Alternative Media and Mediated Political Participation: A Conceptual Discussion

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Abstract

This article presents conceptual discussions around the links between alternative media and mediated political participation, drawing on Bourdieu's conception of language as a medium of exchange and a symbol of power imbued by competing social, political, and economic interests. The core argument of the article is that, despite the prominence of alternative media in influencing contemporary political discussions, less attention has been paid to the often complex and dynamic conditions (or "media fields") under which mediated political participation occur. The article addresses this gap by critically examining how the structure, function, content, and organisational features of alternative media discursively inform the politics of mediated political participation, including the negotiation of power in alternative media platforms. The ultimate objective of this article is therefore to generate conceptual debates around the consideration of alternative media as a tool for counter-hegemonic discourse.

Introduction

The past two decades have been characterised not only by increased access and diversification of media content, but media users have also taken an active part in content production and dissemination. These shifts in the media landscape have, for the most part, been associated with the proliferation of web-based media that increasingly challenge the structures of corporate media, including their use by "old" or legacy media (Kozolanka, Mazepa & Skinner, 2012; Couldry, 2003; Albert, 1997).

These transformations have positioned alternative media as a prominent counter-hegemonic tool, allowing users to gain some control of the form and content of mediated messages (Pajnik & Downing 2001/2008; Atton 2002). Yet, as Fuchs (2010: 189) reminds us, "alternative media research is an under-resourced, under-represented, and under-researched field – the neglected spot in communication and media studies". It is, therefore, still unclear what falls within the purview of alternative media. In addition, locating the agency of change in alternative media is itself a subject of inconclusive debates. As Downing's (2001: ix) puts it, "to speak simply of alternative media is almost oxymoronic [because] …everything, at some point, is alternative to something else". For this reason, scholars such as Bailey, Cammaerts, & Carpenter (2007) propose that the "identity of alternative media should be articulated as relational and contingent on the particularities of the contexts of production, distribution and consumption" (p. xiii). For them, alternative media should not be defined primarily in opposition and/or relation to mainstream forms of media. This is because the scope of alternative media stretches beyond the confines of radio, television, and online media forms, to include art, fashion, music, theatre, punk fanzines, etc. (Jeppesen, Kruzynski, & Riot, 2016).

The difficulty in determining what comprises alternative media is also reflected in Jeppesen's (2016) work, where it reflects "a range of media forms and practices, from radical critical media to independent media, and from grassroots autonomous media to community, citizen and participatory media" (p. 54). This is not to say that scholars have not grappled with the meaning and scope of alternative media. However elusive the boundaries of alternative media may appear, four broad thematic areas guiding extant discussions on the topic can be discerned.

First, there are studies underscoring structure as the key determinant of alternative media. Here, emphasis is often put on the standards of operation that distinguish mainstream media from alternative media (Rodriguez, 2001; Harcup, 2011; Hamilton, 2000). These studies have given rise to complementary terminologies used alongside alternative media, including but not limited to participatory media, citizen media, independent media, community media, etc. One of the works often cited in this regard is Rodriguez's (2001) notion of *citizens' media*, which, according to her, represents a type of media that addresses the concerns of all citizens rather than a select group of individuals rallied around a

particular cause. Rodriguez claims that the term "alternative media" is too ambiguous and broad in scope, and therefore does not enable the capture of the emerging trends associated with the shifting media "fields". What is particularly interesting in Rodriguez's work is her conception of citizens' media beyond participatory approaches to include other concepts such as autonomous media, radical media, radical media, etc.

The re-negotiation of political action and/or engagement (including citizenship) is therefore a constant in such media forms and/or practices. The outcome of this, according to Rodriguez (2011) is social change (e.g. democracy and development) because such media "give citizens the opportunity to restructure their identities into empowered subjectivities strongly connected to local cultures and driven by well-defined, achievable utopias" (p. 24). Among others, this may take the form of content, structure, and aesthetics. McQuail (2000), also prefers the term "democratic-participant media", because it challenges "the dominance of centralised, commercialised, state-controlled and even professionalised media (p. 160). On his end, Harcup (2011) draws on Mouffe's (1992) idea of "radical" and "participatory" democracy to associate alternative journalism with "active citizenship". Precisely, Harcup believes the rise of alternative journalism is the direct result of audience dissatisfaction with the mainstream media.

