

Alternative journalism in context

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Chris Atton has a well-established reputation as one of the leading international scholars in the alternative media field, and with this latest offering, co-authored with US scholar James F. Hamilton, Atton is established more specifically in the field analysing practice as well as structures and contexts. As the title suggests, this work differs quite markedly from Atton's earlier and much broader *Alternative media* (2003) through its focus on what the authors call the "infuriatingly vague" term "alternative journalism" (p. 1), but the type of outlet examined is similar. Atton and Hamilton attempt to place alternative journalism in the context of the growing field of studies covering citizens' media (Rodriguez, 2001); radical media (Downing, 1984; Downing et al, 2001); community media (Howley, 2005; Forde et al, 2009; Council of Europe/Lewis, 2008); democratic media activism (Hackett & Carroll, 2006); and the broader alternative media field (Kidd et al, 2010; Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2008; Coyer, Downumt & Fountain, 2007; Atton, 2003; Couldry & Curran, 2003, among others).

Atton and Hamilton's central argument is that the practices of alternative journalists are, primarily, informed by a critique of the dominant practices of journalism. They appear to challenge some of Rodriguez's work which resists simply defining alternative/citizen's media by "what it is not" and encourages definitions of citizen's media in terms of the processes they facilitate between citizens and their communities (2001; 2002, p. 79). Rather, the authors see alternative journalism as defined by what it is responding to:

The key insight of this overview is that alternative journalism is not an unchanging, universal type of journalism, but is an ever-changing

effort to respond critically to dominant conceptions of journalism. Alternative journalism is best seen as a kind of activity instead of as a specific, definitive kind of news story, publication or mode of organization. What alternative journalism is at any given moment depends entirely on what it is responding to. (p. 9)

Unlike previous work, notably by John Downing in the United States, Atton and Hamilton also include non-political, non-radical, “cultural” alternative journalists in their study, which is consistent with Atton’s previous approach to alternative media generally. They include studies of zines and fanzines as examples of “alternative cultural journalism”, along with traditional alternative journalism forms such as alternative radio, radical political media, street papers, and newer forms of citizens’ media such as blogging, Indymedia and the online news site OhMyNews, which combines “professional” and citizens’ journalism (p. 101).

Particularly useful to an understanding of how the authors define and frame alternative journalism is their historical chapter which draws heavily on the work of Raymond Williams (1970; 1978a; 1978b). Williams identified the disappearance of the “popular press” in early 19th century England – the independent radical newspapers of the day – as directly connected to the rise of the commercial popular press. This separation of the radical press from the popular press continues today – what Atton and Hamilton term “alternative journalism” has replaced radical-popular journalism, and exists in perpetual isolation from the “popular” journalism of the commercial media (p. 11; Williams, 1970, p. 22). The history of alternative journalism as presented here is inexorably tied to the history of mainstream journalism – and as the norms and practices of commercial “capitalist” journalism have emerged and evolved, so the nature and characteristics of alternative journalism have changed to challenge them.

Atton and Hamilton use political economy as the key theoretical framework to understand the positioning of alternative journalism in the broader media and political landscape. While generally acknowledging Herman and Chomsky’s political economy, propaganda model approach, the authors consider it “highly deterministic” and prone to portraying the mass media as “monolithic and unchanging” without taking account of how journalists work with their sources, editors and other journalists (pp. 118-119). Atton and Hamilton adopt critical political economy as a

way to understand the key “general limits and pressures” that affect the operations and daily practices of alternative journalism (pp. 26-27). In particular, critical political economy is able to describe how the concepts and contexts that give rise to alternative journalism impact on practice – for example, most alternative journalism occurring in Western nations operates within a capitalist/commercial environment which is almost entirely at odds with what alternative journalism tries to do; to change, or perhaps dissolve, the very society from which it has arisen. This reality constantly pushes alternative journalism to the margins. The critical political economy model proposed by Atton and Hamilton is particularly useful in attempting to define the various guises that different alternative media projects might take and, by extension, the different types of journalism that might exist within them.

The authors recognise that this offering does not contain any significant original research data on alternative journalists as a body – either their current demographics or an analysis of practice. Their original contribution lies in their historicisation of alternative journalism; the broad range of frameworks they use to help define and describe practice; and their synthesis of other work about alternative journalists. Chapter 3, for example, provides a “social demographic” survey of alternative journalists based on previous work about educational backgrounds, motivations, training, and the gender and ethnic mix of people who work for alternative media organisations. Chapter 6 provides a comparative survey of alternative journalism around the world, again based on case studies published elsewhere, and Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the nature of alternative journalism, specifically its ethical practices, its approach to objectivity, its unique use of the “eyewitness” account through sites such as Indymedia, and so on. Despite the lack of original research data for these chapters – which for a global work of this size would be difficult to gather – the authors’ unique analysis of previous work and their conceptualisation of alternative journalism as a “re-imagining” (p. 135) of contemporary journalism is significant.

For journalism scholars, *Alternative journalism* offers important insights into the bases and practices of alternative journalists. This is not only relevant to people working in this broader field of community/radical/grassroots/alternative media, but also to colleagues analysing mainstream media practices. Considering the significant

rise in scholarship about all alternative media forms, primarily in response to the increased opportunity for internet-based democratic media projects and ongoing discussions about the lack of quality journalism occurring in the mainstream, this work will make an important addition to reading lists for many advanced-level journalism theory (and some practice) courses. The critical bibliography included as Chapter 9 will prove useful to both students and scholars.

If there is to be criticism of Atton and Hamilton's work it is that their "definition" of alternative journalism is perhaps too broad, encompassing just about everything outside the mainstream, which is not a particularly useful definition for scholars who wish to engage with issues around the contribution of alternative journalism to democracy. If we are to consider alternative journalism as a particular and unique form of practice – which it should be – more specific definitions

need to apply. Despite this, Atton and Hamilton offer the first comprehensive examination of alternative journalism globally, and the work will inform scholarly analyses of this burgeoning research field for years to come.

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