

## **Feminist media as alternative media? A literature review<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*This article surveys a strand of literature that has as its concern political movements and the strategic importance of developing media networks as a core component of political mobilisation. This article is especially interested in feminist movements and how this specific mode of political action relates to a more general set of debates about the nature of the connection between political movements and media production. Importantly, I see in the inattention given to the constitutive function of media forms within studies of feminist movements as casting a long shadow over more general debates surrounding the intersection between political movements and media production. My particular focus for this article will in the first instance be a particular tendency in media research, namely ‘alternative media studies’.*

*The purpose of this intervention is to examine the existing literature and to offer an assessment of the tools that this literature makes available for the specific treatment of feminist media production. I argue that the established setting of alternative media studies raises some interesting questions about how one might go about analysing feminist media, but that ultimately much of the contributions are marred by a set of generalities and typological idealisations insensitive to the specific analytic demands generated through engagement with feminist media production. I contend that it is only outside the established coordinates of alternative media theorisation that one can locate more appropriate resources enabling an enriched and variegated account of feminist media.*

Forms of media—in the broadest sense of this term—are an invaluable part in furthering the determinate goals and specific demands of a given political movement. This might seem a harmless enough contention. For what would a political movement be without any means of disseminating and circulating its ideas to a wider political constituency? If winning support and forging alliances are necessary prerequisites for a movement to gain what is colloquially regarded as ‘critical mass’ then with what means is political momentum (which a

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movement thrives off) possible other than through the effective, meaning the *affective*, transmissibility of ideas between a movement and what is outside of that movement? At its most basic level, the delivery of a political message between the sender and recipient entails a 'medium' that shuttles between addresser and addressee. Consider the array of possible media forms that function as a transmitter of political content: more often than not the forms of delivery are associated with strictly textual output (for example, newspapers, bulletins, zines, flyers and leaflets, etc.) But this is not exclusively the case. The mode of its delivery could just as well be 'performative', including street theatre or musical performance, graffiti and other art forms. Today, with the development of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), the platforms open for the transmission and dissemination of political agendas have multiplied greatly (for example, weblogs, ezines, social messaging utilities such as Twitter, etc), providing the possibility for more immediate and responsive media output, which are in a synergetic relation with a movement that changes in accordance with the changing times and terrains of its struggles.

Given the obviousness of the connection between political movements and media production, it would be expected that much literature has dedicated its efforts to theorising this relation. To this the answer is somewhat ambivalent. Both a 'yes' and 'no' is appropriate. This article surveys a selection of the literature that broaches the linkage between political movements and the strategic importance of the development of media networks. On this basis, it is readily acknowledged that a rather significant body of research exists at the intersection of the study of media and the analysis of political movements. The question however is whether these understandings capture the full complexity of the function of media production in political movements.

As a feminist scholar my entry into these set of debates is somewhat particular, this from the outset I readily concede. My own understanding of these issues has been shaped by two related observations about feminist political struggles, specifically. First, that the history of the women's movement has demonstrated time and again the central role of 'activist' media in the production of feminist collective identities and yet that second on a theoretical level this essential connection has been largely glossed over.

Already in the latter half of the nineteenth century, suffragist and anti-slavery activist Sojourner Truth (born Isabella Baumfree) sold photographic, *cartes-de-visite* of herself as a way of disseminating her politics and as a means of supporting herself financially (Irvin Painter 1994, 482-488; Downing 2001, vi-vii). More generally women within the suffrage movement(s) were known to be avid producers of their own press, cartoons, postcards and posters (Israels Perry 1993; DiCenzo 2003, DiCenzo and Ryan 2007). This rich and multifaceted element of feminist movement history was to continue well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and has, over the years taken on a multiplicity of formats, genres, modes of expression and political agendas. British publications *Sempstress*; *The English Woman's Journal*; *Votes for Women*; *The English Woman*; *The Free Woman*; *The Vote*, and Swedish radical women's magazine *Tidevarvet* constitute notable

examples of print media produced in the decades around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Feminist publishing peaked once again during the so called 'second wave' of feminism which prospered in the spirit of 1968 with titles such as the American news journal *Off Our Backs*, (since 1970), magazines such as long lived and influential UK feminist magazine *SpareRib* (1972-1993); The 1980's witnessed the birth of significant media contributions; internationalist UK feminist newspaper *Outwrite* (1982-1988); and the self-proclaimed first ever feminist radio station *RadiOrakel* (ongoing since 1982) in Norway. In the mid eighties, the world's first known unlicensed women's radio, *Radio Pirate Woman* had its inaugural broadcast in Ireland. The 1990's saw the emergence of Nicaraguan feminist quarterly *La Boletina* (since 1991, since 2005 also available online); and Iranian independent feminist journal *Zanan* (subsequently banned in 2008). The decade also witnessed what has often been referred to as the transnational 'grrrl zine revolution'; young girls becoming involved in feminist politics through the development of feminist zine networks (small not-for-profit publications, generally authored and edited by a single author or a small editors' collective) (Harris 1998; Zobl 2004a&b; Schilt & Zobl 2008; Kearney 2006; Baldauf & Weingartner 1998; Chidgey 2007). Today, feminist media production continues to flourish. New titles of magazines (such as Norwegian *FETT* since 2004 and Swedish *FUL\_* since 2004) and broadcast media such as Swedish community and online TV *HallonTV* (since 2008) and *an.schläge tv*—the sister project (since 2005) of the long established Austrian feminist magazine with the same name appear alongside 'new media' and hybrid genres such as the e-zine *The F-Word* (UK since 2001), weblogs such as Romanian *F.I.A.* (since 2005) and the extension of queer feminist *FUL* magazine with a monthly pod radio programme (Sweden since 2008).<sup>2</sup>