Second, some studies take a comparative approach to examine the functions of alternative media (Downing, 2001/2003; Bennett, 2003; Waltz, 2005). Here, scholars have sought to understand how people use alternative media differently compared to the legacy media. Often, alternative media is coined as a platform for advocacy and activism (Atkinson, 2010). Downing (2001) also uses the term "radical alternative media" to underscore the oppositional nature of alternative media. He writes: "radical alternative media constitute the most active form of the active audience and express oppositional strands, overt and covert, within popular cultures" (p. 3). For Downing, therefore, radical alternative media is a tool used by "rebellious" and "activist" educators to counter the dominant narratives circulated by the mainstream media. Put simply, this strand of studies presumes that the mainstream media does not provide the audience with the space to counter hegemonic discourses.

The third stream of studies focuses almost exclusively on the content shared through alternative media platforms. Fiske's (1992) work, for instance, aligns with this view. Fiske believes that alternative media content allows for the dissemination of culturally "subordinated voices". At the core of these arguments is the assumption that certain groups are not well-served by the mainstream media, and that alternative media provides these groups with the means to position themselves differently. Media content is, of course, one of the many ways of self-representation. Following this logic, some scholars see "minority media" and "ethnic media" as being part of the broader alternative media given the kinds of content, they offer to target audience (Jeppesen, 2016; Viswanath & Arona, 2000). Fuchs' (2010) idea of "critical media" may also fall under this categorisation since "critical media content shows the suppressed possibilities of existence, antagonisms of reality, and potentials for change" (p. 173).

Finally, some scholars have focused on organisational features of alternative media as a way of evaluating their potentials and challenges. Consistent with this approach, Albert (1997) writes: "…being alternative as an institution certainly isn't just being left or right or different in editorial content. Being alternative as an institution must have to do with how the institution is organised and works" (p. 2). Those who subscribe to this approach often believe that, contrary to corporate media and other legacy media, alternative media is not profit-driven. Rather, it strives to counter elite-driven content by reorganising media institutions, while, at the same time, broadening the overall media audience base (Albert, 1997; Couldry, 2003). Perceived as such, alternative media serves primarily as a tool to reorganise media "fields". In a sense, studies that highlight the openness, participatory, and democratising aspects Indymedia also base their arguments on the organisational features of alternative media (Pickard, 2006; Pickerill, 2003; Wolfson, 2012).

Taken together, these thematic areas show that there is no consensus on what constitutes alternative media. Instead, emphasis is often put on how a given media produces "counter-hegemonic representations that have the potential to contest mainstream media power" (Jeppesen, 2016: 54). Because there are many forms and practices of alternative media, locating and/or situating its historicity is as difficult and multilayered as the definition itself. Studies that have taken on the task of tracing the history of alternative media often place importance on the Anglo-American contexts, with the 1960s politics and/or contestations of identity serving as a key point of departure in the history of alternative media (Hamilton & Atton, 2001).

In non-Western contexts, "alternative media has tended to emerge less in response to commercial power and more in response to government power, in order to create spaces free of control and censorship by state" (Albrow et al., 2008: 160). In short, there are competing forms of historicity as they relate to alternative media, all of which go beyond the scope and objective of this article. This does not, by all means, suggest a neglect of historical conditions that inform both the form and practice of alternative media discussed in the next sections. Au contraire, the article acknowledges the centrality of historical contexts, their uniqueness, and formative roles. Such discussions can be found in the works of Gibbs & Hamilton (2001).

This article is mainly concerned with the interconnections between alternative media (in its broadest sense) and the politics of mediated political participation. Its contribution to the literature is therefore twofold. First, it contributes to the discussions on mediated political participation by examining how the structure, function, content, and organisational features of alternative media inform individuals' choice alternatives when it comes to political discussions. Second, by anchoring these analyses to Bourdieu's conception of language as a medium of exchange and a symbol of power, the article invites critical discussions around the idea that the mainstream media are sites of hegemonic discourses and alternative media as spaces for counter-hegemonic narratives.

