

No Gatekeepers: *Alternative Media*

At OneWorld.net, Amnesty International has posted documentary footage of its visit to the Free Prisoner Association, a human rights group in Iraq. At Big Noise Media, anti-globalization activist filmmakers recount the history of the Zapatista movement in Storm from the Mountain. On Free Speech TV's free digital satellite channel, independent filmmaker Norman Cowie runs his critique of U.S. foreign policy, Scenes from An Endless War.

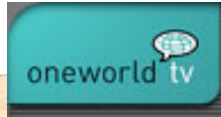
In dramatic contrast to the professional zone of mass media, “alternative media” creates an open, unstructured, gatekeeper-free environment for social documentaries. The current openness of the Internet is exploited to market new media, transmit it, and to engage viewers. This is “media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power” (Couldry & Curran, 2003). Alternative media have been seen, correctly, as expressions of people and cultures whose voices have been excluded from dominant media (Atton, 2002; Zimmermann, 2000), as important for their signaling of discontent and demand for justice as for their demand to express themselves. There is also a tradition among activists of celebrating do-it-yourself approaches to media making, for their saucy spirit of resistance (Halleck, 2002), a theme that has also been present in cultural studies. Although they sometimes claim to be creating alternative programs for general interest viewers or to reach decision makers, alternative mediamakers often serve and cultivate sub-communities, rather than the broad audiences that gatekept TV reaches.

Background

The creation of alternative media has been a dynamic element of rights movements of the last three decades. Feminists from the early 1970s created formally-challenging, experimental work as well as videos for activists and informational-instructional videos on issues ranging from domestic violence



Oneworld TV is a web-based community of shared values for social justice and offers interactive, online documentaries.



Rape allegations against UK army In Kenya



Jumana and Guy meet Mandela in The Staying Alive Special

to birthing care to workplace issues (Rich, 1998; Juhasz, 2001). The core audience for such work was other women. In the 1980s, AIDS activists created film and television for and with the growing movement demanding more social resources to address the public health crisis (Juhasz & Saalfield, 1995), and gay and lesbian subcultures featured work by and for these communities (Holmlund & Fuchs, 1997). Ethnic media have accompanied and fueled movements for full democratic participation by cultural minorities in the U.S., building communities and audiences simultaneously (Noriega, 2000; Klotman & Cutler, 1999). Artists and activists shared a passion to explore modes of expression that would break with mainstream commercial and televisual conventions, as well as content that reflected the new voices clamoring to be heard in the society (Boyle, 1997).

Traditional commercial media products and processes have been a prime target of alternative media. In fact, alternative media criticism has taken on its own name, of culture jamming (Klein, 2000). In this movement, 60s alternative culture activists and today's anti-globalization activists find common ground in resistance to corporate media culture (Shepard & Hayduk, 2002). At the same time, culture jammers are

OneWorld.net

The experiments of OneWorld.net provide some helpful approaches in the struggle to manage the tension between serving communities and publics, and the problems of managing information quality and discussion, since its launch in 1995.

OneWorld both represents itself as a community of belief and also a public resource. It calls itself "a network of people and groups working for human rights and sustainable development from across the globe." Each of its more than 1,500 affiliate organizations can contribute information to twelve offices worldwide. At the same time, it creates a daily news product for a general public. Professional editors create useable information that feeds a daily news service, and also train partners in journalistic standards and technical procedures. The news service is now one of the top four choices for news identified on Yahoo, and is highly regarded at the UN (Charlé, 2003). OneWorld has grown through foundation subsidy, support from some European governments, and the participation of its nonprofit members.

OneWorld has pioneered software permitting interactive video, or "open documentaries," in which digital segments can be interpolated throughout an audio-visual thread. The software is simple enough for amateurs, and easy for even antiquated computers to access. Thousands of individuals and organizations, from dozens of countries, have joined since its launch in 2002, from Amnesty International to ➔

fascinated by the power of commercial media itself, and determined to subvert mass media claims to transparent realism.

