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ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN CANADA



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ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN CANADA

Considering Alternative Media in Canada

Structure, Participation, Activism

KIRSTEN KOZOLANKA, PATRICIA MAZEPA, AND DAVID SKINNER

Communications and mass culture are not simply receptacles into which content can be put ... The mass media cannot be changed by a mere inversion of the signs of the messages which they transmit. It is this intimate integration of communications into the totality of relations of production and social relations which must be grasped if we are to understand its function in reproducing the everyday legitimacy ... of domination.

– Armand Mattelart (1980)

Mattelart's criteria for democratization remain valid today. As he underscores, grasping the "totality of relations of production and social relations" suggests that developing a more democratic media system must include changes in media structure, participation, and activism together. The challenge here is not to reproduce the everyday legitimacy of domination, as corporate media tend to do, but to confront power in the many modes of production and representation that support its inequalities, wherever they may be.

Although the resources and dominance of Canada's corporate media make alternative media appear small, the continuing growth and diversity of the latter indicate that they offer much greater potential for public participation in

media production and decision making than is evident, or ever possible, in the corporate model. Working from this perspective, this book moves away from traditional perceptions of alternative media as encompassing any content that is not mainstream toward a radical rethinking and repositioning of the field in terms of the relations of production and social relations that characterize alternative media.

Drawing from theorists such as Williams (1977), Keane (1991), and Curran (2002), this book illustrates how alternative media play a key role in public debate, the construction of community, and social justice struggles across a range of social dimensions. Taking a critical approach, it employs Couldry and Curran's (2003, 7) general definition of alternative media as "media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power." Although this definition is somewhat ambiguous, it draws attention to the fact that these media occupy contested and shifting terrain, and that the views and ideas they contain are not marginal in any larger social sense, but indicate sustained efforts for more democratic media and society as one and the same. Such a starting point also recognizes that dominant corporate media systematically distort, marginalize, or under-represent particular issues, individuals, or groups (see Hackett and Gruneau 2000), and thus contain or impede attempts at reform or change. It also appreciates that these challenges may take many forms such that the range of what is alternative is itself one of negotiation and contest, as illustrated in the breadth of works included here.

Although we appreciate Schudson's (2000, 183) caveat that "it would be a mistake to see large corporations and the media as working hand in glove to stifle dissent or promote a lethargic public acceptance of the existing distribution of power," there is a plethora of evidence that private corporate ownership does significantly affect the content generated by the media that dominate the Canadian mediascape. Studies by NewsWatch Canada, for example, have documented an "apparent unwillingness or inability to adequately cover" issues of labour, social inequality, corporate concentration, and the relationships between them (Hackett and Gruneau 2000, 166). These studies also identified significant blind spots in coverage of a number of important public issues, such as "environmental degradation as a systemic and ongoing problem," "human rights abuses by Canada's 'friends,'" and "gender-related stereotypes" (ibid.). Critical media scholars have also indicated the absence of, or distortions in, corporate media coverage of a range of social topics, including poverty, gender, race, ethnicity, and Aboriginal peoples (Jiwani 2010a, 2010b; Mahtani

2008; Jiwani and Young 2006; Roth 2005; Keung 2004; Alia 1999). The evidence from critical research indicates that these problems stem from a broad set of complex factors, which, taken together, normalize the exercise of corporate power. These include standardized editorial policies, concentrated ownership structures, and limiting codes and practices of professional journalism, among others (see Canada 2006; Hackett and Gruneau 2000; Hackett and Zhao 1996).

In this context, this book loosely deploys Bourdieu's (2005) notion of the journalistic field to frame alternative media as forms of social action specifically designed to address social, political economic, and cultural issues and concerns. Thus, the social relations, issues, and experiences of groups that are often marginalized or excluded in corporate media are both the focus of and the impetus for alternative media. In this view, a key feature of "media power" is the "power to represent the reality of others" (Couldry and Curran 2003, 7). Additionally, as Couldry and Curran (*ibid.*) note, the way this reality is represented "is an increasingly significant theme of social conflict," such that "the role of alternative media in providing alternative ways of seeing these groups and events is (also) of increasing importance." Although our analysis situates dominant media and media power as playing a centripetal role in civil society and public communication, we do stress that alternative media are also central – albeit very unequally – in the ongoing struggle over meaning. This struggle includes opening up or democratizing media production, advancing media as a public resource (rather than privately owned property), and appreciating that alternative media can be as diverse as the publics they express, bring together, and activate. Alternative media can thus represent possibilities for progressive social change, or counter-hegemonic transformation, and can, at times, be considered both media and social movement, a point made by Canadian communication scholar Raboy (1984) in one of the first studies of alternative media in Québec.

Although alternative media practice generally lies outside leading regulatory frameworks, an environment that is not conducive to public participation has an incalculable impact on the sites and spheres where it takes place, and it is invariably affected by the dominant political economy and larger Canadian mediascape. This includes a global political economic environment that has experienced both selective prosperity and global recession, in which Canada, like other countries (Bagdikian 2000; McChesney 2008b; Chakravarty and Zhao 2008; Castells 2009), has undergone consolidation and corporatization of its culture and communication industries. Bennett's (2003, 18) encapsulation

of the paradox this presents within this complex national and global environment is particularly striking. Bennett maintains that corporate media and global networks are indeed the strongest, but networks of resistance have gained ground as well. Although Canada cannot claim to have more powerful webs of resistance, we can reflect, as Bennett does, on the potential for social transformation both within and beyond our national borders through, by, and in alternative media. We also keep in mind that this observation was made decades ago by Raboy (1984, 11), who wrote that traditional media were changing but so too were political movements. It is this very potential for the possibility of social change that encourages alternative media activity.