For clarity purposes, *mediated political participation* is to be understood here in line with Bennett and Entman's (2000) notion of "mediated politics", which underpins the "transformations in politics and public sphere that arise from the changing operations of new and old communication technologies" (p. 3). Mediation, in this regard, is understood in Livingstone's (2008) sense of the term which underscores "a mutual re-negotiation of meaning – nonlinear, unpredictable" (p. 6). That is, "the media do not simply add a new element to the story, they transform it" (ibid., p. 6). Therefore, the concept of mediation as used in this article concerns the processes of meaning generation and

"dialectical social transformations" that emerge from people's use and/or contact with any form of media. Specifically, it "emphasize[s] the heterogeneity of the transformations to which media give rise across a complex and divided social space rather than a single 'media logic' that is simultaneously transforming the whole of social space at once" (Couldry, 2008: 375). This is not to be confused by mediatisation, which "denote[s] the intensified and changing importance of the media in culture and society" or "considers the long-term structural transformations of media's role in contemporary culture and society" (Hjarvard, 2014: 125-126).

The article is structured as follows. It begins by examining the relationship between discourse and language (i.e. as a cultural capital), and how the relationship recursively shape political discussions in mediated contexts. The article then focuses on the politics of participation to re-examine the claims of democratisation often associated with alternative media. Finally, the discussions are oriented toward evaluating the four argumentative schemes often used to position studies on alternative media, drawing from the idea of mediated public space as a site of tension imbued with discursive strategies.

Political Participation and the Symbolic Power of Language

In writing about the symbolic power of language, Bourdieu (1991) reminds us that "in order for one mode of expression among others…to impose itself as the only legitimate one, the linguistic market has to be unified and the different dialects (of class, region or ethnic group) have to be measured practically against the legitimate language or usage" (p. 45). This means language is a form of "cultural capital" that can be accumulated over time and space and, more importantly, adapted to give preferred meanings to varying social realities. In fact, this is what gives language much of its desired power as a relational tool. Perhaps, this explains why linguists such as Rastall (2006: 19) suggests that "it is obviously not the case that all disagreements can be made to disappear through a careful analysis of the meaning of terms or the 'use of language'". The "unspoken rules" sometimes weigh more than the spoken.

What this shows is that the symbolic power of language transcends both the form and content, and that mediated political participation is itself a function of context within which discourse operates. It would therefore be elusive to think of any mediated meaning outside its operational "fields". This is why rhetoric theorists such as Charland (2003) perceive politics as a communicative action hinged on people's consent. Depending on individuals' cultural capital, they may negotiate the meanings they associate with certain political inferences. Indeed, Charland presumes that political communication is, on the one hand, based on presumed collective values which it seeks to transform, and on the other, it establishes power relations between citizens in search for a consensus. It is therefore not surprising that people's political participation relies on the pragmatics of language and its representational ability. Put simply, a well-articulated opinion or *doxa* is one that selectively uses language to represent the experiences already incorporated within the "societal system" or pre-notions that people have on societal issues (Charland, 2003; Bourdieu, 1991).

In mediated political participation, the symbolic power of language can also be understood by examining the language used and transferred/shared across media landscapes. Rastall, (2006, p. 19), for instance, distinguishes three competing faculties exemplified by any given language. That is, it is either a form of "communication, pattern, and[/or] information". For Rastall, these faculties are further determined by how the intended message is transmitted (i.e. the mediating interface used to convey the message), processed (i.e. argumentative and persuasive functions of the message), and received (i.e. representational function rationally conceived based on contexts) by the target audience. If Rastall's claims about language is true, it is then reasonable to argue that, for any political discourse to generate interest and response (i.e. political participation), the mediating interface must possess persuasive and argumentative properties.