Paper Tiger, an alternative media production group, developed a highly publicized profile that became emblematic of the oppositional spirit of “alternative” TV. The Paper Tiger TV Collective in New York City, born in the early 1980s, develops productions, conducts community screenings, and conducts training to raise awareness about the social implications and impact of media. Its productions typically are purely volunteer, with only the crudest of props and tools. A recent Paper Tiger production, *Fenced Out*, was part of an organizing effort to save the Christopher Street Piers, a rare place in New York City where young people of color and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and trans-sexual youth congregated, from redevelopment. Another longstanding example — sustained for many years by University of Texas professors including Douglas Kellner — was the program “Alternative Views” on Austin public access cable TV. In Portland, Oregon, video collective Flying Focus’s weekly half-hour cable access series, *The Flying Focus Video Bus*, includes subjects such as police brutality and critiques of mainstream media. Its lecture series includes *Noam Chomsky on the Media & Democracy*, *Barbara Ehrenreich on War and Society*, and *Howard Zinn on Reclaiming the People’s History*. Its budget comes close to zero; volunteer passion is crucial. Besides running on the local public access television channel, the collective also distributes tapes by mail from a catalogue of more than 300 titles, and runs local lending libraries, catering to aspiring anti-corporate organizers.

Alternative media producers have ridden the crest of new technologies, often enabled by policies that mandate public use of them. For instance, the cable access movement that began in the 1960s (see next chapter) was a powerful spur to such work, because for the first time it created channels of access for a general public to the prized home screen of television. The cable access movement spurred grassroots and self-styled alternative production projects nationwide (Fuller, 1994).

Friends of the Earth to Television Trust for the Environment to the United Nations Development Program. Topics range from biogenetics to the war on terrorism to HIV/AIDS. A television editor both facilitates and moderates. The moderating and editing, along with the openness of the format, creates conditions for participation across differences of viewpoint.

Thus, OneWorld aspires to the goals of nurturing a community of shared values, participant-journalism, grassroots expression, and public engagement through a combination of participation and mediation. ♦



Satellite television's public channels, also created through citizen pressure, have also provided screens for alternative media. Finally, the Internet, created in a government research project, has mobilized new media activists.

The documentaries made within alternative media generally engage already-mobilized organizations and small groups. In 1991, Deep Dish TV (deepdish.igc.org), a volunteer organization that uses available satellite transponder space to upload programs to cable systems nationwide, distributed nationwide a series of programs in opposition to the Gulf War. These programs were used most often by groups already mobilized against the war or by organizations eager to hear that perspective. (During the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Deep Dish activists considered launching an initiative but could not assemble resources in time.) Activists of all types have seized the video as a tool for their causes. For instance, James Ficklin, a producer working with anti-globalization activists and tree-sitters in the Northwest, describes his own activist videos as "educating the converted," providing arguments and information that bring enthusiasts into the movement. This is an approach detailed with extensive examples in Thomas Harding's *The Video Activist Handbook* (Harding, 2001).

With the growth of the Internet, countercultural work has followed. A "D.I.Y." (do-it-yourself) ethic has fueled enterprises that purvey alternative media, which exist thanks to the commitment of their founders, such as Guerrilla News Network (gnn.tv), People's Video Network (peoplesvideo.org), Video Activist Network (videoactivism.org), and the burgeoning blog phenomenon.

Indymedia

Hundreds of efforts draw from the Independent Media Centers (indymedia.org), or "indymedia," the astonishingly protean network of social activists using the Internet both to communicate and to organize. Indymedia centers have sprung up, now more than 125 of them in some 25 countries since its dawn in Seattle in late 1999, as a result of anti-globalization

Free Speech TV

freespeech.org

Free Speech TV provides a site for left-of-center activists to both find media with their perspectives and to rally and recruit.