Given this rich history of feminist media production it is doubtlessly surprising that—despite the vast amount of research conducted on other aspects of the feminist movement—the terrain is somewhat uncharted (Riaño 1994, Steiner 1992, 122, Byerly & Ross 2006). This inattention can perhaps be partially attributed to the general focus within disciplines such as media and cultural studies, which have privileged the study of mass media at the expense of smaller and more marginal(ised) practices of communication (Atton 2002, 7).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> There is little doubt that contemporary feminist media production has gained the attention of feminist scholars recently. In the growing area of studies concerned with feminist zine making and online media production (Zobl 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Chidgey 2006, 2007; Kearney 1997, 2006; Leonard 1997, 1998, 2007, Byerly & Ross 2006) there is much to be commended, especially the way in which researchers have elevated marginal practices, such as zine making and online weblogs, to the dignity of political operators. Such practices are considered by many as a central component in the revivification of a.feminist politics today. Not that one should be too quick to infer that the importance some researchers have ascribed to the media production in the history of feminism is without precedent. Throughout history, feminist self-publishing has played a crucial role in women's political mobilisation and struggles for the right to vote, study and participate in political life (Steiner 1992).

<sup>3</sup> This is to say, an analysis of the negative role that 'mass media' plays in the circulation of gendered norms and rigid stereotypes, which perpetuate relations of subordination and inequality between the sexes, comes at the detriment of giving visibility to 'alternative' forms of

How this specific situation in feminism relates to a more general set of debates about the nature of the connection between political movements and media production is far from being restrictive. I see in the inattention given to the *constitutive* function of media forms within studies of feminist movements as casting a long shadow over more general debates surrounding the intersection between political movements and media production. I shall therefore argue that it is far from being the case that we can plug the holes and deficiencies of feminist research by using resources and tools available from theoretical quarters which have, in a more general manner, expended much time and effort to the precise relation between political movements and the media form deployed by such movements. Rather there are significant limitations with the more general literature on media and the role it plays in political movements, which, when used to make sense of the specific demands of the feminist movements and its vicissitudes, does not satisfactorily capture the ambiguities and complexities of that movement. My particular focus for this article will in the first instance be a trend in media research captured under the appellation 'alternative media studies'. 'Alternative media'—a contested term in itself, and one to which we shall return in this essay—was until recently largely neglected both in Media and Cultural Studies as well as in the studies of social movements (Downing 2001, v, 26). Alternative media scholarship (in its various guises) has gained increased attention in recent years (see Bailey et. al. 2008; Waltz 2005; Atton 2002; 2004)—a development which, in combination with the important contributions already made within feminist media studies more generally, offers hope for future developments in the study of feminist alternative media. The purpose of this intervention is to examine the existing literature and to offer an assessment of the tools that this literature makes available for the specific treatment of feminist media production, still largely lacking systematic engagement. I shall argue that the established setting of alternative media studies raises some interesting questions about how one might go about analysing feminist media, but that ultimately much of the contributions are marred by a set of generalities and typological idealisations insensitive to the specific analytic demands generated through engagement with feminist media production. Rather it is outside the established coordinates of alternative media theorisation that perhaps one locates the most appropriate resources enabling an enriched and variegated account of feminist media.

With these broad intentions outlined, the structure of this intervention shall take the following form: I will firstly begin by addressing the strand of theorisation which emphasises alternative media as mainly 'oppositional', or counter-hegemonic, in their relationship to state and market, here mainly represented by alternative media scholars John Downing and Chris Atton. Secondly, I will discuss a number of critiques that have been raised against these former approaches, and via these critiques introduce alternative conceptualisations,

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media production, examples of which can be understood as bringing about 'emancipatory' effects by actively challenging the prevailing system of gendered relations.

especially on the notions of 'citizen media' as developed by Clemencia Rodriguez (1992) and the more recent 'rhizomatic media' as formulated by Olga Bailey, Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier (2008).

### **Defining Alternative Media: The Uneasy Relationship between Formal Specificity and Historical Complexity**

Suffering from being largely under researched, the field of alternative media can be characterised by the continuous attempts made by researchers to find and refine suitable frameworks as a way of, first, complementing existing media theories which have proven insufficient at understanding the *specificity* of these media forms in opposition to dominant mass media, and second in a way that takes into account the vast *complexity* within this subset of media production. These overarching—and occasionally conflicting—aims often pose a dilemma in distinguishing 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' from 'alternative' media at the same time of avoiding the reductive, and inflexibility of, binary oppositions drawn between the 'mainstream' and the 'alternative'. The field is characterised by what I see as a problematic tension which is present in the various attempts at theorising alternative media, namely the tension between 'formal specificity' and 'historical complexity'.

Clearly the problem begins as a disciplinary one, inasmuch that alternative media circumscribes a particular area of study on the basis of it existing as a specifiable object in the world. The question that goes begging is 'what' is it precisely about 'alternative' media that is different from its putative antipode, 'mainstream' media? 'What' divines the 'alternative' from 'prevailing' forms of media? Much rests on the answering of these questions. Nothing short of the existence of the sub-discipline, 'alternative media studies', depends on providing a definition that can disclose a phenomenal difference between media forms. Without the difference 'alternative media studies' would lose its reason for existing. Despite several attempts to challenge and, as it were, find 'alternative' terminologies, the contested concept of 'alternative media' still lingers, and remains predominant in the field. This section will dedicate both time and space to a surveying of the various ways in which 'alternative media' is described in the literature.

At its most anodyne, alternative media is defined as *any form of media which constitutes an alternative to, or positions itself in opposition to, widely available and consumed mass media products* (Waltz 2005, 2). A very general and formal definition, the inclusiveness of it is only a strength for as long as it is used as an intuitive, 'commonsensical' umbrella term. Here the problem is that the terminology contributes very little to any sustained and rigorous study of these phenomena (see also Comedia 1984, 95). Indeed, at this, the most basic definitional level, many have questioned the utility of the appellation, 'alternative', claiming that its nebulous nature means that what counts as an instance of 'alternative' media is easily abused by personal predilection and self-definition (see Abel 1997). John Downing describes the term 'alternative media'

as nearly oxymoronic, so that it appears that “[e]verything, at some point, is alternative to something else” (Downing 2001, ix).