Alternative media take any number of material forms and genres, including newspapers, radio, television, film, and magazines, as well as web-based media and a wide variety of non-traditional forms such as zines, postering, tagging, street theatre, murals, and culture jamming. The increasing use of web-based media has led some media theorists to argue that contemporary communications systems “create realms of social interaction that render place inconsequential, if not irrelevant” (Howley 2010, 8). Yet, though there are accelerating trends in global communication, migration, and varieties of convergence (economic, technological, ecological), our everyday experience and avenues of action remain rooted in specific geographic locations and in the political economic and cultural institutions that define those places. Media provide key modes of communicating and understanding that sense of place, and when the imperatives that drive corporate media foreclose on those avenues of expression, both our understanding of the social landscape of which we are a part and the avenues of action that it affords are diminished. In this vein, this book offers an opportunity for alternative media students, researchers, and practitioners, in Canada and abroad, to consider some of the unique characteristics of alternative media in Canada in terms of their political economic and historical contexts to advance democratic change.

A Distinctly Canadian Context

Although alternative media in Canada share certain features with their counterparts in other countries, they are characterized by the peculiarities and exigencies of the history and features of the Canadian state and the diversity of its publics, which need to be identified at the outset. First, what is commonly called Canada’s two linguistic solitudes (from its English and French

heritage) underlie what are, in many ways, two quite dissimilar media systems – systems that reflect not only linguistic differences but also cultural and political distinctions – as well as divergence between provincial and federal policies. In turn, this distinction is reflected in the relatively light representation and discussion of French-language and Québécois media in this collection. Second, though Canada is sometimes celebrated as having particularly strong and vibrant Aboriginal media, the history and structure of this field reflect the tensions between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state: at times, these are enabling; at others, they are frustrating and discriminatory. Third, to an arguably lesser degree, this volatile relationship with the state has also affected Canada's diverse immigrant experience. These experiences are reflected in thriving ethnic media and their range of commercially successful counterparts, which enable people to stay in touch with familiar traditions and communities, as well as reach out to create new ones. As a result, the transcendence of borders and the cultural hybridity of these media make them particularly unique. Fourth, the enduring features of place underlie the breadth of the Canadian mediascape. This includes the vast geographical size of Canada, its varying regional characteristics, and its relatively small population, which have all left their mark on these media. In this context, even with the pervasiveness of electronic communication, these media remain largely local and regional, or intensely glocal in flavour. Finally, the proximity of the United States and the interventionist character of the Canadian state that this proximity has animated, particularly in the fields of media and culture, have also affected alternative media in terms of providing avenues for creating policy fields and mechanisms that might support their future development. In many ways, however, as evidenced in certain regions, particularly those outside of Québec, and in areas such as community radio and community television, this promise remains unfulfilled.

These characteristics underpin the historic and hegemonic development of Canada's mixed communication policy system, particularly its use of media and communication to support explicit nation building, national unity, and cultural identity, from the railway of the nineteenth century to radio broadcasting in the twentieth century.¹ By the time television broadcasting arrived on the policy-making scene, the rhetoric and ideal of public broadcasting (derived from the British model and the example of the British Broadcasting Corporation) had already been established. At the same time, however, existing private stations were allowed to continue and were the core of an eventual

private media system that co-exists with public broadcasting in Canada today (Raboy 1990; Skinner 2005; MacLennan 2005). Over time, as market media proliferated and the post-war Keynesian consensus was shaken up by late-twentieth-century economic crises, the relative policy balance between public and private media in Canada's mixed system shifted. Federal governments that supported public service broadcasting gave way to market-liberal ideology such that both Liberal and Conservative administrations severely cut back funding to public broadcasting – the French and English radio and television components of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). The dominance of the commercial model, together with chronic inadequate funding, forced the CBC to rely on other revenue streams (of which the most immediately lucrative is advertising), thus increasingly compromising its public service principles. Other public service media are affected by cutbacks; these include the National Film Board and programs, policies, and services supporting magazines, community television, local and regional current affairs, and services to remote and First Nations communities. Overall, the lack of reliable financial resources impedes production of culturally specific programming and isolates community and local media that would otherwise find synergies with the CBC. On a provincial level, this shift in the approach to funding extended to the provincial public service educational broadcasters (see Chapter 2 in this volume).