Free Speech derives its basic resources from TV entrepreneur John Schwartz. When an obscure bit of the spectrum, instructional fixed spectrum, became available in the 1980s, he succeeded in purchasing some of it. He established foundations to funnel the profits, and has poured these resources into grassroots television experiments and policy advocacy.

The origins of the 24/7 satellite TV service, with a website that features streaming media, go back nearly two decades. Its predecessor was an anthology series, "The '90s," curated by veterans of guerrilla TV and the media center movement. "The '90s" was a window into alternative video production with a leftist or culture jamming bent. It showed on cable-access and on some public TV stations, but struggled constantly for airtime. Satellite TV provided new television access. A public interest clause in 1993 legislation, finally put in force in 1998, mandated that satellite providers use 4–7 percent of their channel space for noncommercial programming.

Free Speech TV inherits and expands on the earlier initiative, using both satellite and cable access as well as the Internet. "By exposing the public to perspectives excluded from the corporate-owned media," it declares, "FSTV empowers citizens to fight injustices, to revitalize democracy, and to build a more compassionate world." It operates 24 →

protests at a World Trade Organization meeting (Kidd, 2002). That movement drew on the expertise and contacts of older media activists including those involved in Paper Tiger, who shared an anarchic sensibility (Halleck, 2002b). As “evan,” an indymedia activist, put it, “Indymedia draws its content and ideas from within active participants themselves. This is why we say ‘be the media.’ We are creating media labs, video editing rooms, radio stations, websites, community newspapers, and other media to be a space in which discourse can take place.”

Indymedia sites have both made use of streamed media and also become retail sites for video. The Showdown in Seattle: Five Days that Shook the WTO, created by a coalition including Deep Dish, Paper Tiger, FreeSpeech TV, Whispered media, Changing America, and New York Free Media Alliance, was seen on television, streamed, and is used in anti-globalist organizing. *9-11*, made in New York within a week of the attacks on the Twin Towers, is available in video and streamed media, via the FreeSpeech website.

Indymedia makers often espouse anti-professional, movement rhetoric, seeing their work as responding to and fueling social protest. For instance, Big Noise Productions’ manifesto reads:

We are not filmmakers producing and distributing our work. We are rebels, crystallizing [sic] radical community and weaving a network of skin and images, of dreams and bone, of solidarity and connection against the isolation, alienation and cynicism of capitalist decomposition. We are tactical because our media is a part of movements, imbedded in a history of struggle. Tactical because we are provisional, plural, polyvocal. Tactical because it would be the worst kind of arrogance to believe that our media had some ahistorical power to change the world - its only life is inside of movements - and they will hang our images on the walls of their banks if our movements do not tear their banks down.

Thus, Big Noise measures its success on the basis of its service to a struggle against the powers maintaining the status quo.

hours a day, repeating programming, and also has a website where videos can be viewed. It also has a “Mobile-Eyes” campaign; its “cybercar,” an ENG-equipped truck, provides mobile access. Special coverage on issues such as Palestinian nationalism, education reform, sustainable development, and corporate responsibility use highly visible public events (for instance, the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2003) to conduct electronic “teach-ins.” This coverage is aimed at communities of belief; for instance, the Palestinian “teach-in” features only Palestinian nationalists. Reportage from the U.N. summit on sustainable development in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002 was summarized as follows: “Can the planet’s future be left to the marketplace and those who argue that what’s good for business is good for the world? Millions seem to be saying no.”

FreeSpeech produces little of its own, and pays only a few dollars a minute for acquired material. But its staff cultivate links with other parts of left-wing alternative media, including indymedia and the Pacifica network’s “Democracy Now” program. ♦

Big Noise's videos draw from international indymedia documentation to celebrate the spirit of anti-globalization demonstrators and describe them as an "anti-corporate" force for peace and justice. In *Fourth World War*, for instance, producers compiled images from indymedia groups around the world — Argentina, Palestine, Seattle, Genoa — to create a collage film with a music-video like track (contributed to by rappers and other popular music groups), melding images of protestors from different continents and layering images of Mexican indigenous peasants onto Seattle and Genoa demonstration footage. Narration, read by poet Suheir Hammad and musician Michael Franti, asserts that "the world has changed" and that "we" are joining protestors everywhere.