Of course, the processes of such mediation will vary considerably depending on the form and practice of alternative media under study. As noted earlier, mediation involves a non-linear re-negotiation of meaning that transforms both the content, context, and history of a story or people's experience (Livingston, 2008). The efficacy of language as a mediating element is therefore key to understanding dialectical social interactions and the shifts in power than arise from such interactions. This possibility is evident when we examine what political theorists hold with regard to the relationship between language and the shifts in public opinion. Coleman (2005), for instance, sees the "modes of mediation" as the most effective way of ensuring responsiveness from ordinary citizens. This is certainly true, as political actors increasingly seek ways to improve their rhetorical skills (often based on language and discourse) in an attempt to engage with varying audiences (Olson, 2005; Colás, 2003). While the efficacy of political communication may hinge on both language and discourse to achieve intended argumentative and persuasive results, this does not mean the two are synonymous. As Olson (2005: 320-321) rightly points out, "discourse does not concentrate specifically on language because it is more concerned with discursive type of knowledge". He adds, "discourse is concerned, for instance, with social subjects and consciousness that are created by ideologies, which are grounded in economic and class relations" (p. 321). At the core of this view is the assumption that every individual is free to position themselves vis-à-vis the representations vehiculated by the language and/or discourses mobilised.

Giving primacy to such assumptions raises the question of whether every individual/citizen is provided with an opportunity to participate in the construction of such lenses. Put differently, if creating a sense of collective interest is dependent almost entirely on argumentative and persuasive aspects of language and discourse, how should political actors navigate the pitfalls of adopting a universalist approach when discussing the perceived "collective problems"? Certainly, some scholars have attempted to answer this question by exploring emancipatory features of various media and the extent to which they allow users to take control of the narratives about them or their groups/communities (Livingstone, 2008). For example, in examining the participatory aspects of the social media, Miranda, Young and Yetgin (2016: 303) found "social media to be emancipatory with regard to structural constraints, but hegemonic with regard to an important content restriction". This is important, because it shows that the so-called emancipatory media can equally be constrained by hegemonic content.

Other studies have also highlighted the processes of differentiation and/or selective representation which inform fragmented patterns of media consumption, including discursive imposition of "linguistic order" on social, economic, and cultural realities upon which political discourse is hinged (Ebersbach & Glaser, 2004). Identifying such processes is important when seeking to understand the construction of competing representations, whether perceived as "oppressed" or "oppressing" representations. In other words, media audience not only interpret "collective problems" in relation to their own contexts, they also consume and/or appropriate such realities as active recipients with the ability to give judgment on the very realities (Charland, 2003). Nonetheless, it is possible that the ability to give one's judgement is also conditioned by the linguistic labels associated with such realities. That is, political discourse is, by nature, manipulative since they rely on actors' intentions. Establishing "symmetric" conditions of judgement would probably be the only way to achieve such objectives, which is almost impossible.

In fact, Bourdieu's (1991) views on political communication is that it is not representative of reality since it involves strategic use of language to legitimise certain social structures over others. For Bourdieu, it is the social structure that dictates social orders, and that political discourse follows the same trend by virtue of being rooted in the world of representations. The fact that people use language in a selective manner already creates room for illusions according to Bourdieu. Conflict, manipulation and domination are still possible even in conditions of democracy because of language as the medium of representation. To borrow from Rastall (2006, p. 31), "the search for a logically perfect language or an ideal language …. involves a denial of the importance of communication in favour of a concentration on information and the manipulation of ideas". The power of language is therefore still ubiquitous in mediated political information and participation.

Political Participation and Debates Over Democratic Processes

Given the prevalence of language as a representational tool, a growing number of scholars have increasingly sought to determine what kinds of democratic possibilities mediated platforms support. This is influenced by the supposition that politics is about finding a balance between individual liberties, collective interests, and emerging areas of contestation. Understood as such, one would certainly consider politics as a process of legitimisation with varied democratic outcomes. This invites discussions around the dimensions of democracy envisioned in mediated spaces and how the notion of *citizen* [1] engagement is articulated in the entire process. Four dimensions of democracy can be identified: deliberative, representative, direct, and pluralist.

For *deliberative democracy* theorists, dialogue and its justification are, for the most part, the main determinants of democracy (Chambers, 2003; Maia, 2007). As a "reason-giving" process, deliberative democracy is believed to provide "room for many other forms of decision-making (including bargaining among groups, and secret operations ordered by executives), as long as the use of these forms themselves is justified at some point in a deliberative process" (Gutman & Thompson, 2004: 3). Decision-making is therefore not left solely to the elected officials. Rather, constituents are encouraged to give their opinions on the justifications provided for or against a given societal issue. Since deliberative democracy is primarily concerned with "unitary" or "communal" decision-making, the challenge remains balancing competing interests. The same is true when we shift discussions to deliberative aspects of mediated platforms.

