

# Alternative Media and Bourdieu's Field: Internal Resistance or External Competition?

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to situate alternative media in relation to Bourdieu's journalistic (or media) field. More specifically, it explores the various conceptions of media power and the ways in which the media field influences, and is influenced by, other fields, as well as its internal dynamics in the struggle for the control of symbolic power. Using Fuchs' (2010) critical media model as a starting point, the current analysis argues in favor of a conceptualization of alternative media as conflictual activist media; media focused on contesting centralized power from within – through its alternative form and focus – and from without by mobilizing the public in pursuit of an alternative organization of society. Ultimately identifying a continuous process of de-centering and re-centering within the media field, this paper identifies the role of conflictual activist media as one of “conflictual unity,” following Muhlmann (2010).

**Keywords:** Alternative media, media power, field theory, resistance

The contemporary media field is characterized by low entry costs, a variety of voices, and a consumption oriented distribution system. The advent of new media technologies allows for a broad range of expressive engagement through a variety of channels. This said, from a political economic standpoint, these developments have not led to a democratization of cultural capital. In fact, one might even argue that the concentration of symbolic power – that is, the power to shape social reality - has been consistently concentrated in the hands of a small elite (Couldry 2003b).

If this is the case, what tools are at our disposal for resisting this concentration of communicative power? To start, we might look outside of this power monopoly toward those forms of media that have the potential to challenge it from within. Considering Christian Fuchs' (2010) conceptualization of alternative media as critical media – a counter ideological application of media structures and media practices – this paper attempts to map alternative media in relation to Bourdieu's journalistic field. In Bourdieu's field model, agents and organizations are directed by structural predispositions but still maintain a degree of autonomy (Bourdieu 2005). If we consider the internal and external influences on any field, we must ask what are their limits and at what point does a resistant agent or group transcend the boundaries of the field proper. Conflict, it will be argued, is central to this distinction, as it is in the struggle for economic and cultural capital that fields define their own borders and influence those of other fields (Benson & Neveu 2005).

Contemporary media studies continues to be heavily reliant on an assumption of centralized mass media (Couldry 2005). Frequently considered as a top-down exchange of communicative resources, the media landscape and its subtleties are subsumed in this conceptualization. It is for this reason that this paper will consider alternative forms of media and the ways in which they contribute to the internal struggles of the journalistic field. As such, it is in considering a field's margins that we can best understand its constitution and its interaction with other fields.

As Bourdieu (2005) tells us, “A field is a field of forces and a field of struggles in which the stake is the power to transform the field of forces...” (44). The role of alternative media in this field of struggles is one of internal resistance wherein critical content and alternative structures of production and distribution function as new

entrants to the field, challenging it from within (Sandoval and Fuchs 2009). Such an internal challenge, according to Muhlmann (2010) is a complex social endeavour. Contestation from within, she argues, runs the risk of contribution to those aspects of media power that an activist is attempting to challenge. The journalistic gaze unites audiences around myth, and Muhlmann questions the potential of journalism to critique myth through myth. Conflictuality, in this sense, unifies through action.

However, by employing journalistic logic, norms, and structures a change agent engages in a process of centralization, what Bourdieu (1998) describes as the depoliticizing influence of media. This process, according to Muhlmann, must be continuous for a project of internal challenge to be successful. This would take on the form of a repeating internal de-centring in which alternative journalists push the field's boundaries only to eventually be re-centred in a new formation.

However, we must then consider at what stage the field's boundaries might fail to expand. What I mean here is that if internal challengers deviate far enough from the field's normative constraints, they may actually step outside the boundaries of the field itself, becoming a form of counter-field. Indeed, it is in considering a field's internal disharmony that we run into one of the drawbacks of such a model. Ultimately, this paper will explore this boundary within field theory, attempting to find the locus of alternative voices and agents of resistance within the broader model of power relations.

In order to cut through this theoretical quagmire, I will begin by considering the journalistic, or media, field on its own as a conceptualization of the world of power in the cultural industries. I will then attempt to synthesize the contemporary debate over the definition and operationalization of the concept of alternative media, arguing for a definition centred on conflict and activism rather than on organizational structure and form. Finally, I will unite these two concepts to test the appropriateness of field theory as a model for understanding the subaltern segments of such a complex social structure. I will conclude by proposing an alternative formulation of the media field, one that considers the media at a micro as well as a macro level.