The most commonly deployed solution within alternative media scholarship to the vagueness of the term has been to denounce vague definitions and conceive of ‘alternative media’ not merely as ‘alternative’, but more specifically as media positioned in opposition to dominant mass media—as *counter hegemonic*. This has the merit of excluding ‘apolitical’ media forms such as niched special interest media such as sport clubs newsletters) (see Downing 2001, xx).<sup>4</sup> More specific still, Michael Traber’s defines alternative media as media which aims to effectuate “change towards a more equitable social, cultural and economic whole in which the individual is not reduced to an object (of the media or the political powers) but able to find fulfilment as a total human being” (Traber 1985: 3, also in Atton 2002: 16).<sup>5</sup>

The definitions so far surveyed all make the same assumption, namely that in both form and content ‘alternative media’ breaks free from the status quo, presenting alternative resources antagonistic toward ‘mainstream’ and ‘official’ channels. The work of James Hamilton is in this regard conspicuous in the attempt he makes to complexify the prevailing way that ‘alternative media’ is understood. Notably, Hamilton sees congruence in the ‘ends’ of media production, whether alternative or mainstream. Both tend to ‘educate’ and ‘mobilise’ a general public in the sense of a particular movement or political cause. Hamilton continues by naming this as a particular hazard in putative instances of alternative media production:

[...] for a theory and practice of alternative media to be fully democratic, a major conceptual hurdle to be overcome is the habit of conflating ‘media’ with ‘communication’. If seen simply as a technological process of

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<sup>4</sup> For media scholars Nick Couldry and James Curran, for example, the counter hegemonic aspect of alternative media is mainly positioned in opposition to mainstream media, and defined as any “[m]edia production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take in different locations” (2003: 3). In a similar manner, Tim O’Sullivan has previously formulated a definition of alternative media as media forms which “avowedly reject or challenge established and institutionalised politics, in the sense that they all advocate change in society, or at least a critical reassessment of traditional values” (O’Sullivan 1994: 10)—later adding that the criteria for these media must follow “a democratic/collectivist process of production”, and show a “commitment to innovation or experimentation in form and/or content” (O’Sullivan 1994: 205, see also Atton 2002: 15).

<sup>5</sup> Within the category of ‘alternative media’ Traber advances a further distinction between *advocacy media* and *grassroots media*. Alternative *advocacy media* is any media project and product embodying values other than the established ones and which in the process introduces ‘new’ social actors (such as the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised etc), but is nevertheless produced ‘professionally’. *Grassroots media* is a more ‘thorough’ version of alternative media, according to which the media is produced by the people whom it aims to represent. Professionals may (or may not) be involved in these publications, but if so, only as advisers to support non-professionals to produce their own independent media (Traber 1985: 3; *ibid* Atton).

manufacture, distribution and consumption, media/communication then simply names the *use* of media products. The resulting implications are that communication is functionally equivalent to any other consumerist practice and that it is an optional add-on to society—at best, a means of conveying ideas about more basic and important processes—rather than essential to it (Hamilton 2000: 361).

Instead, Hamilton wishes to make a distinction between ‘media’ and ‘communication’, defining the former as “physical techniques of amplifying and making durable the expressions of individuals, thereby making them available to many more people than would otherwise be the case (Hamilton 2000: 361; Williams 1980). The latter, he argues, is “related to and dependent on technical processes of reproduction, amplification and fixing (making durable)”, but not equivalent to them. Instead, communication is described in terms of cultural processes, as “the creative making of a social order” (Hamilton 2000: 361). “Alternative media, therefore, must also enable alternative communication, which together make possible an articulation of a social order different from and often opposed to the dominant.” (Hamilton 2000: 362). “Furthermore, attention should focus on developing forms of alternative media/communication that (1) have barriers to participation—such as time, distance, money, and training—as low as possible; (2) strive for an everyday, spontaneous, non-corporate mode of organisation that require little if any capital outlay; and (3) should be part of other realms of life instead of divorced from them” (Hamilton 2000: 371). As such, they must be: *de-professionalised*, *de-capitalised* and *de-institutionalised* (Hamilton 2001a in Atton). The fulfilment of such laudable aims would assist in eliminating the separation between production and consumption; media becoming a fully popular means of cultural organisation and not as merely an individualised media product to consume (Hamilton 2000: 371; Benjamin 1934/1978; Downing 1984: 156, 351-54).

Hamilton offers a corrective to those guilty of overt ‘idealisation’ of the extent to which concrete instances of ‘alternative media’ break with (challenge) the ‘mainstream media’, pointing out how often ‘alternative’ forms of media have maintained certain practices and assumptions from dominant media forms. The outcome of this, however, is not a more nuanced understanding of how would-be ‘alternative’ media operate. Rather, Hamilton ups the ante further, by wishing to present a more pure conception of ‘alternative’ media—a normative schema (ideal and formal) as to how best ‘alternative media’ may realise itself.

