The global alternative and community media sector: Prospects in an era of climate crisis

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It is by now recognised that the environmental crises we face are the product of industrial development, enabled and in union with advances in science and technology, which are at the same time largely looked to for solutions (Beck, 1992, 2009). The environmental and hard sciences, law and policy are reaching consensus on climate change, reporting to the United Nations, governments, policy-makers and industry. Conferences and announcements propagate almost hysterically, celebrity is made and/or wielded calling for action, and election dreams are bolstered and broken in this daily influx of what is happening, what needs to be done, by whom and to what end or effect – all, of course, communicated via big media. What role is there for the global alternative and community media sector in this din of cash registers, careers and environmental crises? What role can be played by community and alternative media scholars?

Community and alternative media scholarship shares some salient characteristics. Principal among these is the critical exploration of the ways in which power (be it media, political, social or cultural and their intersections) might be disrupted and/or exerted to empower the diverse expressions of humanity. Resistance and challenge to hegemonic forms are very much a part of our scholarship, as is the identification of power relations that impact – often negatively – on marginalised people, groups and communities. Fundamentally, alternative and community media research carries an ethical commitment to the complex pursuit of fairness, justice and freedom, identifying communication as a *sine qua non* for progressive futures. Alternative and community media entail a certain amount of freedom that, while always incomplete and imperfect, provides a space to imagine and communicate something different – often on the margins of debate – within our community public spheres (Fraser, 1993).

Underpinning most alternative and community media scholarship is a passionate and resolute commitment to social change. Opportunities abound to translate this commitment into scholarship that might help to thwart environmental catastrophe and foster environmental change. It is a short step from considering the negative impacts of power relations and structures on human communication to a consideration of the non-human. Indeed, the environment is part of the history of community and alternative media scholarship (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001) and a growing body of scholarly work. All of this work brings environments to the fore of our thinking about community, communication, media and alternatives.

The power of community and alternative media to impact on environmental change is often far from the 'big end of town' where industrial capitalism and its current manifestation of neoliberalism dominate. Indeed – and arguably – big governments, international diplomacy, environmental law and policy, and science in this context are strangled by the conditions of their own legitimacy. They are bound by the extraordinary power of their own discourses that

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limit alternative possibilities, and in this context it may be hard to imagine something new.

On the other hand, community and alternative media, and its disciples, need not be so bound by the same rules of legitimacy. Here on the margins, resourcefulness, creativity and innovation flourish, as does the space to imagine something new. In some ways, free from the shackles of profit and performance objectives, these media and their participants can both pursue and epitomise freedom. The capacity for freedom to foster something different within the global alternative and community media sector speaks to the heart of the environmental crises that we now face. This 'heart' is to imagine a relationship between ourselves and our planet that halts the current disastrous trajectory of climate change.

This not only implies protests against industrial capitalism, neoliberalism or environmental vandalism and destruction – although this remains important. Rather, it demands a fundamental paradigm shift in public sphere debate that brings other relations to nature – relations not premised on exploitation, control and profit. The global community and alternative media sector is well placed to encourage this shift. In history and in the present, this sector is at the forefront of a fundamental challenge to nurture changes to what we might call our 'planetary imagination'. In myriad local places, these media can and do challenge the hegemonic discourses that would continue to devastate our environment. This is evident in my own local research and wherever the discourses of development, expansion and dominion are challenged. Consider some First Nations media as a starting point to explore different relations between ourselves and our places.

Of course, we must acknowledge the temptation to romanticise community and alternative media. The participatory nature of community and alternative media does not guarantee positive or progressive environmental outcomes. It is, however, a site where challenges to the environmental status quo of industrial capitalism and a different planetary imagination can be made tangible and meaningful for local people and their places. You will not often find these challenges broadcast by dominant media; rather, they are found on community noticeboards and Facebook sites, on local radio and TV, and in community newspapers.

I look forward to encountering work in this journal that investigates the realised and the potential role of the global alternative and community media sector in procuring positive environmental change. The discussions within the pages of this new journal provide an exciting and emergent space for alternative and community media scholarship, meeting a need that is especially urgent in an era of climate crisis.

References

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