Alternative

in Canada

Edited by Kirsten Kozolanka,
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ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN CANADA

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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; Chakravartty 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