The work of Downing, more contextual and descriptive than Hamilton, offers an improved definition of ‘alternative media’ which avoids both the risk of vacuous generality on the one hand and a specifiable purity as to what ‘alternative media’ ought to be, which rarely if ever exists in reality other than in the books of normative theorising. Thus, and in an attempt to offer a more workable terminology, Downing defines ‘alternative *radical* media’ as any “media, generally small-scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative

vision to *hegemonic* policies, priorities, and perspectives (2001, v; *emphasis added*).<sup>6</sup>

Apart from this definition, which positions radical media (or radical alternative media) as distinctive from merely the 'alternative', Downing steers clear of any clear-cut definitions. Instead, he argues that: "[t]here is no instantaneous alchemy, no uncontested sociochemical procedure, that will divine in a flash or with definite results truly radical media from the apparently radical or even the nonradical" (2001, vii). This is already progress from Hamilton and others. Instead of resorting to simple binaries, Downing argues that *context* and *consequences* should be key to demarcate the radicality of a specific medium (Downing 2001, x). To give an example, Downing highlights the contextual importance of Truth's *cartes-de-visite* depicting her as a 'lady', a respectable woman of her times most often sitting down with her knitting placed on her lap (Downing 2001, vi, vii), often dressed in glasses and sometimes (notwithstanding her documented illiteracy) with a book strategically placed on her side table (vi, vii; Irvin Painter 1994; Israel's Perry 1994). While, when measured by contemporary standards, this representation of femininity could hardly be considered revolutionary, in the context of the mid- to late nineteenth century, it is to be read as a radical refusal to identify with her previous status of enslavement. This historical example therefore represents a potent re-articulation of black femininity.<sup>7</sup>

Chris Atton, author of the book *Alternative Media* (2002), has celebrated Downing for his nuanced and theoretically eclectic approach of drawing together theories of counter-hegemony, counter-publics and resistance, but sees, at the same time his approach as overemphasising the collective dimension of radical alternative media production, thereby constructing a theory suitable mainly for the study of the media production of social movements. By doing so, Atton argues, Downing ignores the fact that "hybridity and purity as problematics of alternative media are certainly accessible through an examination of new social movement media, but they can also be approached through media that accommodate themselves rather more cosily with mass media and mass consumption. (Atton 2002, 21)"

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<sup>6</sup> In a related manner, Waltz have stressed the need for further terminologies to complement the notion of 'alternative media', using instead the overlapping but (not equivalent) distinction between 'alternative' and 'activist' media. The latter would, she argues, involve encouraging readers to "get actively involved in social change" (2005, 3). Similarly to Downing's definition of radical media, activist media can include media promoting any ideological strand, ranging over the whole scale from 'left of left' to far right extremism (Waltz 2005, 3). In addition to this, however, Waltz concept of 'activist media' can—when the additional label of 'alternative' is left out—also include media which advocates views that supports what would generally be understood as 'mainstream' (such as voting) (2005, 3).

<sup>7</sup> In foregrounding context and consequences, Downing consequently downplays *intention* as a suitable criterion for the evaluation of radicality, on the grounds that effects of a specific medium are not so easily predictable by the media producers themselves (Downing 2001, x).

Atton (2002), therefore, proposes a theory of alternative media, considerably more far reaching than any of those assessed thus far. Building and expanding upon the work of Downing (1984; 2001) Stephen Duncombe (1997) and Robert Dickinson (1997) Atton constructs a theory which includes not only the more politically radical variants (or so called ‘resistance media’) but one which includes also media forms such as zines; video; music; mail-art and creative writing and, “hybrid forms of electronic communication” (ICTs)—forms of media production which are not necessarily in themselves aiming at radical social change. This theoretical perspective stresses “the transformatory potential of the media as reflexive instruments of communication practices in social networks”, and focuses therefore on the *processual* and *relational* aspects of these media forms (Atton 2002, 7-8, see also 2004). Drawing on a wide range of discussions on alternative and radical media, Atton has constructed a ‘typology of alternative and radical media’, which I take the liberty of reproducing below:

1. Content (politically radical, socially/culturally radical); news values
2. Form—graphics, visual language; varieties of presentation and binding; aesthetics
3. Reprographic innovations/adaptations—use of mimeographs, IBM typesetting, offset litho, photocopiers
4. ‘Distributive use’ (Atton 1999b)—alternative sites for distribution, clandestine/invisible distribution networks, anti-copyright
5. Transformed social relations, roles and responsibilities—reader-writers collective organization, de-professionalization of e.g., journalism, printing, publishing
6. Transformed communication processes—horizontal linkages, networks

(Atton 2002, 27)

These six elements form the basis of Atton’s model, with each element representing a dimension of alternative media. The first three elements in this typology specify ‘products’, the last three processes of communication (‘*distributing*’, ‘*writing*’, ‘*printing*’ rather than position, e.g. ‘*distributor*’, ‘*writer*’, ‘*printer*’)..

By looking at different dimensions in this manner, one does not have to ascribe or refrain from ascribing the value of ‘radicality’ to a particular media project, when in terms of both its form and content as well as its organisational factors it is riven with ambiguities and indiscernibles. Atton’s procedure allows, in principle, for a more refined and anatomical study, sensitive to the inconsistencies of a given media project. Broken down into its composite

dimensions various aspects of a specific media form can be judged specifically as to the extent to which its constituent dimensions break with established practices, modes of presentation and organisational relations respectively. For example, there could be inter-dimensional discord: the same medium can be 'radical' in terms of its distribution but 'conservative' with regards to political contents. There could also be intra-dimensional ambivalences, so that *within* each dimension there are complexities to take into account that preclude easy categorisation. If, for example, a media form allowed professionals to write, but had a collective process of decision making (2003: 28). One also needs to weigh up both historical and geographical contingencies, and appreciate that the absence of radicality (at least according to the properties listed in the typology) need not necessarily prevent its overall radical/revolutionary potential. For a certain 'dimension' might not be 'available' for radicalisation in certain cultural and historical contexts. Attention to all this, would enable an analysis of the 'mixed radicalism' of alternative media—looking at hybridity rather than a set of characteristics to determine the 'purity' of these publications (2003: 29). This is a marked improvement on previous studies abovementioned. Atton's model tries to capture the *contents* of these media, as well as their *sociocultural contexts* and *modes of organisation*. In this manner, he wishes to provide a definition which includes not only their critical reactions against cultural stereotypes circulating in the mainstream, but also to create an alternative space which builds on different values (Atton 2002: 10). These media, he argues, provide forums for the "direct voices" of "subjugated knowledges" in the Foucauldian sense (1981: 81), offering a spaces for what Raymond Williams would call *democratic communication*, the "origins" of which are "genuinely multiple", affording the possibility of "true" communication and "active response" between all participants (Atton 2002, 9; Williams 1963: 304). In the context of feminist media studies, such a possibility might hold true for media forms using easily accessible and cheap techniques such as zine production and blogging. However it would be more difficult to sustain the argument for non-commercial but established feminist cultural magazines such as Swedish *Bang* which are not free of exclusionary 'agenda setting' (even if this 'agenda' is, indeed, based on different principles than the ones found in mainstream media).