## **Power and the Character of the Media Field**

The journalistic field – or media field as it will be referred henceforth – owes its place in media theory to a rather limited selection of Bourdieu's work. In *On Television*, Bourdieu (1998) attempted to popularize his work by considering what he saw as one of the primary power structures of late modern society: the media. The power of the media, to Bourdieu, significantly influences the shape of society through fragmentation and depoliticization. The media field, in this view, is a major force due not only to its own power but to its influences on other social spheres.

In a later essay, Bourdieu (2005) explores this internal/external dynamic. Agents in the media field, he argues, are informed by structural predispositions but still maintain a degree of autonomy. This internal complicity and conflictuality must be considered both in terms of the entire social space but simultaneously as a part of the “political microcosm” (35). Put in physics terms “the more energy a body has, the more it distorts the space around it, and a very powerful agent within a field can distort the whole space, cause the whole space to be organized in relation to itself” (Bourdieu 2005, 43). The media field, can be seen as one of these extremely powerful fields.

It is on this reconstitution of social space that I would now like to turn my attention. Focusing on the interrelations of various fields, we meet with differing views of the relative power of the media field in relation to others. Champagne (2005), for instance, argues that the media field is strongly influenced by the political and economic fields due to its traditional operation as either an arm of the state or as a for-profit entity. From Champagne's vantage, journalistic practice is dependent on profitability and policy, resulting in a regime of public relations and the absorption of new media outlets into the market system.

However, we should be cautious of limiting media's power simply to those most influential social structures. According to Couldry and Curran (2003), media power is commonly seen in two directional relationships. The first assumes the use of media technologies by the powerful, the second the inherent power of the media as a social structure. Following this second view, “...media power is an *emergent form of social power* in complex societies whose basic infrastructure depends increasingly on the fast circulation of information and images” (Couldry & Curran 2003, 4). In fact, media are more complex than a simple, unidirectional flow of power. It goes almost without saying that media are influenced by loci of social power – the state, market, and civil society. However, what is the power of media itself?

In a subsequent chapter in the same volume, Couldry (2003a) attempts to answer this question. As alluded early, Couldry is primarily concerned with the concentration of symbolic power, that power that shapes social reality. The media, as that social apparatus at the centre of this concentration of symbolic power, is necessarily a site

of struggle. "To contest media power," Couldry argues, "is to contest the way social reality itself is defined..." (39). To better understand this dynamic, Couldry focuses on contemporary struggles over symbolic power and the historical trajectory of its concentration. According to this exploration, media power transcends the political economy of the ownership structure. The contemporary media landscape is characterized by heavily controlled access to communication channels. This said, Couldry argues that this centralized media power can still be contested but that such contestation will depend on challenges from within media and without, from producer and consumer alike.

It is in his resistance to a defeatist view of the concentration of symbolic power that we find hope in Couldry's analysis. Indeed, following his case studies of Indymedia and megastories – two examples of participatory media outlets – Couldry likens the current state of the media landscape to the early modern development of the printed book. There is, he argues, no telling where new media technologies will lead us as a society and the myriad ways that we will find to utilize these new resources.

As we navigate this new mediated terrain we must remain sensitive to the media's capacity to shape our social reality (Couldry 2003b). In fact, as Couldry argues, "We need a middle-range theory of the media's impacts on social reality and the particular power of media institutions to constitute... our sense of the social which... still addresses the questions of power and inequality that motivated earlier work on media ideology" (2). Field theory, to Couldry, is overly reliant on the role of the producers of cultural resources, neglecting the place of the consumer. Simultaneously, he questions the appropriateness of considering media a field in their own right due to their immense power over other fields and over the entirety of social space. If media power transcends the bounds of an individual field, he argues, "...we should understand ...[it]...as a form of 'meta-capital' which enables the media to exercise power over other forms of power" (12).

Indeed, we witness the power of media over other fields in the expansion of media logic into other spheres of influence (Hallin 2005). "Media logic," explains Hallin, "has become increasingly differentiated from 'political logic' and increasingly dominant over the latter" (234). This media logic is informed by the professionalization and the commercialization of the communication media. What is at stake, in this instance, is the imposition of media influence into other social fields with seemingly little resistance.

This does not, however, translate to a complete absence of resistance. As Hallin (2005) notes, it is in the struggle for dominance within the field and the interactions between agents that a field defines its own borders. This is not to say that struggle is the only aspect through which a field self-defines. However, for the purposes of the present discussion – the role of alternative media in challenging the centralization of cultural capital – it is in struggle that we will observe the inner workings of the media field on a micro level.

