Mapping the rhizome. Organizational and informational networks of two Brussels alternative radio stations

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ABSTRACT

Alternative media theory aims to capture an important component of the third (non-state and non-market) media sector, but it also has a number of disadvantages. The temporality of alternativeness, the homogenizing effect of the alternative-mainstream binary which excludes fluidity and diversity and the resulting media-centric position all form structural constraints of this alternative media approach. This article argues that while the alternative media approach is valuable, it can be strengthened by combining it with a rhizomatic media approach, which allows us to focus on three aspects: their role as at the crossroads of civil society, their elusiveness, and their interconnections and linkages with market and state. The combination of the alternative and rhizomatic media approaches is then applied to two Brussels radio stations, Radio Panik and Radio Air Libre, in order to show how they connect a number of civil society (and other) organizations, act as a nodal point and construct linkages with market and state. Through an analysis of the websites of the radio stations and programmes, and through an analysis of 10 broadcasts of *Passe Muraille*, one of Radio Air Libre's programmes, the surprising richness of their civil society networks, in both numbers and diversity, is mapped. Moreover, a second mapping shows how both radio stations engage with market and state. The analyses of the two rhizomatic-alternative radio stations show us that the third way, navigating between market and state, still persists, but at the same time the rhizomatic approach allows us to incorporate more of the complexity of these media organizations.

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1. Introduction

Alternative media theory has been trapped in a complex paradox since its insipience: its binary and media-centric components have made the concept difficult to deploy for capturing the diversity and social embeddedness of the mediated practices that it aims to theorize, while on the other hand the social practice of alternative media continuously signifies the importance of its social embeddedness and alternativity, at the organizational-participatory level and/or at the counter-hegemonic discursive production level. As we are attached to the alternative media concept, we want to reduce the above-described tension by complementing this alternative media approach with a rhizomatic media approach. Arguably, the rhizomatic approach will protect the alternativity concept, but at the same time allow overcoming its binary and media-centric characteristics. More specifically, this rhizomatic approach will allow us to highlight the role these media organizations play as crossroads in a larger civil society network, their structural elusiveness and their crossovers into the realms of market and state. Moreover, we want to provide empirical support to this rhizomatic media approach by mapping the diverse networks in which two Belgian alternative radio stations, Radio Panik and Radio Air Libre, are embedded. An analysis

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of the websites of the radio stations and programmes, and an analysis of 10 broadcasts of *Passe Muraille*, one of Radio Air Libre's programmes, will show how these radio stations connect a number of civil society (and other) organizations, act as a nodal point and construct linkages with market and state.

2. The definition of alternative media and its problems

When discussing the notion of alternative media, Downing (2000, p. ix) critiques its "*oxymoronic*" nature: "*everything, at some point, is alternative to something else*", thus legitimizing his decision to focus on 'radical alternative media', thereby for instance excluding niche trade magazines and corporate industry bulletins. At the same time he still emphasizes the diversity that characterizes these (radical) alternative media that are to be found in a "*colossal variety of formats*" (Downing, 2000, p. ix). The diversity can also be found in the differences in the terminology used to describe alternative media – educative, popular, free, associative, communitarian, native, citizens', civil society, communal, indigenous or participatory media.[1] Downing is not the only one to formulate a critical position. A related argument is developed by Rodriguez (2001, p. 20), who suggests abandoning the notion of alternative media in favour of citizens' media:

> because 'alternative media' rests on the assumption that these media are alternative to something, this definition will easily entrap us in binary thinking: mainstream media and their alternative, that is, alternative media. Also, the label 'alternative media' predetermines the type of oppositional thinking that limits the potential of these media to their ability to resist the alienating power of mainstream media.

The problem of binarity plays in two respects. First, there is the temporality of alternativeness (Lewis, 1993, p. 12). An opposition is a transitory concept; the meanings on which these oppositions are based, are in continuous movement. In some cases, the alternative might transform into the mainstream. Moreover, the opposing positions might start interacting, which may alter their oppositional nature. The identities of media organizations cannot be seen as fixed in time (nor space), but are (at least potentially) in permanent flux. At the same time, these identities of course remain embedded within hegemonic processes, which often stabilize the involved identities. Second, the binary logic has homogenizing consequences for both positions, and tends to exclude the outside world, which might result in a media-centric position (Carpentier et al., 2003, pp. 52–53). The belief in the homogeneity of alternative media has lead to a search for exclusive alternative media characteristics (and ways to distinguish between 'real' and 'fake' alternative media). This search is problematic because the requirement of consistency on all levels – content, structure, financing, production process – as a condition for using the label of alternative does not do justice to the enormous variety of alternative media practices. For instance using commercial tactics to collect funding (while the absence of these commercial tactics are an often-used criterion for distinguishing between alternative and market media) does not necessarily exclude a media project from being alternative. Again, the notion of fluidity moves to the foreground, as also Atton (2002, p. 209) argues:

> This encourages us to approach these media from the perspective of 'mixed radicalism', once again paying attention to hybridity rather than meeting consistent adherence to a 'pure', fixed set of criteria (...)

Before looking for ways to deal with this fluidity, we should be careful not to discredit the concept of alternative media. However imperfect it may be, it still captures these media organization's oppositional natures, on two different levels: with respect to content and on the structural level. As Downing (1984, pp. 2 and 35) remarks in researching (radical) alternative media, the objective of these media is to fill the wasteland left by other mainstream media.

At the content level, alternative media can offer representations and discourses that vary from those originating from mainstream media. The main reason for this difference is linked to the higher level of participation of different societal groups and communities, and to the aim to provide "*air space to local cultural manifestations, to ethnic minority groups, to the hot political issues in the neighbourhood or locality*" (Jankowski, 1994, p. 3). The orientation of alternative media towards giving voice to various (older and newer) social movements, minorities, and sub/counter-cultures, and the emphasis on self-representation, can result in more diverse content, signifying the multiplicity of societal voices and the embeddedness in civil society. Also the critical stance towards the production values of the 'media professional' working in mainstream media organizations affects the content, as it leads to a diversity of formats and genres and creates room for experimentation with content and form.

Although not a necessity, locality remains an important concept for alternative media content production, as it offers one of the conditions of possibility for participatory practices, namely small-scaledness. What Simpson called an 'artisanal production' of radio content, refers to locally produced and adapted content, based on local participation (cited in Beltran, 2005, p. 21). The objective thus becomes dealing with local concerns and interests rather than reaching the largest possible audience. Obviously, there is also the danger of localism or isolationism (see Mattelart and Piemme (1983, p. 416)), and we should keep in mind that 'community' should not be exclusively defined geographically, as communities can cross geographic localities (Lewis, 1993, p. 13).

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[1] Discussions about the different labels regarding alternative media can be found in Bailey et al. (2007), Acevedo (2006), Brunetti (2000), Charles (1999) and Checa Montufar (1999).