Atton states that the ultimate 'test' of a theory of alternative media would, in addition to its explanatory ability, be its aptitude to capture diversity in the phenomena under study (Atton 2002, 9). The question is whether Atton's theory itself passes this test? Despite its break away from a *rigid* dichotomisation, Atton remains faithful to the basic grammar of 'alternative media' studies, which as a consequence imposes certain restrictions on both the plasticity and durability of his proposed theory vis-à-vis concrete instances of media production. A set of normative claims infuse his typology, founding the indicators by which Atton measures the radicality of a given media form. Focussed, still, on normative judgements and evaluative criteria between radicality and non-radicality, Atton himself reintroduces the very binary opposition he wishes to avoid, preventing, ultimately, the analysis of the complex relationships of interconnectedness between various media forms. Even though it is true that much feminist media

production has indeed managed to fill the various criteria as stated by above mentioned authors (see DiCenzo and Ryan 2007), such a dichotomous logic—even in Atton’s weakened version—would be detrimental for the study of feminist media production, unable, as it is to capture the diversity of these practices. Instead, study of feminist media production needs to take into account a varied range of practices, or put otherwise, analyses of feminist media production need to show an ability to capture media which, to paraphrase Clemencia Rodriguez, are ‘legal, a-legal [...], illegal, pirate, commercial, non-commercial, government funded, planned, spontaneous, professional, amateur, local, regional, diasporic, mono-lingual, bilingual, multilingual, daily, weekly, monthly, once-in-a-while’ (1992, 64). In order to achieve this, we will now turn to scholars of alternative media who, in their move beyond binary thinking have turned to poststructuralist accounts of textual production, politics, democracy and subjectivity. The next section will introduce and critically assess the recent development of the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of ‘rhizomatics’ as a way to better understand the nuances of alternative media production.

### **Connecting Feminist Media: The Rhizomatic Alternative**

Instead of, and in a response to, the aforementioned attempts to distinguish between more oppositional, radical or activist media forms, Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier’s have formulated a theory which seeks to further the move from a rigid economy of oppositions. Building on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome, which juxtaposes the rhizomatic (non-linear, nomadic, connective) with the hierarchical tendencies of arborescent, or tree-like, systems (linear, unitary, with fixed points of origin and sub-divisions) (1988, 3-25), Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier argues that this metaphor does better justice to ‘alternative’ media systems by accenting their contingent character in contrast to the more ‘arborescent’ and rigidly organised mainstream media (Bailey et al 2008, 29). Similarly, the notion of the rhizome has previously been employed as a perspective to shed light on the riot grrrl movement, arguing that their zine networks, websites and distros as typically rhizomatic, stressing their character of an “underground culture multiplying via lines of connection that are not controlled from a primary location”, but rather as a polymorphous de-centralised movement without leaders, spokeswomen or a unified political agenda attached to its name (Leonard 2007, see also Piano 2002). In Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier’s understanding of rhizomatic media, however, the emphasis lies not primarily in the ‘subterranean’ nature of such rhizomatic networks. Rather, I would argue that its analytical strength lies in its ability to explore their elusiveness and contingency *as well as* possible interconnections and linkages with the state and the market (2008, 27). As such, this approach has proven useful to understand alternative media which does not easily fit into models of counter-hegemony. It extends the possible analyses of feminist zine production so as to do better justice to zines which do not fully embrace the prototypical counter-hegemonic DIY-ethos of zine culture (see Duncombe 1997).

Although the majority of existing feminist zines may subscribe to the antagonistic ethos of anti-commercialism, anti-elitism and anti-professionalism, far from all of them do. A recent case study of the Central and Eastern European *Plotki Femzine*<sup>8</sup> provides an instructive example of a media project which, while motivated partially by the knowledge of existing grrrl zines also have employed non-prototypical strategies of media production. Whilst the first edition of *Plotki Femzine* was a cheaply produced photocopied zine, the editorial team later successfully applied for funding from the German-Polish Youth Foundation in order to print a somewhat more magazine like second edition, thereby negating the assumption that zine production is inherently anarchist and anti-state (Chidgey, Gunnarsson Payne & Zobl, forthcoming). Similarly, Swedish feminist magazine *Bleck* initially employed the DIY-format of the zine predominantly out of financial necessity, in order to later be re-launched as a more costly magazine, which in turn assisted the editor Linna Johansson in establishing herself as a well known columnist in *Expressen*, one of the major tabloid newspapers in Sweden—again disproving that zine production is inevitably and always a consequence of a deeply seated aversion to capitalism and its mainstream media (Gunnarsson Payne 2006). In light of these ambivalences the concept of rhizomatic media has the asset of steering clear of simple, somewhat metaphysically infused, oppositions between ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, the relationship between the rhizomatic and the arborescent is not one of mutual exclusiveness. Instead: “[a] new rhizome may form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch. Or else it is a microscoping element of the root-tree, a radicle, that gets rhizome production going (Deleuze & Guattari 1988, 15).” The analytical value of this statement is one which should not be underestimated—but one which has yet been downplayed both in Leonard’s and Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier’s work. This is unfortunate and calls for further investigation, as it offers a much needed analytical possibility which manages to avoid romanticised ideas of ‘alternative’ media as *inherently* democratic and radical, as well as demonising and simplified notions of the ‘mainstream’ as completely devoid of any potential for the production of counter-narratives—thereby offering a potentially fruitful solution to the aforementioned tension between ‘specificity’ and ‘complexity’ in alternative media theory. Although I would agree that the former tend to be more ‘rhizomatic’ in character, and the latter more ‘arborescent’, this impasse allows for analyses of, for example, how ‘arborescent’ hierarchies can, and do, form within alternative media frameworks, and, subsequently, how journalist practices occasionally manage to subvert hegemonic meanings and instigate social change.