Added to the constant instability of resources is the significant political shift that has occurred in the Canadian policy environment over the last few years. Industry priorities have taken centre stage, with the current (2011) pro-market government open to considerable lobbying by private interests.² Recent decisions by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), the national regulatory body whose commissioners are appointed by Cabinet, have been varied in terms of their impact on media development with nods toward “the public interest” primarily under the rubric of “what is best for Canadian consumers.”³ The general trend has been toward facilitating the growth of private-sector media, allowing the industry to create national oligarchies, ironically at the same time as these oligarchies are increasingly vulnerable to global capitalism. Although it was a Conservative government that first moved to construct a Canadian national culture through public broadcasting in the late 1920s and early 1930s, today's Conservative Party is firmly ensconced within the New Right political project. Even when CRTC decisions are arguably made in the national interest, such as in early 2010, when the commission ruled against a bid by an Egyptian company to

become one of Canada's four major cell phone service providers on the grounds that it violated Canadian foreign ownership restrictions, the federal Cabinet overruled it unilaterally. These shifts are critical, given that the chair of the CRTC has stated that the Broadcasting Act and the Telecommunications Act should be merged into one (Marlow 2010), which places public service provisions – currently central in both acts – in considerable jeopardy.

Nevertheless, previous governments must also share responsibility for the current direction in media and communications policies. During the move away from public service, the federal government (regardless of political party) commonly used the rhetoric of public service and the public interest in announcements as well as in international forums, yet it did not follow through with supportive policy domestically (Mosco 1997). Evident as well – in what continues to be a classic struggle between economic and cultural interests – is the contest between two government departments, Industry Canada and Canadian Heritage, for the right to define policy and lead decision making (Barney 2004). This was particularly obvious in the lack of substantive government response to the recommendations from the Lincoln report on broadcasting (Canada 2003), ignoring the “pressing issues” of chain ownership, vertical integration of content producers and carriers, and cross-media ownership (Skinner and Gasher 2005, 71). Similarly, the Senate's Bacon report (Canada 2006) clearly laid out the need for strong public media and advised stringent caps on media ownership. These recommendations, as with those from previous commissions that called for decisive government action (Canada 1970, 1981), were ignored. Instead, as evident by the above example of the federal Cabinet overruling the CRTC decision, the fixation on economic interests often takes priority over the national, and arguably public, interest. Nevertheless, the continuing recommendations to prioritize the public, as made in the Lincoln and Bacon reports noted above, should be seen as clear and repeated indications of the public's preferences and input concerning policy matters related to media, communication, and culture.

It is this market-led policy action that has contributed to the current state of media ownership in Canada. Although the CRTC did formulate a policy governing ownership in 2008, regulations had already been loosened throughout the 1990s and 2000s, resulting in escalating levels of foreign ownership of media enterprises and concentration of ownership, particularly in terms of cross-media ownership. Converged media conglomerates have holdings in several markets and industries, and as Skinner and Gasher (2005, 53) note, “this

means they can: aggregate audiences across media and thus increase their media power; reuse programming and editorial content in a number of platforms to increase efficiency; increase their potential ideological clout to decrease diversity and inhibit dissent; and build significant barriers to entry for new enterprises or competitors." In addition, cutbacks in news operations and staff layoffs tend to follow takeovers in a bid to lower corporate debt burden (*ibid.*, 54). All of this has a decisive and negative impact on both the quality and diversity of news (Waddell 2009).

During this period of concentration over the past fifteen years, formal public participation in key areas of policy making involving new media decreased involuntarily as, ironically, those who argue for public communication have not been able to voice their concerns within the policy-making circle, and instead must fight for inclusion in the process (Moll and Shade 2004). In the period since 1994, examples in which the public was excluded from government-initiated committees and boards addressing new media include the Canadian Network for the Advancement of Research, Industry and Education (CANARIE), the Information Highway Advisory Council, and the National Broadband Taskforce. Even those government-initiated endeavours that included public participation found governments ultimately "non-responsive" in their outcomes (Barney 2004, 104). The effect of these and more recent public attempts to regain a place at the policy table represent what Barney (*ibid.*, 97), referring to the CANARIE experience, has called privatizing and commercializing policy making. "Leave it to the market" is now the order of the day in Canadian media and telecommunication policy formulation.

Most recently, the Conservative federal government has sent a strong signal that it plans to continue giving market forces greater play in the allocation of media resources, announcing that it expects to relax Canadian ownership regulations in telecommunications and satellite markets at the same time as it intends to "strengthen laws governing intellectual property and copyright" (Canada 2010). In retrospect, the CRTC's 1999 decision not to regulate the Internet is in keeping with what can now be seen as a trend toward marketization, a process by which governments change policy to facilitate corporate ownership and control. Moreover, as overextended large media corporations such as CanWest and Quebecor began to flounder and restructure or divest, Canadian media and communication policy in the first decade of the twenty-first century must bear some responsibility for ignoring report recommendations and calls from experts, media activists, and the public for a different kind

of policy and political environment, one that would encourage diversity and participation in the public interest and allow community and local media to flourish and truly be public.

A cause for considerable concern has been the impact of shifting and tightening public space on alternative media practice, which has been marginalized from debates that focus largely on the media as an industry. Yet, despite the daunting political and policy environments, new examples of alternative media practices continue to be forged, although they are joined by some that are ephemeral and remain invisible to history. As the chapters in this volume attest, many of these new practices negotiate with dominant media to produce more flexible and hybrid entities and structures, disdaining purity, whereas others deliberately create pods of resistance to all matters dominant and act collectively and consensually as micro-movements. If, in the current Canadian experience, we cannot make the claim that Bennett is right about increasing networks of resistance, we can clearly see the potential for such a claim within an environment that is actively involved in alternative media practice – the politics of possibility – as this volume suggests, and as the history of alternative media in Canada indicates. It is to that history that we now turn.