In a *representative democracy*, however, citizens are regarded as being dependant on physical or human mediators to deliver/receive political messages. Therefore, depending on people's political affiliations, they are likely to communicate their views directly to the elected officials who would then redirect these messages to relevant bodies (Nasstrom, 2006; Howard 2005). In this context, the fore-end content does not necessarily depend on how it was conveyed by the constituents, but rather how it was redirected by the elected officials (Coleman, 2005). Critics argue that such structures entrust only a handful of people to make significant decisions, and that the majority of citizens may go unrepresented or misrepresented (Howard, 2005). Other scholars such as Vedel (2003) point out the dangers of what they term "elitist democracy", relying on the primacy of representatives to take a mediating role because ordinary citizens are "unable" to address matters pertaining to their lives. The key question that arises is whether internet-based platforms offer constituents a means to bypass representatives. For Vedel, interactive media are equally used by elites to reinforce their powers instead of addressing public issues. In other words, mediated political participation may not necessarily address issues of representation.

Direct democracy, on the other hand, seeks to eliminate mediating elements. Direct democracy therefore advocates for the exact opposite of representative democracy. Accordingly, the ideals of direct democracy rely on one-on-one contact with the governing bodies (Johnson, 2006; Coleman, 2005). Johnson (2006), for instance, found that constituents who had access to the Internet used it as a tool to search for relevant background materials or data about congressional representatives instead of "relying on the gloss of a television commentator" who might not necessarily provide the context around issues to help voters make informed decisions (Johnson, 2006: 25). He called this "direct electronic democracy", but also acknowledged people's lack of knowledge to exploit participatory potentials offered by such platforms. In essence, what Johnson's (2006) study tells is that it is still unclear whether the expounded benefits of mediated platforms outweigh the risks when it comes to political participation and engagement of citizens in political life.

Finally, *pluralist democracy* assumes that public actions come as a result of aggregate self-interests (Plattner, 2010; Bellamy, 2000). In a sense, pluralist democracy gained traction following the realisation that "adversary democracy", often "built on the assumption of self-interest" and "benevolence", was a major threat to the cohesion of the nation-state (Mansbridge, 1990: 21). This is because every individual identifies him/herself within a given "community of interest" (Vedel, 2003). In fact, this may explain why media pluralism gained prominence as a means to encourage and integrate diverse voices into the mainstream politics (Raeijmaekers & Maeseele, 2015; Ots, 2009). However, one fundamental challenge with pluralist democracy, as Bellamy (2000) points out, is that "people may share a `world view' or culture, yet divide over what its fundamental values are, how they should be ranked, their justification, and their bearing in particular cases" (p. 198-199). Moreover, people "pursue their individual interest by making demands on the

political system in proportion to the intensity of their feelings" (Mansbridge, 1990: 21). Put differently, even in conditions of pluralist participation, it is still difficult to rally people around certain viewpoints because they may present them with inconciliable choices.

Amidst these views, it is unclear how alternative media transforms power dynamics in mediated political contexts, including the kinds of democracy they are likely to offer. This is compounded by the fact that alternative media is still a tyrannical medium, bearing the same hegemonic structures of oppression believed to be inherent in corporate and/or mainstream media. It is therefore important to understand how alternative media alters the politics of participation in the contemporary public sphere. The next section tackles these debates, focusing on how the structure, function, content and organisational features of alternative media informs political participation in mediated spaces.

Alternative Media and the Politics of Participation in Mediated Public Sphere

Scholars have long debated about the role played by the media in shaping the public sphere through discourse. The pervasiveness of alternative media in the process often takes a centre stage in these discussions. Scholars like Jeppesen (2016: 57), for example, situates these debates with four theoretical frameworks: a) the "DIY [do-it-yourself] media and culture" attributed to the Birmingham School and subcultural studies; b) the "community and citizen media" championed by the proponents of development communication and communication for change; c) the "critical media" influenced by the Frankfurt School and critical theory; and d) the "autonomous and radical media" drawing on social movement theories.

