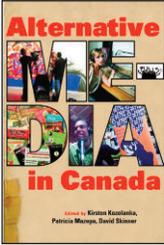


## Reviews



**Alternative Media in Canada.** Edited by Kirsten Kozolanka, Patricia Mazepa, & David Skinner. Vancouver/Toronto: UBC Press, 2012. 338 pp. ISBN 9780774821643.

“Alternative media” is a concept and focus of study that has gained momentum in the past 15 years, following a spate of landmark Anglo-American academic texts that appeared at the beginning of the last decade.<sup>1</sup> The variety of communication practices and projects that have thus come into focus, of course, are not necessarily so historically novel—though this may often in some respects be the case—and their theoretical framing shares something of the fascination and concern with extant possibilities for participatory and potentially progressive/oppositional media practices evident in work from Benjamin and Brecht to Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Armand Mattelart, and Raymond Williams. A basic commitment to communicative democracy prompts attention to proposals and practical examples of varying scale that might contribute to the project of dispensing with “the idea that communication is the business of a minority talking to, instructing, leading on, the majority” (Williams, cited in Hamilton 2008, p. 3). At the same time, specific projects that propose to set out in this direction, in their evident diversity, call for fine-grained analysis in their own right. Indeed, useful analysis, not taking for granted the emancipatory potential of media forms and technologies, must carefully consider the modes and structures of participation manifest in particular cases, the status of prefigurative initiatives, the fraught terrain of any politics of representation, and such practical matters as the potential sustainability (or frequent ephemerality) of grassroots and activist media projects. The fact that struggle for and through what have come to be termed “alternative media” is essential to prospects for progressive social change is increasingly recognized,<sup>2</sup> and work in the field is proliferating. Interested scholars may now count amidst this proliferation a volume which explores significant elements of the Canadian context whilst engaging with broader (sub-) disciplinary deliberations and offering up relevant strategic considerations for practitioners and activists.

*Alternative Media in Canada* represents the first edited collection of its type, an academic work seeking to elaborate the contours of the field specifically within the borders of the Canadian state. As such (in addition to securing a succinct title), it fills a substantial void. As many of the included essays emphasize, the particularities of the policy environment in this country give more than just an “imagined” unity to the conditions under which many projects falling under the “alternative” rubric operate. A recurrent theme expounds upon the distinctly local resonances of global trends (e.g., media ownership consolidation/corporatization, privatization, and neglect of institutional supports to extant community-based and

public service media), at times usefully complemented by a comparative perspective. David Skinner's piece (Chapter 1), for example, contrasts US and Canadian contexts with an eye to prospects for "sustainability" in alternative media projects—a topic usefully framed with reference to the potential synergies to be generated by movements (unfortunately less successfully developed north of the 49<sup>th</sup> than south of it) which bring together critics of corporate media, "alternative" producers, supporters of community participation and self-representation, issue-based campaigners for social justice, and communication policy advocates.

To the credit of its editors and contributors, the book possesses a coherence that is not always evident in edited volumes. Clearly the result of sustained collaboration amongst many of the included authors—the range of focus very much reflective of recent gatherings of engaged academics and practitioners such as the *Making Media Public* conference at York University in 2010—the collection gathers together offerings that fill in the parochial (and not-so-parochial) specifics necessary to construct a global view of how the Canadian experience lines up with concerns raised by a literature often focused elsewhere. The individual essays seek systematically to point out the venues and institutions in which participatory opportunities exist (albeit often under mounting threat), present case studies of relevant media organizations, publications, programming, and movement activity, and offer theoretical reflections as to the salient components of an answer to the basic question: just what makes alternative media alternative? Typical of such efforts, the selection could prompt some discussion of lacunae in scope<sup>3</sup>—an issue especially germane to a collection that is the first of its type. The editors explicitly recognize this dilemma. In addition to the relatively comprehensive compilation that follows, and alongside the caveat that coverage of francophone Québec is "relatively light" (p. 5), they furnish a bibliographic résumé in their introduction (pp. 10–15), which directs the reader to a wealth of important works that supplement the account(s) on offer, an effort that stands on its own as an exercise in context-setting as concise as it is useful.