Toward a Canadian Alternative Media History

Although scholarship in this field has stepped up over the last several years, a relatively few books have led analysis of alternative media in the Anglo-American context. John Downing's *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication* (1984) stood virtually alone in the international field for over a decade and was therefore key to constructing initial understanding of what he called "radical media." Atton (2007, 19) considers *Radical Media* the "starting point for contemporary studies in the field" of alternative media. Extended and revised in 2001 with a number of co-authors, Downing's contribution was joined by Clemencia Rodriguez's *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens' Media* (2001), which explored the grassroots community media making she termed "citizens' media." DeeDee Halleck's *Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media* (2002) focused on the history of community television mainly in the US context.

Chris Atton's *Alternative Media* (2002) took a more methodical approach to the field as a whole and became the primary text for teaching courses in

alternative media. These books were joined in 2003 by Nick Couldry and James Curran's collection *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World*, which acknowledged the impact of technology on alternative media and situated the subject within a broader networked world. Atton followed suit with his *An Alternative Internet: Radical Media, Politics and Creativity* (2004), an examination of alternative media on the Internet. In a vein similar to Rodriguez's *Fissures in the Mediascape*, Kevin Howley's *Community Media: People, Places, and Communication Technologies* (2005) and Ellen Rennie's *Community Media: A Global Introduction* (2006) have provided volumes that focus primarily on case studies of what they term "community media" in the US and international contexts. More recently, Megan Boler's edited collection *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times* (2008) features a number of essays that discuss alternative media as a means to overcome the domination of public debate by the mainstream press. Kate Coyer, Tony Downmunt, and Alan Fountain's *The Alternative Media Handbook* (2007) provides an overview of various forms of alternative media and a DIY guide, whereas Olga Guedes Bailey, Bart Cammaerts, and Nico Carpentier's *Understanding Alternative Media* (2008, xi) makes a case for "a reimagining of the alternative media canon" such that it includes a "wider spectrum of media generally working to democratize information/communication."

In more focused recent contributions, Chris Atton and James Hamilton's *Alternative Journalism* (2008) provides a critical historical overview and discussion of the practice of alternative journalism, and James Hamilton's *Democratic Communications: Formations, Projects, Possibilities* (2008) offers a deep historical and philosophical consideration of the dimensions of the field and the scholarship that documents and describes it. From a somewhat different perspective, Kevin Howley's collection *Understanding Community Media* (2010) provides a broad perspective on the contemporary purposes and politics of community media as a form of democratic communication. Finally, the two comprehensive volumes edited by Clemencia Rodriguez, Dorothy Kidd, and Laura Stein (2010a, 2010b) under the title *Making Our Media: Global Initiatives toward a Democratic Public Sphere* provide particularly strong theoretical and analytic insight into the emergent structure of grassroots and alternative media at the international level.

There is considerably less literature that reflects on anglophone Canadian-based experiences and interactions with alternative media. Yet the field continues to grow and is marked by the inseparability of media and activism,

which underpins the very foundations of the field of scholarship in Canada, as first articulated by Raboy (1984) in *Movements and Messages: Media and Radical Politics in Quebec*, published the same year as Downing's *Radical Media*. Much of the early published works on alternative media sought to identify their history in terms of the social relations and the social movements they articulated. This included the newspapers of the labour movement and labour journalism, as identified in Verzuh's *Radical Rag* (1988), which features a brief foray into the dynamic editors and fractious politics of a developing movement and its media from the late nineteenth century. The focus on social class and labour was also the purview of a vibrant immigrant press in Canada and was central in initial movements for democratic social change (Hoerder 1984; Hoerder and Harzig 1985; Hoerder 1987a, 1987b; Mazepa 2003). Book-length case studies of what has come to be called ethnic media emerged in the 1980s (see Chapter 8 in this volume) and indicate the complexity of immigrants' experiences, not the least of which was a volatile politics that included a range of fascism, nationalism, conservatism, socialism, and communism (Pilli 1982; Levendel 1989; Principe 1999). Canadian historians have also examined relations of class and gender in terms of providing case studies of a radical women's press (Sangster and Hobbs 1999; Lindstrom-Best 1985), and feminist media in Canada grew in tandem with the women's movement, as Chapter 4 in this volume confirms. As for many facets of Canadian alternative media history (Woodsworth 1972; Verzuh 1989), much research remains to be done in general, given the number of feminist periodicals that were published during the 1970s and 1980s, as Wachtel's (1982, 1985) listings reveal.

Alternative media and histories that espouse non-mainstream ways of thinking in challenging power and dominance are generally considered "radical." This was noted almost half a century ago by Margaret Fairley (1945), who sought to reclaim a general history of Canada via a number of "radical" writers who provided evidence of a long tradition of social struggle in Canada, beginning in the seventeenth century. Identifying the continuation of this phenomenon into the twentieth century, Doyle (2002) emphasized that it was in the radical newspapers and, particularly, the many booklets and pamphlets published during the 1930s that agit-prop – the combination of agitation and propaganda – was honed to motivate activism (Mazepa 2011a). These were published by small alternative presses and disseminated hand-to-hand as an effective method of distribution and public education to which the culture of contemporary zines can be traced (see Chapter 13 in this volume). Regrettably,

as Weinrich (1982) notes, many of these small publications have been lost or were destroyed by censoring provincial and federal governments. Nevertheless, the alternative venues for publishing, distribution, and exhibition remain crucial. Currently, what Betts (n.d.) identifies as a “small press movement in Canada” as an “alternative to the hierarchical, sales-driven model of commercial literary publishing” needs to be supplemented with the history, participation, and support of independent publishers such as Black Rose Books, Edmonton’s Small Press Association, and the relatively few independent bookstores that remain in Canada (see Byron Anderson 2002).