In the remaining pages I will outline a conceptualization of alternative media as conflictual activism and then apply this definition to the preceding discussion of the media field. In doing so, I will attempt to reveal the ways in which alternative media challenge the dominant sources of power within the field while simultaneously engaging citizens to do the same from without. First, however, I will address the current literature pertaining to alternative media and some of the difficulties involved in the development of a cohesive definition.

## **What is 'Alternative'?**

Alternative media is a growing area of research in the social sciences but one that is still in its early stages of conceptualization. At the core of the recent debate surrounding this area is the definition of what should and should not be considered 'alternative.' Does alternative imply organization outside of the mainstream? Critical or radical form and content? A localized rather than nationalized focus or distribution? Some researchers (Fuchs 2010; Downing 2001) focus primarily on radically resistant forms of media, while others (Forde 2011; Cottle 2006) exercise a less rigid consideration of any form of media existing outside of the mainstream. These are not, of course, the only options, and, in the paragraphs that follow, I will synthesize these positions and propose an open definition of alternative media as conflictual activist media.

Alternative media, according to Christian Fuchs (2010), can be seen as a form of proletarian counter-public sphere wherein the apparatuses and structures of mass media are used to challenge dominant centres of symbolic power. By homing in on the critical segment of alternative media, Fuchs attempts to build a concept of critical media that offers alternatives to dominant repressive perspectives, gives voices to the voiceless and grants productive power to the powerless.

However, one should note that Sandoval and Fuchs (2009) see in this a danger of unchecked optimism in the potential of alternative media. It is not enough, they argue, that alternative media be participatory in nature. It

must also be critical and engaged in the pursuit of an alternative society. Whereas traditional inquiry into alternative media focused on its participatory characteristics, Sandoval and Fuchs are quick to note that isolated forms of alternative media run the risk of creating ideological noise and fragmenting the counter-public sphere. It is worth bearing in mind that in Fuchs'(2010) view, in such a counter-public sphere it is better to have few widely consumed sources of alternative media than to have many narrowly consumed sources.

Although we will return to the question of critical mass and united resistance within the media field in the next section, a counterpoint to Fuchs' argument might be found in the work of Joshua Atkinson (2008). Contrary to Fuchs, Atkinson's focus is on engagement rather than circulation. For Atkinson, alternative media is any non-commercial form that challenges power and is aimed at social change. In his study of alternative media use in new social movements, Atkinson explored the relative closeness of audience members to these media outlets in order to establish an interactivity model between new social movements and alternative media use. His results, regrettably, were more or less mixed, revealing close but superficial ties between movements and media outlets.

Atkinson, in partnership with Laura Cooley, builds on this proximal conceptualization of the relationship between movements and alternative media in an article published two years later (Atkinson and Cooley 2010). Here the authors explore the interaction between an outlet's narrative capacity and their ability to engage social movement networks. Although the concept of narrative capacity – the capacity of a network to circulate a narrative throughout, influencing the network's resistance performance – is slightly outside the scope of the present discussion, let us consider, briefly, the role of network proximity, or distance, in relation to Fuchs' counter-public sphere. Network proximity, according to the findings of Atkinson & Cooley (2010), mediates the relationship between the alternative media network and the social movement. As such, with effective communication (narrative) an alternative media outlet can increase its closeness with the activist network, thus contributing to the goals of the social movement.

Let us pause now in order to explore the relationship between the critical media and social movement media models of Fuchs and Atkinson (and colleagues), respectively. Key to both is an active public, engaged through the conflictual content of alternative media outlets. For both commentators, these outlets are viewed as primarily small-scale, even if a larger reach may be preferable. Small-scale media's impacts, according to Downing (2001) can vary considerably. In fact, it is this variation that allows for conflictual media to resist on a number of levels at once. Similar to Atkinson, Downing highlights the potential of alternative media to communicate the values of popular culture upward against the onslaught of mass culture. For Downing, alternative, or radical, media must break rules in order to “...express opposition vertically from subordinate quarters directly at the power structure and against its behavior... to build support, solidarity, and networking laterally against policies or even against the very survival of the power structure” (xi).

Social movements, in this vein, are both created and stimulated through their use of alternative media (Downing 2001). Communication and media are important aspects of social movement cohesion and the power of alternative media is in the generation of an alternative public sphere. Here one again observes that consistent thread in alternative media literature: the fostering of an engaged public.