While sometimes shading towards an encyclopaedic flavour, overviews of different niches within the alternative mediascape cover a great deal of recent historical and (social) geographic ground, paying mind to the genesis and current fortunes of forms such as community radio and television, "educasting" (public service educational broadcasting), and subfields such as indigenous and "ethnic" media. At their best, these offer added emphasis to common themes (e.g., the importance of supports contra the interests of media conglomerates institutionalized in Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission [CRTC] regulation), illustrate innovative efforts to mobilize existing resources, and present some direction for action. In this regard, Michael Lithgow's chapter on community television (Chapter 6) is exemplary. Lithgow presents analysis insisting upon the pressing need to secure independent management of funds earmarked under CRTC mandate for community programming and ensure accountability from the cable companies that are compelled to provide that funding. The chapter further describes vital examples of what forms such programming could take, even under difficult conditions (e.g., Vancouver's "Fearless TV," focused on self-representations of a resident community in the economically deprived Downtown Eastside, which is otherwise faced with a dearth of positive media portrayals not un-

connected with advancing gentrification) before finally holding out the prospect of creating “a network of community-media resource centres” (p. 137) envisioned as infrastructure for “subsidized cultural access” (p. 143).

Other case studies within the book present divergent examples that prompt reflection upon the very different practices, codes, and functions associated with different types of “alternative” media, and upon the varying aims and quotidian challenges of media done differently. These include Barbara Freeman’s chapter, which traces the course of three vital feminist periodicals in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chapter 4), Sonja Macdonald’s (Chapter 5) take on the Real News Network (an online provider of news content intended to challenge corporate agenda-setting and perspectives while maintaining standards associated with professional journalism), and Sandra Jeppesen’s chapter on DIY ‘zines and environmental “direct action” in the context of anarchist activist subcultures (Chapter 13).

Contributions of a more strictly theoretical bent engage problems inherent in a field of study that brings under one conceptual banner the production and circulation of such diverse media artefacts. Among the tasks of theory in this field is to seek some delimitation or to posit axes of analytical differentiation, and to seize upon under-considered dimensions of the promise and challenge posed by an admittedly diffuse conception. Scott Uzelman, for example (Chapter 3), seeks to underscore the radical alterity of what he calls “autonomous” media, defined by their “autonomy from hegemonic communication practices, organizational forms, modes of governance, processes of production, relationships to audiences and users, and professional norms” (p. 83) above and beyond independence of state and market influence, focusing not only on the challenging oppression in terms of content, “but also through the social relations and subjectivities they foster” (p. 83). Nicole Cohen (Chapter 10), in another contribution of particular interest for its treatment of an issue widely noted but seldom taken up in depth, presents labour as a category which both grants insight into what animates some alternative media projects and presents a means of problematizing and potentially rethinking aspects of organization and practice toward greater sustainability and inclusiveness. Across the range of contributions, the reader finds an emphasis on process/participation, organization and structure, with less detailed consideration of content/form—in keeping, perhaps, with its extensive scope and with the framework invoked for coherence, though also consistent with tendencies in the field at large.

As the editors suggest, departing from Mattelart’s statement that “the totality of relations of production and social relations” (p. 1) are intimately integrated in the legitimating functions of the corporate media industries, efforts to reconfigure the media system along democratic lines “must include changes in media structures, participation, and activism together” in order to “confront power in the many modes of its production and reproduction that support its inequalities” (p. 1). The examples described and elaborated upon in *Alternative Media in Canada* are indeed “as diverse as the publics they express, bring together, and activate” (p. 3), yet the collection does succeed to a significant degree in attaining a certain thematic unity under this framework. As the first book to focus a wide-angle lens upon “alternative media” within the borders of the Canadian state, *Alternative Media in Canada* stands out as a unique resource

for teaching in Canadian institutions—and the quality, range, and relevance of contributions should reward not only those of us with particular interest in alternative media, communication policy studies, and the political economy of communication, but also scholars of media, politics, and social movements more generally, as well as media makers outside the mainstream, social justice activists, and engaged citizens.

### Notes

1. These landmark texts include, for example, work by authors such as John Downing, Clemencia Rodriguez, and Chris Atton. The editors' introduction to the work under review presents a neatly captured snapshot of this watershed period, alongside (as noted) a more extended bibliographic exercise that traces the emergence of a number of books and articles, both prior and subsequent, which might be taken to constitute the (sub-) field of works on the topic with specific reference to Canada.
2. As McChesney (2004, p. 24) has stated, expressing an insight now oft-cited, "whatever your first issue of concern, media had better be your second, because without change in the media, progress in your primary area is far less likely."
3. Save for a single reference to a 1970 government report (the topic of which the editors do not note), the omission of any mention of the 50-year legacy of progressive—sometimes radical—tendencies within the Canadian University Press (CUP) struck me as one such point of potential discussion. All readers are, of course, likely to have their own such suggestions.

### References

- Hamilton, James. (2008). *Democratic communications: Formations, project, possibilities*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- McChesney, Robert. (2004, July). Waging the media battle. *The American Prospect*, 7, pp. 24–28.

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