentralizing and re-localizing	critical, opppositional, alternative (creating other options)
• 7 purpose of framing	external analysis (for evaluating projects)	lobbying & networking: talking to others, talking to each other	analysis: talking to ourselves, talking to each other
• 8 direction of discourse	'experts' addressing funding organizations	academics and practitioners addressing policy makers and practitioners	academics addressing academics and practitioners
• 9 political philosophy implied in use	modernization/ development/'social change'	localism, communitarianism, participatory democracy	'left' (socialist anarchist, feminist, Marxist, etc.), radical democracy

Table 1. Usage of Frames in ‘Classic’ Form (pre-2001)

First, contrary to widespread practice, the terms ‘alternative’ and ‘community’ are not synonymous, as Table 1 illustrates. The DevCom ‘community media’ column is shaded because it does not refer to media *by* and *of* the people, but to “small governmental” or “aid” media (Riaño 1994). In the ComCom context, ‘community media’ originally referred to local broadcast media, with connotations of localism and participatory democracy. ‘Alternative media’ in ComAlt and RadAlt discourses are the media of social movements. Rows 3-6 also shows that the traditions surveyed define their object of research on multiple levels: content, purpose, organization/production, and relationships to audiences. This stands in sharp contrast to US English usage of ‘alternative media’ as solely defined by ‘non-mainstream content’ and approaches like ‘citizens’ journalism,’ which define their object one-dimensionally as ‘journalism made by citizens.’

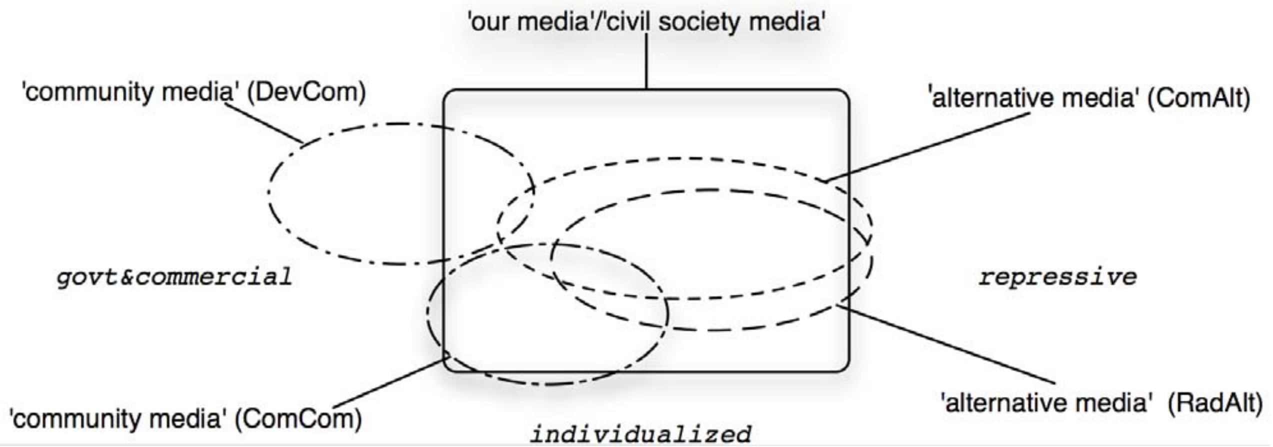

Figure 1. Range of Frames (pre-2001)

Figure 1 shows that pre- 2001, the frames surveyed overlap only partly: 'Community media' includes forms of governmental and commercial media (*their media*), and individualized media (*my media*). 'Alternative media' includes top-down and repressive social movement media. Still, there is significant overlap in the practices covered by ComCom, ComAlt and RadAlt approaches, and ideological common ground in a concern for counteracting the effects of the neoliberal/neoconservative paradigm and developing alternatives. This makes a common framing possible (Ó Siochrú 1999). My co-researcher and I have previously attempted to define and theorize such a common frame, indicated in Figure 1 as 'civil society media' (Hadl & Hintz forthcoming, Hadl 2006).

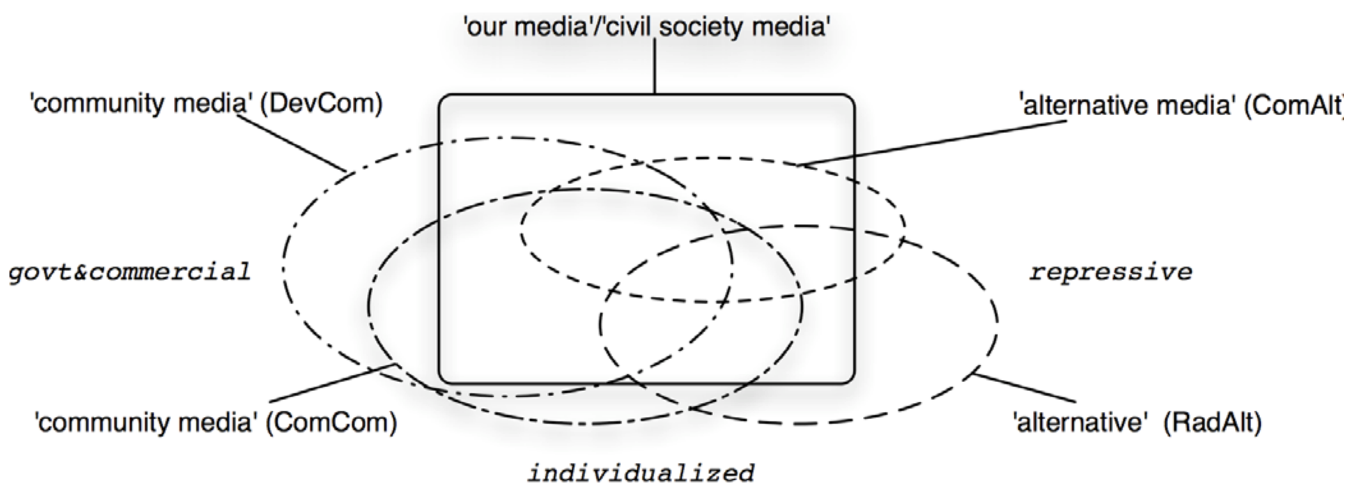

Figure 2. Range of Expanded Frames (since 2001)