Further, "who claims power" also varies across the four models according to Jeppesen. For instance, in the DIY view, it is the individual as it emphasises individual ideology. In community and citizen media, it is the community, as it advocates for participatory and locally owned practices. In critical media, it is the post-industrialist proletariat who pushes for anti-capitalist views. Finally, in autonomous and radical media, it is "the people" who advocate for counter-hegemonic ideologies (Jeppesen, 2016: 70-74). These clarifications are important when seeking to locate the agency of power in mediated political participation and/or engagement. In fact, scholars often disagree on whether alternative media are any different from the mainstream media. This is probably why widely read authors on this topic, such as Atton (2001), proposes a typology of alternative and radical media. For Atton, there are about six categories one could use to locate the agency of change in alternative media: content or news value; form or aesthetics; reprographic innovations/adaptations; redistributive use; transformed relationships roles and responsibilities; and finally, transformed communication processes such as the formation of networks. Fundamentally, Atton argues that "any model must consider alternative and radical media not simply in terms of the differences in content and medium/carrier (and its dissemination and delivery) but in relation to how communication as a social (rather than simply an informational) process is construed" (p. 21).

Overall, a commonly held assumption is that corporate and legacy media produce/disseminate elitist-driven discourses that maintain the status quo while disparaging certain voices, whereas alternative media create disruptive and emancipatory spaces that extend power to the masses (Fuchs, 2010; Lievrouw, 2011). Indeed, there is a recognition among scholars that alternative media have the potential to become democratising tools. As an increasingly pervasive interface for mediated political participation, it is worthwhile considering how alternative media contributes to the transformation of the public sphere proclaimed by Habermas. Further, if we consider the public sphere to be "the realm of debate and open discussion on common interest issues among citizens who are considered equal from moral and political standpoints" (Maia, 2007: 70), one certainly wonders how the structure, function, content, and organisational features of alternative media inform the means and/or the ends of political decisions.

Structure of Alternative Media

The openness of alternative media structures has been regarded a key factor encouraging participation in both civic and political life. Accordingly, alternative media is seen as a fragmented space where diverse voices convene to counter the dominant narratives circulated by the mainstream media channels such as cable news. This is because the mainstream media is believed to exhibit centralised hierarchical structures, disparaging "alternative voices". In contrast, alternative media is linked to what McQuail (2000) calls "democratic participant" media, providing "minority" voices with an avenue for expression. McQuail views "democratic-participant" media as being small-scale in scope and interactive in nature, compared to the rigid large-scale structures of mainstream mass media. For the most part, such views are expanded in political communication literature, which associate such structures with dialogic forms of communication.

Precisely, political communication scholars have suggested alternative media structures allow for the mobilisation of the "politically marginalised" so they take active part in political discussions that affect their daily lives, even when their participation might not culminate into any meaningful policy option (Moe, 2008). In fact, several studies have sought to determine whether or not web-based platforms, as a form of alternative media, have any bearing on electoral outcomes, particularly in the so-called established democracies. On examining the use of internet in 1996 and 2000 presidential elections in the US, Rice and Katz (2004), for example, found that about 53% of Americans used the internet to access political news which was not necessarily provided by the mainstream media. In other words, it is now well-documented that internet properties have a propensity to reorganise how political information is produced, disseminated, and consumed to achieve political goals (Albert, 1997; Bennett, 2003; Lievrouw, 2011). More importantly, the structures of alternative media are credited with providing "bottom-up" dialogic avenues that are less hierarchical in nature (Askanius & Gustafsson, 2010).

This is not to suggest that the structures of alternative media eliminate power struggles between political actors. Since there are no shared guidelines on what constitutes alternative media, the questions of who participates, when, and how still dominate such spaces. Moreover, the perceived affordances of alternative media as an agent of social change are yet to materialise. In other words, while alternative media may be disruptive and emancipatory in nature, their

structures still provide avenues for individuals with competing views to "normalise" their viewpoints through language and discourse, however progressive or reactionary such views might be. This is because "the social uses of language owe their specifically social value to the fact that they tend to be organised in systems of differences…which reproduce, in the symbolic order of differential deviations, the system of social differences" (Bourdieu, 1991: 54). If this is true, then the structures of alternative media are still imbued by power struggles embedded in the narrative produced, disseminated, and consumed through those spaces.