As for alternatives in radio and television, save for an early discussion of community radio (Girard 1992) and of the initial developments in community television (K. Goldberg 1990), the primary written history focuses on the CBC, as its alternatives are historically identified as structural (public rather than private ownership and control), as well as practical (public service rather than for-profit goals) (Raboy 1990; Raboy and Taras 2005). Although mitigated by what Raboy (1990) calls a series of “missed opportunities,” several examples indicate sustained attempts to democratize the CBC through experiments in developing radio and television beyond a commercial and technical transmission model (of one-to-the-many) to a model based on public interaction and participation. Radio programs such as the *National Farm Radio Forum* (1941-1953) and the *Citizens’ Forum* (1943-1952) exemplify programming aimed at maximizing public discussion and participation in decision making (Raboy 1990; Romanow 2005; Mazepa 2007), and gained a worldwide reputation as models upon which to develop (Lewis 1993). These were complemented by diverse experiments in which religious groups, provincial governments, and independent organizations such as the Canadian Association of Adult Educators (Faris 1975) and the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) (Comor and Casella 1987) used radio to facilitate public education.

Many so-called radical elements at the CBC were quickly extinguished, however. The WEA programs had a brief life before they were officially cancelled due to “inferior technical quality” – and unofficially due to complaints by business leaders and a continuing red scare that identified such ideas or practices as communist (Klee 1995, 108). The persistent red scare has been an effective deterrent to experiential programming given government ownership of the CBC and marks one aspect of the political boundaries of how alternative the CBC can be and how far its programs can go in criticizing power, particularly as it is consistently under attack for both political economic and ideological reasons (see Chapter 12 in this volume).

After Canada's National Film Board (NFB) was established in 1939, it too was subject to a similar red scare with an attending scrutiny of staff, content, and policing of political boundaries (Kristmanson and McLaren 1998; Khouri 2007; Spencer 2003, 12). As Druick's (2007) book-length review of its history indicates, on the one hand, the NFB has been used as a tool for government propaganda or has censored controversial subjects; on the other, it is a significant example of progressive alternative media. This includes its recognition of working-class experiences and development of grassroots politics through its documentary subjects and discussion periods (Khouri 2007), an emphasis on public participation and explicit projects for social change (see also Waugh, Baker, and Winton 2010), and direct engagement with feminism (through Studio D), as well as specific support for Aboriginal media production.

The range of views on the NFB well indicate the pushing and pulling of government involvement, and support Williams' contention that the media can't be democratic when the state itself is not (Williams, cited in Sparks 1993, 84-85). The complexity of state involvement in communication is particularly acute in the development of Aboriginal media in Canada (which Chapter 9 in this volume addresses), as identified in Alia's *Un/Covering the North: News, Media and Aboriginal People* (1999) and Roth's *Something New in the Air* (2005), both of which document the character and history of Aboriginal media, largely in the Canadian North.

Although the proliferation and importance of web-based communication to the growth of alternative media is now a given, it should be remembered that just over twenty years ago computer networking was in its infancy, and significant attempts were made to secure it as a public space. Experiments in progressive computer networking in Canada began during the early 1980s when the Canadian Union of Public Employees developed the Solidarity Network. Known as SoliNet, it established the first national bilingual computer conferencing system in Canada and the first national labour network in the world (E. Lee 1997; Mazepa 1997). Its appearance was in tandem with the establishment of local computer networks in the 1980s and 1990s in cities across Canada and the US in Community FreeNets that provided public access to the web and e-mail facilities for little or no charge. These were primarily locally based operations in Ottawa (for example, the National Capital FreeNet) that depended on the work of volunteers and on the donations of those who could afford to pay for access for their sustenance and development (Weston 1997). As Murphy (2002, 36-37) states, by 1999, these "autonomous civil society computer networks" were unique to the US and Canada, with 114 operating in the

US and 67 in Canada, compared to only 10 in the rest of the world. They remain examples of an Internet prior – and in opposition – to its commodification and commercialization.

The emphasis on participation and social movement development using information and communication technologies has contributed to the burgeoning interest in alternative media, as the literature on the topic steadily increases in Canada. A number of theses and dissertations published in the 1990s and 2000s indicate additional bases for the further development of academic work in the field, as research combines with scholarship and scholarship combines with activism. This list, which is not exhaustive, includes dissertations and master's theses on computer networking and social movements (Balka 1992; Mazepa 1997; Kidd 1998; Milberry 2005; Powell 2009), Trepanier's (1991) application of Gramscian theory to alternative media strategies, Fairchild's (1993) dissertation on community radio in Toronto, and Mazepa's (2003) dissertation on alternative culture and media in interwar Canada. Additional work in Canada focuses on community media (Harris 1992; Dykstra 1999), community television (Lithgow 2008; D.E.B. Johnston 2005), and Aboriginal media (Buddle-Crowe 2002; Ferreira 2007; Hafsteinnsson 2008), with some specific case studies (Gillett 1999; Falconer 2004; Winton 2007). Various articles and book chapters also provide general overviews of alternative media (see Skinner 2010) or more focused consideration of dimensions of the field (see Sullivan 1970; Demay 1993; Juniper 2002; Karim 2002; Avison and Meadows 2000; and a number of others in this book's extensive References section).