Indymedia producers have been far less open-handed with producers who are not part of their own networks and circle of belief. For instance, German investigative journalist Michael Busse made a film investigating the role of Italian police in instigating violence during the bloody 2001 anti-globalization demonstrations in Genoa, Italy. *Storming the Summit*, shown on German public service TV, draws on the work of dozens of amateurs who videotaped the events, often comparing several shots from different angles of the same incident. It harshly indicts the Italian police both for causing violence and failing to control it.

Busse found both Italian and German indymedia outlets impossible to work with (Busse, personal communication, November 15, 2003). Italian indymedia producers refused to let him reuse their original material (which, unlike that of consumer videotapes, was broadcast quality), and only wanted to let him use a half-hour work if he used it in its entirety. In Germany, he found indymedia producers reluctant to share documentation that could be used to show that protestors had acted violently, and they also cut out images that could be used to identify individuals. Finally Busse used Internet searches to find individuals outside indymedia networks who were willing to share their tapes. Thus, in this instance indymedia makers were concerned primarily to use their video storytelling to tell only their own version of the story.



Independent media like

Big Noise Productions support

networks of anti-globalist

activists.



Indymedia centers, with horizontal decisionmaking structures and openness to all volunteers, have become entry points to many new, and often young people. At the same time, indymedia sites have found themselves hamstrung by their own anarchy, as they have grown past the moment of the 1999 demonstration (Halleck, 2002b, p. 65). In 2002, indymedia sites worldwide found themselves attacked by anti-Semitic, racist and conspiratorial contributions. While some suspected a coordinated attack to discredit indymedia and the IMC Global Newswire collective made recommendations to protect indymedia sites from attack, local volunteers failed to implement any coordinated action.

Other alternative sites for social documentary

Many projects join a rejection of mainstream commercial media, fascination with new technologies, and the Internet's capacity for interaction. DVRepublic.com, a project of the Black Filmmaker Foundation, mentors and encourages "socially concerned filmmakers of color to present their stories, ideas, and images on their own terms without seeking the permission, approval, or sanction of media gatekeepers." For instance, Tania Cuevas-Martinez and Lubna Khalid's *Haters*, the first finished work at DV Republic, chronicles racial profiling and hate crimes after Sep. 11, 2001. Calling itself a "liberated zone in cyberspace," DVRepublic uses the Web to promote and sample work that can be ordered in video. It also fosters a discussion list around the work, and activist links, for people who reject the "artistically exhausted and politically insidious" mainstream of American TV and film. Thus, the

The Chiapas Media Project, in coordination with the Zapatista movement, is "a bi-national partnership providing video and computer equipment and training to indigenous and campesino communities in Chiapas and Guerrero, Mexico."

project hopes to generate a community of users who will also be consumers of its niche product and provide enough revenues to keep it alive.

Other work draws from the “digital storytelling movement,” as the Center for Digital Storytelling (storycenter.org) in Berkeley, CA calls it. Community organizing efforts employ media to permit people to discover the stories in their lives, and thus build and strengthen relationships and their ability to act in their own communities and lives. People create small digital movies, audio files, slideshows and other media. Their stories may be about surviving child abuse, or about being young, gay and Latino, the life of one interracial family, or about organizing to resist racism in one community (digitaldocumentary.org). Third World Majority (cultureisaweapon.org) is one example of such a project, focused on people of color. “Even those within the industry recognize that mainstream media's trickle-down approach to storytelling poses important concerns about the legitimacy of the information, and compromises the notion of open, accessible, and balanced information,” its website declares. The process itself acts as a forum “for communities to tell their own truths in their own voices.” The stories are usually developed within workshops that also develop action agendas. Storylink.org, a project in development in 2003, intends to provide a common platform for digital storytellers of all kinds to view each others’ stories, link to them, and create their own.