Purpose and/or Function of Alternative Media

One of the defining features of alternative media is believed to be its emancipatory potential, often associated with socio-political change (Atton, 2002; Servaes, 1999; Harcup, 2011). Alternative media are believed to be empowerment tools that provide the "ordinary" citizens with the means to take active part in political discussions and therefore shift the locus of power and political influence. In fact, with the proliferation of web-based media in the 1990s, "many people's hopes were raised that the spirit of egality, the emancipatory power of the medium then, would be brought to the masses" (Ebersbach & Glaser, 2004: 2).

Despite the emancipatory and/or empowerment appeals associated with such platforms, several studies show that traces of domination are still present in alternative media. For example, on examining alternative media platforms such as Wikis, Ebersbach and Glaser (2004) note that, "the openness of wikis, their success and the emphasis on social community instead of technological means to produce quality content raises the question whether they are especially suited to be used by social movements, in other words, whether their use can be thought of as being emancipatory" (p. 3). Furthermore, articulating the need and urgency for social change may require users of alternative media (e.g. the perceived minority and/or subaltern groups) to draw on the practices used by the dominant media institutions, such as "standard" or "legitimised" language, in order to gain prominence. This already sits at odds with the overall conception of alternative media as an emancipatory counter-hegemonic tool.

In Bourdieu's (1991) words, "the effects of domination which accompany the unification of the market are always exerted through a whole set of specific institutions and mechanisms, of which the specifically linguistic policy of the state and even the overt interventions of pressure groups form only the most superficial aspect" (p. 50). Even though scholars such as Hanke (2005: 4) believe "the dominated working class" can use web-based interfaces "to 'creatively resist and subvert structures of domination'" (Uzelman, n.d. p. 20, cited by Hanke, 2005: 4), mainstream media outlets are equally provided with the same platforms to diffuse and/or neutralise the views of "the dominated".

Content of Alternative Media

While alternative media content has been regarded as a key demarcating factor, it is important to note that content is itself a function of language which bears traces of power. As Rastall (2006) observes, this assigning meaning to any given content "involves processes of rational thought and conscious awareness of logical and factual issues" (p. 25). In this regard, even subaltern voices believed to be expressed through alternative media undergo rationalisation processes to increase their relevance to the target audience. This is because "discourses simultaneously provide us with frameworks to view the world and express ways of life that shape our practices" (Hanke, 2005, p. 5). And since rationalisation of thought requires one to use an official language understood by the masses, the voices expressed through alternative media channels are equally adapted to the demands of a given collective. This limits their counter-hegemonic appeal.

In fact, Bourdieu (1991) points out that "the official language is bound up with the state, both in its genesis and in its social uses. It is in the process of state formation that the conditions are created for the constitution of a unified linguistic market, dominated by the official language" (p. 45). Therefore, while alternative media may allow users to produce and disseminate certain narratives about politics, users are still compounded by the challenge of using a language that is widely understood. This, in the process, serves the demands of the "unified linguistic market" which is imbued by hegemonic forces. This is especially true when it comes to editorial editing or restrictions, which may not necessarily reflect the opinions of content producers. Such dynamics are revealed in a study conducted by Ebersbach and Glaser (2004), examining content co-creation practices of Wiki as an emancipatory medium. The authors observe that "participants are not always happy if their articles are changed and do not reflect their opinion anymore", and that "in extreme cases, this can result in downright edit wars, where two persons repeatedly roll back or undo each other's changes" (Ebersbach & Glaser, 2004: 3).

Overall, while alternative media content may offer counter-hegemonic perspectives, the mainstream media increasingly incorporate such non-mainstream leaning content as part of their strategy to retain the masses (Kenix, 2011/2012; Rauch, 2015). Further, political representations in mainstream media are slowly adapting to the demands of the perceived disenfranchised groups through the exploration of representational alternatives. As Atton (2007) points out "newspapers and broadcasters routinely incorporate blogs into their websites; some solicit advice and recommendations for stories and programmes from audiences" (p. 22).