Additional volumes, such as Nancoo and Nancoo's *The Mass Media and Canadian Diversity* (1996) and Alia's *Media Ethics and Social Change* (2004), have touched upon English-language alternative media in Canada. The collection by Langlois and Dubois, *Autonomous Media: Activating Resistance and Dissent* (2005), draws upon many Canadian examples but was written by activists for a popular and largely activist audience rather than as a systematic study of the field. Thus, and with Mattelart's initial direction in mind, the consideration of the relationship between activism and scholarship led the editors of this volume to organize its chapters according to the three central characteristics of structure, participation, and activism. These characteristics are addressed in separate parts of the book but are treated as belonging to a central whole as one way of understanding the totality of relations of production and social relations manifest in alternative media. In this vein, although not directly addressing the subject matter of this book, Marc Raboy and Jeremy Shtern's recent volume *Media Divides: Communication Rights and the Right to Communicate*

in Canada (2010) is particularly pertinent in that it provides a comprehensive overview of the larger political and legal ground that gives form to these relations.

Structure, Participation, and Activism

Led by Michael Albert's (1997, 1) central question "What makes alternative media alternative?" this book aims to develop both a history and a context of the field in Canada within the shifting trends and conditions that give it form. Like its historical predecessors, it intends to get at the heart of the term "alternative" by organizing its discussion around three central characteristics that distinguish these media: *structure*, *participation*, and *activism*. Although many alternative media forms have all three of these characteristics, together they provide an analytic frame for understanding how these media find form and function in the mediascape. Each contributor to the volume was asked to focus on one of these characteristics while considering the interplay of politics, policies, and practices as evident in the range of alternative media he or she reviewed and analyzed. Centring on structure, participation, and activism emphasizes the conditions that make these media, and the alternative public spheres they activate, temporal and vulnerable yet persistent and stubbornly enduring.

Structure accents how alternative media both develop out of and are structured into the larger media environment. This includes their intersections with specific national or international policies and institutions, and their administrative and economic organization. It highlights what Couldry and Curran (2003, 14) note are the "specific factors that enable or constrain challenges to [dominant] media power." For instance, many critical communications scholars have commented on global acceleration and consolidation of commercial media (Gibbs and Hamilton 2001), and in Canada specifically, on ongoing monopolization and corporatization within communications industries (Crow and Longford 2004, 356; Winseck 2002, 2010). However, as mentioned earlier, recent federal governments have not provided adequate support to public media, which keeps community and local media at risk and narrows the scope and diversity of information.

Participation focuses on the means through which these media extend democracy in communication and how this is facilitated (or not) in their internal organizational and discursive practices. Set in contrast to the top-down, or vertical, structure of corporate media that are seen as agenda setting and

foreclosing on opportunities for expression, participation is often perceived as the key feature of alternative media. Atton (2002, 25) states, for example, that alternative media “typically go beyond simply providing a platform for radical or alternative points of view; they emphasize the organization of media to enable wider social participation in their creation, production and dissemination than is possible with mass media.” Such participation attempts to establish a horizontal relationship between writers and readers – that is, a situation where there is as little filtering of news and information as possible.

Activism focuses on how alternative media are, as C. Rodriguez (2001, 20) puts it, “actively involved in intervening and transforming the established mediascape,” and thereby working to transform established ways of seeing and operating in the world and to empower the communities of which they are a part (see also Frey and Carragee 2007a, 2007b; Rodriguez, Kidd, and Stein 2010a). The concept of activism highlights how social and political change is advocated and facilitated through the media as connected to external networking. Alternative media are thus seen as modes of prefigurative politics, providing examples of progressive political relations that are otherwise difficult to configure in the face of dominant social forms (Downing et al. 2001, 71), or as evidence of regressive social relations as a refusal to do so.

In attempting to trace and understand the dimension of these characteristics and challenges, the present volume foregrounds a number of critical questions that bring together the politics, policies, and practices of alternative media in Canada. These include the following: What are the conditions that inform and sustain alternative media? How does the Canadian policy environment enable and constrain their potential? How do the practices and structures of alternative media contribute to more representational and egalitarian forms of communication? How do alternative media actively challenge, subvert, circumvent, and/or undermine the power of dominant media? The chapters in this book address these questions by examining the specific conditions and environments that offer both possibilities and challenges for the work of alternative media.