Although the anarchic, obstreperous voice of left critics of capitalism have been highly visible in alternative video and film, other ideologically-driven communities have seized their opportunities as well, and created national networks. Christian fundamentalists have developed extensive product lines and distribution networks. Books, audio and, to a lesser extent, video by Tim LaHaye on the Rapture have sold by the tens of millions, turning Tyndale Press into a publishing powerhouse. The highly publicized success of Al Qaeda’s recruiting videos also demonstrates the power of ideologically-driven video with an institutional base.



Some alternative media have strategized how to use the strength of networks of communities of belief to reach beyond them, into public life. MoveOn.org, which uses the Internet to build “electronic advocacy groups” for liberal and left perspectives on public issues, has had unparalleled success with “viral marketing” — the rapid spread of information through friends-and-family-list emailing. Since its origins in the attempt to counter Republican attempts to impeach President Clinton, MoveOn has moved from a small, partisan organization to a voice of protest to be ignored by politicians at their peril. It provides its email recipients with information, something to do, and often somewhere to go to discuss or debate an issue; it has become a force of public opinion. MoveOn uses social documentaries to stir public debate. It claims to have distributed 100,000 DVDs of professional filmmaker Robert Greenwald’s *Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War* in a few weeks in October–November 2003; the distribution of these videotapes was intended to expand informed discussion of the war at election time. Thus, MoveOn’s use of video not only creates community, but also fuels public discussion.

The networked, Internet-based independent media site OneWorld also directly confronts the challenge to reach “beyond the converted.” It aspires to provide information to diverse audiences, and also to cultivate virtual communities of people committed to social justice. It has a management structure, editors, and criteria for membership. Its showcase for social documentary is also a moderated and managed public platform (see p. 32). OneWorld serves both a community and publics beyond it. For instance, in November 2003, OneWorld excerpted Portia Rankoane’s *A Red Ribbon around My House*, a film on AIDS activism in South Africa made as part of the celebrated Steps to the Future series. It links the video with news about South African AIDS activism, and to an open discussion board.



Resources

The resources that alternative media can draw on depend both on their relationships with institutions (for instance, an evangelical church network or Democratic party fundraisers) and their ability to use viral marketing to win individuals' support. Budgets vary but they rarely reflect the real costs of the product. Resources for such work largely depend on the energy — usually youthful — of participants, occasionally boosted by foundation support. However, foundations can be stymied if structures are not reliable. For instance, foundations associated with RealNetworks initially backed indymedia in 1999, but were unable to sustain support because they could not identify leadership to receive and channel funds. Alternative media are often sustained by ever-new infusions of youthful energy. It is correspondingly difficult to have institutional memory, to develop skills, and to learn from mistakes.

Success, for communities and the public

Success is often equated, in alternative media, with survival (in this case, creation of a documentary) against the odds. There is also often, understandably for organizations running on enthusiasm, an emphasis on producers rather than on users. On the other hand, methods drawing on multiple measurement approaches are also being tried. OneWorld is developing an evaluation element to its work that includes not webhits and also audience surveys and focus groups, and that draws from development evaluation expertise; evaluation focus is on users.

In the ungated environment, networks grow along the lines of shared commitment and perspective. So a major challenge of most alternative media is reaching beyond a committed circle. That challenge is in the public's interest, and also in the interest of the committed themselves. In a network analysis of niche and alternative media and movements, Manuel Castells (1997) notes that media can reinforce group self-identity, at the cost of linking with others and fully participating in the emerging "network society." This is a familiar tension, and not one that new technologies resolve.

Alternative media oppose mainstream media and feature voices excluded from the mainstream.