Table 2 illustrates that since 2001, when the current wave of interest in *our media* began to rise, the terms have been expanding (cf. Gumucio Dagron 2004, 2001; Hemer & Tufte 2004, Downing 2001, Howley 2005). The outcomes have been contradictory and not always productive. While broad usage can forestall narrow analyses and fragmentation of the emerging field, it can also obscure important differences and facilitate co-option of critical positions. Since the terms and frames carry historical baggage, choosing one term over another privileges the practices the term in classic usage referred to, with real-life consequences (Hadl & Hintz forthcoming).

Nonetheless, common framing is increasingly called for, for example in policy intervention (Ó Siochrú 1999, 2003; Hadl & Hintz forthcoming), writing grant proposals or transnational networking (Kim 2003). So how can "a recognizable identity" (Ó Siochrú 1999) be constructed for the field and the practices? There will be no perfect all-purpose frame without ideological baggage. It may be necessary to differentiate between frames suitable for talking to ourselves (e.g. analyzing practices), talking to each other (networking), and talking to others (e.g. policy actors, potential funders, mainstream media researchers, wider publics) (Kim 2003, Hadl & Hintz forthcoming). Additionally, an integrating frame for the practices has to take into account multiple levels of audience/production relations, contents, organization and purpose.[12] The pros and cons of each framing option have to be weighed and discussed in light of these parameters.

Conclusions and Directions for Further Research

The meta-analysis of existing approaches to media *by*, *for* and *of* the people, their successes, conflicts and limitations, yields a number of conclusions. First, contrary to current practice (cf. Servaes et al. 2003), the approaches surveyed are only partly complementary and their key terms overlapping but not synonymous.

Second, a field is emerging, perhaps best understood as a subfield of research on democratic communication. The practices studied may be no panacea, but deserve

[12] Hadl & Hintz (forthcoming) and Hadl (2006) expand this point, spelling out a multi-level definition for what they call 'civil society media.'

to be approached on their own terms. The field thus needs to develop methods that are 'alternative'– different, perhaps better options– to those currently used in media research. Several attempts have been made to develop approaches, but totalizing theories as those of *comunicación alternativa*, pre-2001 style ghettoization, and recent fuzzy mergers have proven limited. The meta-analysis of existing approaches enables more effective common framings based on recognition of the differences outlined above. Definitions of practices should be multi-levelled and terms chosen carefully. This will allow moving beyond analyzing fragmented phenomena towards crafting a democratic theory of communication.

Third, the field emerges from a dialogue of research and practice, but the battle for funding and recognition, and other tactical concerns have shaped, indeed distorted, it. Securing independent funding for research, as well as research on policy, history, contents, organization and audiences, new methods of evaluation, etc. should be priorities. Other tasks include a more comprehensive analysis of existing frames and approaches, including other uses of 'alternative,' 'community' and 'citizens' media' in different language contexts, as well as 'feminist,' 'autonomous' and 'tactical media.' Neighbouring areas like *ethnic minority media* and *citizens journalism* also deserve attention, as do civil society media-type practices traditionally studied in the area of *computer-mediated communication* (CMC). How can lessons from all these fields contribute to a theory for the democratization of communication, and how does theory translate into practice? For example, what does communications policy beneficial to *our media* look like?[13]

The above analysis shows historically important developments towards formulating "coherent alternatives" to commercially or governmentally controlled media systems, with many wheels already invented and dead-end streets identified. However, too little of this body of experience and theory has been documented and circulated. A sustained discussion on theoretical issues and a publicly shared history of *media by, for* and *of* the people is essential. The challenge is to get beyond both cold war rigidities and post-modern vagueness. The emerging solutions are in approaches and theories that are less fuzzy and more flexible, in mind-maps of interconnected concepts and approaches, and in collaborations based on recognition of differences in historical and cultural contexts.

[13] A research consortium is currently working to address this question (http://homepage.mac.com/ellenycx /CSMPolicy).

The solutions are being developed in a variety of venues, but progress is hampered by many factors. Within important networks, the pressures of neoliberalism/neoconservatism affect the personal lives of those involved, with precarious work and funding conditions, limits on travel, scrutiny of interpersonal communication and even threats to life. Under such circumstances, clarity and discussion of strategy are paramount. Considering the world's ecological and humanitarian crises, promoting alternatives, quickly, is not optional. A renewed democratization of communication movement offers hope: Along with strategies for mainstream media reform (reform of 'their media') and making 'my media' more useful, at lot will depend on how effective strategies for *our media* can be made.

There is nothing inevitable or natural about the current hegemony of the economic neoliberal/cultural neoconservative paradigm in communication. It is partly the result of discourse control from the side of powerful governments and businesses, aided more or less unwittingly by the media research establishment that chose to focus on 'the media,' starving *our media* research and practices of attention, tools and funding. Now that the neoliberal/neoconservative paradigm is widely considered to lead to social and environmental bankruptcy, the search is on for alternatives. This much is clear from the errors of the past: *our media* cannot be ignored in the future. Integrating them into democratic theories of communication is the present challenge of communication research.

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