In Part 1: Structure, Chapter 1 discusses the sustainability of alternative media in Canada. David Skinner argues that, with changes in media technologies, fragmenting audiences, and shifts in the ideological dimensions of media regulation, sustainability is a particularly important topic. With an eye to better understanding how to approach and deal with the issue of sustainability, he reviews and critiques some of the ways it has been taken up in the literature. He considers the conditions under which sustainability is viewed as a

problem and how the key to sustainability might be seen as building and strengthening the social infrastructure that supports and gives form to these media. Set in the context of recent efforts toward media reform, the chapter goes on to examine attempts in both Canada and the United States to create different forms of organization and infrastructure to support alternative media. Of particular interest are what contributions, if any, these experiences offer to the further development of alternative media in Canada.

In Chapter 2, Kirsten Kozolanka examines the often overlooked field of public service educational broadcasters. Set between the broadcast policy responsibilities of the federal government and the educational policy responsibilities of provincial governments, the chapter illustrates how “educasting” was charged with a distinctive public service mandate and how its evolution has been structured by the shifting currents of politics and media policy. Kozolanka reveals how the forces of commercialization, unleashed by politics of the New Right, have severely affected the public interest mandate of these media and forced a range of organizational restructuring among them. Nevertheless, her analysis suggests that these evolving mandates may be a welcome antidote to the larger forces of commodification driving commercial media, and it identifies some encouraging signs of stabilization and growth.

Chapter 3 takes a more theoretical tack, as Scott Uzelman considers how studies and definitions of alternative media tend to concentrate attention on their organizational characteristics, thereby obscuring some important differences between them and their relationships to wider social and political movements. Uzelman is particularly concerned with the ways in which alternative media participate in radical democratic politics and challenge practices of oppression, and he illustrates how four common ways of conceptualizing alternative media tend to conceal their differences in this regard. He goes on to propose that the term “autonomous media” be used to provide a more concise way of differentiating this type of media from others.

In Chapter 4, Barbara Freeman offers a glimpse of the rich history of the feminist press in Canada. Developed with the express purpose of providing an alternative to the mainstream or “male bourgeois ‘public sphere’ of communication,” hundreds of these publications came and went in various Canadian communities from the early 1970s into the twenty-first century. Focusing on *Kinesis* in Vancouver (1974-2001), *Broadside* in Toronto (1979-1989), and *Pandora* in Halifax (1985-1994), Freeman illustrates how their structure and operation, as well as the character of their stories and advertisements, worked to challenge dominant media in general and dominant women’s media in particular.

In doing so, she provides an interesting counterpoint to both Chapter 1 – demonstrating that sustainability is the product of a complex range of political economic and social factors – and Chapter 3, giving a practical illustration of certain features of what Uzelman describes as autonomous media.

Rounding out the contributions to Part 1 is Chapter 5, Sonja Macdonald's case study of The Real News Network (TRNN), an independent, on-line, international video news organization launched in 2005. As Macdonald demonstrates, on the face of it, TRNN constitutes one of the more compelling recent challenges to commercial media as, without accepting advertising or government funding, it seeks to present news from a perspective not generally seen on commercial television networks. In doing so, TRNN draws on both mainstream and alternative media practices, and provides an interesting example of what can be called hybrid media. Macdonald traces four dimensions of hybridity in TRNN's operations and considers the impact of this blend of media structure and practice on the news it produces.

Indeed, as the chapters in Part 2: Participation indicate, and in community broadcasting in particular, there is consistent pressure by corporate media owners to extend their ownership to the ether itself and to obliterate both the concept and practice of public ownership entirely. As revealed in Chapter 6, Michael Lithgow's exploration of community television, government changes to regulations increasingly favour the private cable operators that have managed to reap the financial rewards of public funding with little or no accountability. The ability of these operators to aggressively manage both government policy making and the airwaves has meant that community television itself is almost invisible to Canadians, who are generally unaware of the possibilities of public ownership and its attendant participation in decision making and production. In emphasizing the importance of what he calls cultural citizenship, Lithgow discusses two local examples of what can politically constitute the "community" in community television and suggests that the traditional community centre be reconfigured to a community *media* centre, a central hub based on active communication and media production rather than sports and recreation.

Given the predominant structuring of the public as commodified subjects, public participation in media production is itself considered a political act. Chapter 7, in which Evan Light discusses community radio stations in Québec, underscores this recognition that public participation in media ownership and production is political (in terms of taking responsibility for it) but should not

be assumed to be alternative or equated with political engagement in either formalized politics or social activism. In identifying such variations, Light submits that exactly *who* participates in radio, and *how* and *why* the community participates in the medium, largely depends on its constituents, access to resources (participant, financial, or technical), and the location of the station and its broadcast range (AMARC n.d.). Light highlights the differences between the organizations of the sole English-only campus radio station in Montréal and another station in the same area that manages no less than seven distinct language production units. In examining regional and rural examples, Light identifies significant differences between them and the urban stations in terms of what they perceive as their community mandate, particularly in the interpretation of “public service.”

The diversity of the public and the degree of its participation is further expounded by Karim H. Karim in Chapter 8, on ethnic media in Canada, which he regards as ranging from the transient self-produced small press, to international broadcasting reception via satellite, to diaspora interaction on-line. Karim considers the question of what is alternative in media otherwise categorized by their language and cultural affiliation in a dynamic environment tempered by the global political economy of media (Chakravarty and Zhao 2008). Ethnic media in Canada have the added challenge of negotiating their relationship to federal government policies of multiculturalism while avoiding responses to commercial and international dominance that contribute to their further commodification and marginalization or result in exclusionary social practices to the extent that they digress into racism. As Karim concludes, dialogue among and between the diasporas and the communities with which they engage is based on public participation and shows ethnic media’s independence and their progressive alternatives.