### **Tactical Media and Hegemonic Appropriations: Culture Jamming as Rhizomatic Media**

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<sup>8</sup> This study, which is currently undergoing peer-review, is conducted by Red Chidgey, Elke Zobl and myself, and is part of the larger research project *Feminist Media Production in Europe*.

The term ‘tactical media’<sup>9</sup> has been coined as a way of expressing a position outside of both mainstream and alternative media, or, as David Garcia calls it, “a ‘no-man’s land’ on the border of experimental media—art, journalism and political activism—a zone that was, in part, made possible by the mass availability of a powerful and flexible new generation of media tools” (2007, 6). As such, the recent developments of tactical media have been inextricably linked to the expansion of new ICTs. The growth of tactical media should, however, not be understood as a simple adaptation of movement strategies into the ‘information age’. Instead, their positioning is one of refutation in relation to not only the presumed ‘objectivity’ of journalist practices and the elitism and person cults of the art world, but also of the disciplinary and instrumentalist strategies of traditional social movements (Garcia 2007, 6). Importantly, the term ‘tactical’ alludes to Michel de Certeau’s distinction between ‘strategy’ and ‘tactics’, the latter referring to the art of the subordinated, as opposed to strategies being implemented from a locus of domination. Tactics, in this sense, consists of parasitic appropriations, subverting the meaning of the signifier, which makes techniques such as ‘subvertising’—the practice of parodying commercial or political advertisements by, for example altering its text or images—prime examples of the ‘culture jamming’<sup>10</sup> of tactical media.

Exemplary of tactical media production would be the work of *Princess Hijab*, whose provocative street art includes ‘hijabizing’ adverts—painting black hijabs on commercial adverts for products such as jewellery and make-up. In her manifesto she states, albeit obliquely, what could be interpreted as a feminist statement: “Princess Hijab knows that *L’Oréal* and *Dark&Lovely* have been killing her little by little. She feels that the veil is no longer that white. She feels contaminated.” She declares her influence by “movements such as *Adbusters*”, but argues that “since 9/11, things have changed” and that she therefore has chosen to subvert images in a non-American way. She claims to “know all about *visual terrorism*” (emphasis added), and rearticulates, thereby, dominant cultural representations of the Muslim terrorist, as well as the hijab, which so often in the Western context has served as the signifier of women’s oppression *per se*. Her street art and manifesto subverts the meaning of the capitalist beauty industry by pointing its messages out as ‘lethal’, as a threat to her life in a

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<sup>9</sup> Although tactical media predominantly is discussed as a 1990s phenomenon, tactics of cultural and political ‘jamming’ is not an entirely new. Its genealogy can be traced back to, for example, techniques of *détournement* (Debord 1959/2006) and *radical bricolages* (Hebdige 1979, 103) of the *Situationist and punk movements*, both of involves re-using and re-articulating elements of the dominant culture so as to subvert their meaning, thereby rendering their contingent character visible and shows how ‘things could be otherwise’ (see Bailey et al 2008, 138-9). In the context of feminist media production, such examples of jamming would be represented by the well known examples of eclectic Riot Grrrl zines, commonly rearticulating the ‘cut-and-paste’ technique of punk to creating dissonant feminist collages mixing elements from both elite, popular- and movement cultures.

<sup>10</sup> sa Wettergren has defined culture jamming as “symbolic form of protest located within a field of anti-corporate activism here tensions between democratic principles and the undemocratic principles of the ‘free’ market are articulated as pivotal contemporary political conflicts”. As such, culture jamming includes any groups or individuals “who practice symbolic process against the expansion and domination of corporations and the logic of the market in public and private spaces”, by targeting characteristically capitalist symbols such as adverts and logos (Wettergren 2009, 2).

symbolic sense (killing her little by little), as well as an epithet used by dominant culture to demonise the Muslim Other. Despite these strong political statements, Princess Hijab does not position herself within any political or religious movement, but states quite clearly her independence and dedication to art only:

“And don’t forget, she acts upon her own free will. She is not involved in any lobby or movement be it political, religious or to do with advertising. In fact, the Princess is an insomniac-punk. She is the leader of an artistic fight, nothing else”.

The brief example of ‘hijabizing’ makes a strong case for the rhizomatic approach to tactical media, particularly with its use of the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of *detrterritorialization*, shedding light on the process of undermining the authority of corporate advertising by tactically turning its own rhetorical tropes and imagery against it, and thereby destabilising their meaning. Cultural and political jamming, however, should not be understood as inherently radical modes of operating. On the contrary, what is used as tactics of subordinated groups and oppositional movements can also be used as ‘strategies’ (in de Certeau’s sense) of the dominant. Processes of detrterritorialisation, in this sense, are always inextricably tied to *reterrterritorialisation*, a process demonstrated by Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier’s discussion of the ways in which corporate companies deploy jamming techniques for marketing purposes, and political parties appropriate techniques of ‘jamming’ in their election campaigns, as a way of mocking their political competition—in a way that presumably functions as an effective strategy in appealing to younger and ‘trendier’ sections of the electorate (2008, 143-147). In a feminist context, the conceptualisation of de- and reterrterritorialisation would be particularly useful in understanding the relations of reciprocity between would-be ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream’ socio-political messages. To give some brief examples: the ways in which the Riot Grrrl slogan ‘Girl Power!’ has been reterrterritorialised by ‘postfeminist’ commercial products such as women’s magazines and popular music (i.e. *Spice Girls*), and feminist jamming tactics such as ‘Revolution. Because you’re worth it!’ (an adaptation of the cosmetics company *L’Oréal* slogan employed by Swedish feminist zine *Radarka*) (Gunnarsson Payne 2006, 69).