Organisational Features of Alternative Media

Another differentiating factor of alternative media is found in their organisational features. That is, they are believed to be decentralised and co-operative in nature. Precisely, alternative media have come to be "credited with bringing forward opportunities for empowerment of communities, possibilities for transnational activities by social movements and their various challenges to contemporary borders and boundaries" (Pajnik and Downing, 2008: 8). Johnson (2006) also argues that government institutions are increasingly subjected to scrutiny more than ever before thanks to alternative media platforms. Alternative media appeal, in this regard, hinges on the assumption that users maintain some control over what is produced, circulated, and consumed by the target groups. In the process, alternative media platforms may reinforce collective action (Atkinson, 2010; Bennett, 2003; Hamilton, 2008).

While it is undoubtful that the organisational features of alternative media have limited "top-down" influence on content, such outlets are not fully untainted with practices of mainstream media control. In fact, Ebersbach and Glaser (2004: 6) observe that "a publicly controlled medium, however, will need its own structures and rules of interaction to function", and that rules have started to emerge in alternative media spaces such as Wikis. Moreover, since alternative media are controlled by interest groups (or by people with incentives to privilege certain issues/voices over others), their likelihood of being free emancipatory spaces is increasingly questionable. This is because some media platforms dubbed as "alternative" have received huge donations or financial aid from interest groups to influence certain narratives. For instance, "Michael Moore, an ardent critic of mainstream capitalism became the first feature-length documentary artist to earn more than $100 million in box office theatre receipts for a single film" (Box Office Mojo, 2009, cited by Kenix, 2011: 189). This potentially shows the limits of alternative media in navigating the corridors of power. Overall, we are witnessing uneasy convergence between the features of mainstream and alternative media (Kenix, 2012). What cannot be ignored is how this increasing "merger" between mainstream and alternative media platforms influences the politics of participation.

Conclusion

This article presented conceptual discussions on the links between alternative media and mediated political participation, anchoring these debates within Bourdieu's conception of language as a symbolic power and discourse as a representational tool in both mainstream and alternative media platforms. This has raised questions about considering alternative media platforms as sites free of hegemonic forces. The article argued that, while it is true that the structure, content, function, and organisational features of alternative media may pride individuals with the means to participate in political discussions, it is still unclear what forms of democracy they are likely to reinforce. The constellation of affordances brought to bear by alternative media are broad in scope and unhinged to a particular aspect of democracy (i.e. deliberative, representative, direct, pluralist?). This is probably why scholars such as Hamilton (2000, p. 358) suggest that "arguments about degrees of representativeness mask a more fundamental dynamic" when seeking to illuminate the affordances and potentials of alternative media as counter-hegemonic medium. This is due to the difficulty in measuring or determining the emancipatory level of alternative media.

What is certain is that alternative media platforms, particularly web-based, have significantly contributed to the shifts in conventional conceptions of public sphere, which in turn, opened debates on citizenship and/or civic engagement in political life. However, if we consider mediated political participation as a form of citizen engagement, one is still confronted with the difficulty of delimiting the range of activities that fall within the purview of citizen responsibility. Therefore, should one underline voting trends as the measure of citizens' active engagement in political life as argued by some (Howard, 2005; Rice & Katz, 2004; Dalrymple & Scheufele, 2007) or emphasize people's "civic identities", "civic cultures", or "lived experiences" as proposed by others (Atton, 2002; Dahlgren, 2000)? These options still present us with the difficulty of determining the causal mechanisms between voting patterns and the shift in mediated civic activities. Further, agreeing on what aspects of "citizenship" would fall under the broader political emancipation for social change is less likely. Overall, it would probably be useful to probe how the structure, content, function, and organisational features of alternative media support (or not), the four dimensions of democracy outlined in this article. This is because little is still known on the relationship between alternative media and democratic finalities.

Footnotes

1. *Citizen* is put in italics in recognition that the term has different meanings for different scholars. Here, the term "citizen" is used to refer to varying constituents, and therefore has less to do with issues of nationality.

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