A growing independence from the structuring of state policies – or management through funding – as experienced in ethnic and community media, is indicated in Chapter 9, Marian Bredin’s treatment of Aboriginal media. Contextualizing Aboriginal media in Canada, she reviews their historical development and focuses on three contemporary types, including independent film, regional broadcasting, and a national cable network. Bredin highlights active participation as essential to reposition an Aboriginal lead in policy making, to foster economic independence, and to facilitate cultural renewal and political activism. She identifies several factors that make Aboriginal media distinct, while emphasizing the necessity of activism on all accounts as fundamental to

the democratization of public communication in Canada, demonstrating that participation is not restricted to the media themselves (their policy and practices) but necessitates political action and mobilization.

The four chapters in Part 3: Activism probe the meanings, degree, and challenges of prefigurative politics in alternative media practice. In Chapter 10, though valorizing the labour of alternative media as a commitment to an activist vision, Nicole Cohen also problematizes the actual conditions of that labour. Volunteer or poorly paid labour for alternative media directly challenges capitalism, but it can be (self-)exploitative and unsustainable. Moreover, alternative media are organized in such a way – informal and often run out of the home – that problems of gender, class, and workplace conditions and dynamics often remain unresolved. Cohen suggests that not addressing these issues contributes to alternative media's lack of sustainability and, in fact, challenges one of their underlying principles: "that anyone can make media" (this volume, 216). She argues that alternative media need to uncover the actualities of their labour practices in order to conduct the necessary conversation on how to create sustainable activist alternative media.

In Chapter 11, Kate Milberry covers on-line activism and addresses the key dynamic of our times: the social struggle between the public (the community model of the Internet) and private interests (the commercial model). Foregrounding net neutrality and fair copyright as two current and ongoing battles, she contends that the spectre of a two-tier Internet with different service and mobility for users in turn threatens to neuter the potential of cyberspace for alternative media. Within this fast-moving environment of on-line communication, "net freedom fighters" – many of them alternative media practitioners – have organized across a broad spectrum of action, both virtually and materially. In so doing, they are engaging in democratic media practice with the ultimate goal of democratic communication.

In Chapter 12, Patricia Mazepa tackles head-on another uncomfortable area of activist alternative media practice. She argues that the broad term "alternative media" covers both progressive and regressive communication forms, but rather than challenging conditions of domination and oppression, regressive communication reinforces them. Mazepa rejects the New Right's false presentation of its ideology as merely another perspective that is open to public debate and draws attention to the underlying power relations that must be uncovered to separate progressive activist media's quest for social justice from regressive media's exercise of power to legitimate and maintain the hierarchical order. Through examples drawn from the far right, religious

right, and neo-conservatism, Mazepa examines the New Right's strategic framing and delineates its tactics of marginalization, scapegoating, demonization, and dehumanization.

In Chapter 13, on anarchist direct-action activism, Sandra Jeppesen provides a strong contrast and an excellent illustration of progressive prefigurative politics. Here, democratic media practice in the form of a zine collective's media activism and actions is situated within cultural spaces where collective principles and values challenge hierarchical economism. Jeppesen extracts her analysis of the media activism of an anarchist "horde" from Bourdieu's principles of legitimation, arguing that zines have a high social value within anarchist culture, largely because they disavow the economic and are seen as inherently anti-capitalist. Rather than being legitimated through Bourdieu's economic capital, the process of media production is consistent with the content it produces and the actions it describes. Such self-reflexive and collective self-production, Jeppesen argues, provides rhizomatic foundational efforts toward alternative media sustainability. Through her delineation of the horde and how it functioned, she addresses issues of labour and sustainability that are similar to those raised by Cohen in Chapter 10.

In the three interrelated spheres of structure, participation, and activism, our focus in this volume is on examining the conditions that democratize the media, both structurally and in representation, while recognizing that no democratic media are possible without democratic communication and a democratic government (Hamilton 2000). The chapters in this book attest to the challenges facing alternative media in Canada in reaching these goals, while also examining the practices that continue to define and redefine alternative media in Canada.

In the face of escalating commercialization and concentration of ownership worldwide, the breadth and diversity of media practices, and the roles and purposes played by various media in the development and circulation of public communication, need to be better understood and advanced. Given that communication is central to our species, our collective relationships, and our future, this book also aims to provide encouragement to its readers to (re)consider and further activate the democratic alternatives.

NOTES

- 1 The editors are painfully aware of the dearth of history on alternative media in Canada and recognize that the present discussion is but a brief sketch confined mainly to

publications in English. We welcome contributions to ongoing projects such as the Canadian Alternative Media Archive (www.alternativearchive.org/) and future research collaborations.

- 2 This includes direct lobbying as indicated in the list of the Registry of Lobbyists (Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying of Canada 2011a), to indirect lobbying through industry-sponsored conferences, such as the 2010 Canadian Telecom Summit.
- 3 Indeed, even the CRTC identifies the public as “consumers” as one of its four constituents, together with the broadcasting, telecommunication, and media sectors (see CRTC 2011).

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