I would advance that a rhizomatic approach to alternative media shows a flexibility in its theoretical apparatus that is otherwise lacking in much of the literature that comprises the field of alternative media studies. The perspective offers a compelling framework for the study of the tactics, processes and connections within and between feminist media production. However, this is not to say that the approach is without its limitations. Its strength resides in its understanding of the processual dimension of media production—and an understanding that furthermore does not reduce the complexity of such processes. It is therefore particularly informative in obviating the ‘how’ of these connections. What it does not offer is any explanatory purchase on the ‘why’s’ of

these connections and processes. Devoid of any notion of the subject as it is, this mode of theorisation, consequently, also lacks any notion of political subjectivity and the more 'strategic' aspects of the building of alliances between struggles. It might even be said, then, that the gains of expunging 'alternative media studies' of the dichotomies implicitly or explicitly present in the more 'counter hegemonic' approaches subsequently has carried with it the loss of explanatory value as to how these media function as crucial sites for the constitution of political identification. In the study of feminist media production, this latter aspect cannot be underestimated. On the contrary, any rigorous analysis of feminist media production needs to take seriously the ways in which 'merely' gendered identities are *transformed* into 'feminist' identities. I will now like to sketch out a further contribution to the field that at least begins to make incursions into these questions, and that thereby will I think prove an invaluable resource to any future study of feminist media production. Leaning on the important work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, two notable political thinkers, Clemencia Rodriguez has made an important intervention in making explicit the political operations at play in media production. Her approach has the merit of not being content, in dichotomic fashion, to suppose that all 'alternative media' is normatively 'good' and its mainstream antipode 'bad'. She argues that the ascription of such value judgements must be suspended at any analytical level, because it is at the political level—that is, at the level of active participation in media forms—that these normative judgements gain their importance, tied as these judgements are to the political investments that subjects make, at a particular moment in time and space, in the process of media production. Political identifications are produced from a sense of what one is struggling against—an 'other', a that-which-'we'-are-not. Here I would add the corollary that no sooner does the construction of the 'other', the 'against-whom' that one is struggling, alter than the borders between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' are redrawn once more.

### **Political Identification and the Notion of Citizen Media**

Rodriguez's starting point is the supposition that social subjects identify in multiple, contingent and heterogeneous ways, constituted by an assembly of 'subject positions' (Mouffe 1992c, 372). Social categories such as 'woman' are produced through complex intersections of various discourses and institutions, and the subordination of women cannot be understood to be constituted by a single cause or underlying essence. From this destabilised notion of the subject it follows that one cannot any longer view any member of a historically subordinated group as belonging to a certain 'interest group' with *predetermined* interests and needs (Rodriguez 1992, 18). Media representations cannot be said to represent the 'true' interests of any certain groups—whether they belong to the 'mainstream' or the 'alternative', or regardless of whether alternative media are 'advocacy' or 'grassroots' in Michel Traber's sense of the terms (Traber 1985, in Atton 2002, 16-17). Rather, from this perspective, interests do not precede political action, but are constituted in political acts. As such, alternative media

plays a crucial role in the constitution and negotiation of political interests as well as collective identities. Mediated representation of 'interest groups' is, then, seen as a constitutive practice, actually producing the very interests they claim to represent. Instead of risking to reproduce essentialist notions of 'women's writing', this perspective allows for feminist identities not to be revealed by feminist media production, but the latter to be part of producing them.

It is telling that Rodriguez dismisses the terminology of 'alternative media' altogether, arguing that it problematically predetermines these media as necessarily in opposition to the mainstream media, and thereby "limits the potential of these media to their ability to resist the alienating power of mainstream media" and claims that this "approach blinds our understanding of all other instances of change and transformation brought about by these media" (Rodriguez 1992, 20). In its place Rodriguez proposes the formulation of 'citizen media', an idea entailing two fundamental properties. First that a collective enactment of citizenship through active interventions and transformations of dominant media; ii.) that these collective practices of citizenship takes place through the contestation of social codes, legitimised identities and institutionalised social relations, and; iii.) that these interventions have an empowering—and, as a result of this empowerment, transformative—effect on the community in which it is located (2001, 20). In her notion of citizen media, Rodriguez stresses Mouffe and McClure's extensive understanding of the political, extending the political from the narrow definition of "juridical demands upon the state" to also include a "quotidian politics—a politics which extends the terrain of political contestation to the everyday enactment of social practices and the routine reiteration of cultural representations" (McClure 1992, 123). In feminist terms, this 'quotidian-ness' of politics have been long known and articulated in the famous 'second-wave' slogan "The personal is political!", so often reiterated in feminist political manifestations, relating to crucial feminist issues such as sexual violence, heteronormativity, reproductive rights and issues about body image.

Contemporary feminist media production can be said to embrace this 'quotidian' dimension of politics, not least in relation to media forms such as zines and blogs. Their common concern with producing personal narratives is something which on occasion has however been criticised by older feminists on the grounds of its apparent individualism diluting the collectivist spirit of a feminist politics. British sociologist, Nina Wakeford, for example, expresses in a newspaper interview an apprehension about the place of blogs in the feminist movement. Whilst she concedes that they might be useful to 'spark debates', she also states that their role in activism is obscure. Comparing feminist bloggers with the pastimes of feminist organisation, she is questioning whether "women can affect public policy through blogging", and rhetorically asks: "Just who are they representing?"

The value of feminist media production such as zine writing and blogging would, however, not lie in their potential to affect political policies, but rather in the contestation of symbolic codes and rearticulation of everyday experiences. Many

feminist zines, for example, offer personal accounts of negative feelings towards one's own body, thereby de-naturalising the beauty standards of commercial girl's and women's magazines:

why do i cry every time i look in the mirror? why do i look at stupid magazines ad wish that i looked like that? why is there so much fucken emphasis placed on looking "pretty"? i am not pretty and i dont know that i want to be. i just don't want to hate myself anymore for not being the delicate little flower that i am told to be. why does the media try so hard to dictate to us what is and what isnt beautiful. [...] I am so sick of hating myself. i dont want to cry in the mirror anymore. (*Revolution Rising #1*, in Kearney 2006, 181, *spelling in original*)

As Mary Celeste Kearney argues, such personal accounts are, indeed, clearly oppositional against capitalist and patriarchal media. Indeed, the latter is clearly constituted here as the constitutive outside of grrrrl zine culture—meaning that this 'outside' would not only be 'different' from feminist media production, but it's radical 'other', or 'enemy', positioned in an *antagonistic* relationship to feminist *per se*. From Rodriguez's avowed Mouffian perspective (as shared by Ernesto Laclau) antagonism lies at the heart of any politicisation of the social. It is precisely this dimension of antagonism that is underemphasised in the rhizomatic perspective.<sup>11</sup> This antagonistic relationship takes us back somewhat, showing us, as it were, the loss of an analytical strength of the counter hegemonic approaches, surveyed in the first part of this paper. From the anti-essentialist perspective of Laclau and Mouffe, however, and unlike more traditional perspectives, there is no *inherent* opposition between even the most unequal subject positions (such as 'men' and 'women'); rather, the *antagonistic* relationship occurs, if and only if the subordinated group opposes the unequal relationship, by contesting it and de-naturalising it (Laclau 1990, 6; Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 122; Mouffe 1993, 77). With its strong anti-essentialist ontology, it avoids any pitfalls of reproducing any metaphysical ideals of any inherent 'female' way of writing, or of any determinist idea of universal interests of 'all women' (see Rhodes 2005, 10-23). Instead, this perspective takes into account how feminist identities are constituted through the practice of media production, and how these identities are necessarily historical, contextual and processual. This ability to study not only the 'hows' of processes of interconnection between feminism and other various struggles, but also the 'whys', the conditions of

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<sup>11</sup> It should be mentioned, however, that precisely this lack is acknowledged by Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier, who have, then, chosen to solve this problem by regarding the anti-essentialist notion of the subject as formulated by Laclau and Mouffe with a rhizomatic approach to alternative media. Although this attempt pinpoints important deficits in previous theories as well as turn our attention to the importance of a theory of political subjectivity, the ways in which this is done in their work is accompanied with a number of incommensurable ontological presuppositions which needs to be explored in more depth and further elaborated upon. Unfortunately, the length and scope of this essay does not provide sufficient space for such interventions.

possibility for feminist identification and the construction of 'chains of equivalence' between movements in an antagonistic relationship to an 'oppressive other' is crucial in understanding the ways in which instances of feminist media continuously produce spaces where gendered identities and relations are transformed into sites of antagonist struggle.

### **Concluding remarks**

There has been something of a blind spot in alternative media studies to date. The limited number of sustained engagements with the rich and variegated history of feminist media is surprising given its historical prominence over the last two centuries. The question that I wished to raise was that given the lack of attention about feminist media production can it be said of the conceptual tools available that there is an essential difficulty in teasing out the specificities and nuances of instances of feminist media? The intention was not necessarily to propose that there is something 'different' about feminist initiatives which set them apart from other modes of media production, as if an engagement with feminist media projects requires a specifically feminist theoretical perspective. Rather, the aim was to move away from theorisations of alternative media with too broad and formal conceptions, under which too many concrete examples can be subsumed and made identical to one another, to the detriment of paying attention to the differences between instances of alternative media as well as the tensions and inconsistencies internal to a particular media project. A more dynamical, as opposed to a static, understanding of media production was sought. An assessment of 'alternative media studies' reveals a wide ranging set of theoretical engagements. Ultimately each can be brought back to a common denominator of wishing to give the idea of 'alternative media' a conceptual and phenomenal specificity that overdraws the distinction between alternative and mainstream forms of media. The vicissitudes and complexities of actually existing feminist media projects are not best served by such hard-edged analytical distinctions. Examples abound within the feminist movement itself that would caution against the use of such metaphysically infused distinctions. Both Deleuzo-Guattarian and Laclau-Mouffian insights might be better harnessed to provide a more durable, a more empirically responsive theory, far more sensitive to the contingencies of the process of media production. The work of Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier as well as Rodriguez were referred to as examples that have actively developed these insights into the process of theory construction about media forms. Each departs from the attempt to define what constitutes an instance of 'alternative media' from outside the site of its particular manifestation, but at the same time brings to bear with it a set of theoretical tools that do not merely set out to describe a particular case of media production but seek to explain the processes by which media comes to be produced in a given socio-political situation. What each of these scholars advance can only be just the start, however. As far as the successes of their operationalisations of certain poststructuralist presuppositions, further advances needs to be made to fully meet the requirements of rigorous study of feminist

media production. Importantly, I would suggest that particular theoretical consideration needs to be paid to the constitution of feminist identities, furthering particularly not only the ways in which alliances and coalitions are made, but also the role feminist media production plays in the constitution of collective feminist identities. A significant, but hitherto overlooked dimension of alternative media production—and one which should be placed centre stage of feminist media production—is the central role of feminist media production for affective investment in certain feminist grammars, aesthetics and political prioritisations. Such explorations would need to combine the theoretical insights of poststructuralist approaches to alternative media and nuanced conceptions of political subjectivity with thorough further empirical research of both audiences and producers (to the extent such a distinction can be made) of feminist media.

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