As a final example of this theme, Tony Harcup's (2011) interviews with 22 alternative media practitioners revealed an internal view of these media as active citizenship wherein “...alternative media must be understood in terms of fostering democratic inclusion and participation and countering social exclusion and political disengagement” (23). Taking his research beyond what he sees as a tendency to define alternative media in negative terms – media that are distinctly *not* mainstream – Harcup situates these media in direct interaction with democratic politics: those media that contribute positively to democratic participation.

Where does this leave us in our development of a concept of alternative media? If we accept, following the preceding literature review, that alternative media are, in fact, made up of those media that practice a resistant conflictual form and that this form results in a more engaged public, we might then conceive of these media as follows. First, conflictual activist media should not be limited to the outwardly radical or critical, a la Fuchs and Downing. Such a narrow fencing limits the variety and complexity of alternative forms. Instead, keeping the field model in mind, we should consider all media forms that intentionally challenge the concentration of symbolic power – that is, those media that contribute to the internal struggles of the media field. Additionally, as we know, fields do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, fields, by their nature, are interactive. As such, conflictual activist media should transcend the media field in their focus and influence. In effect, such a model of alternative media depends on the internal influence of the media field as a whole, combined with influence on actors outside of the media field – the audience and other stakeholders. It is not enough to conceive of alternative media that are simply media outside of the mainstream. Instead, those media must be active elements of the media field on the one hand, and catalysts for social change on the other. Conflictual activist media must contribute to struggle whilst unifying the polity.

## **Internal Resistance or External Competitor?**

In his 2005 account of youth activism and youth media, Eric Klinenberg took on the question of whether it is possible for alternative outlets to contest the central powers of the media field from within. Youth activist media, according to Klinenberg (2005), and other alternative media channels by extension "...are, in effect, trying to open up a new sphere of political activism, one that operates both in and through the media field" (179). Many of Klinenberg's findings revolve around the capacity of youth media to effect change within the media field through the development of professional efficacies and the entry of new conflictual agents from subaltern groups into the field. Even so, he recognizes that the limited successes experienced by these agents can be drowned out by the field as a whole.

Like individual ripples in a fast current, the efforts and struggles of media activists are regularly swallowed up by the sheer momentum of the mainstream media. Activism is easily absorbed and commodified, and, as Fuchs (2010) seems to suggest, it takes a massive gravitational change to realign the field as a whole. Here we are confronted by the central question to the present discussion: do alternative media function like new entrants to the field, changing norms and challenging from within? Or, are the unique logics, goals, and dispositions of activist media divergent enough to necessitate a new counter- or sub-field?

Simply, there is no simple answer. As Schudson (2005) notes, although journalists fear domination from the political and economic fields, they may have a tendency to avoid questioning their own assumptions. Accordingly, while volume counteracts change, so too do internal norms and standards.

Where, then, are we to seek change and are alternative journalists and producers truly insiders in the media field? In order to answer this question, we should first consider the previously identified characteristics of conflictual activist media. First, these forms of alternative media should focus on the struggle against centralized symbolic power. Second, they should work to build a more engaged democratic polity. Thus, truly conflictual activist media would, by principle, challenge from without and within at the same time.

Here I will introduce Muhlmann's (2010) concept of a conflictual unifying journalism, one in which the ongoing struggle for cultural capital both challenges the centre while simultaneously reconstituting it. A conflictual unifying journalism is one in which alternative and other conflictual journalists challenge the predispositions of the field as a whole. In this, Muhlmann envisions a journalistic community "...that is both one and conflictual, but which also understand[s] that the place where one can achieve unification...only reveals itself in conflict" (185-6). Such unifying de-centring depends on a public, an engaged common that bonds behind the struggle rather than the centre.

However, Muhlmann also cautions that it is in this struggle that a new centre emerges. "It is clearly this particular risk," she explains, "that of contributing in spite of their struggle, even by means of it, to the development of a new 'centred' and ultimately dominant unification, that is run by those who agree to fight on the terrain of journalism" (Muhlmann 2010, 192). This risk, it seems, is a necessary evil of such a conception of journalism. Conflictual activist media will always, by definition, find themselves on the margins of the media field, attacking the centre while attempting to influence and shape the surrounding social space.

In this way, we observe media that are, in form, both internal dissidents and external competitors. They are internal in that they are using the principles of the media field in order to challenge the dominant centre. They are external in that they attempt to mobilize the public in such a way that the dominant centre will be challenged from without.

As these media are absorbed, commodified, or silenced, they will contribute to the re-centring of the locus of symbolic power. This process is one of constant flux and struggle wherein yesterday's dissidents become today's converts. Struggle is permanent, fixed. What changes is which agents are in power and which are considered alternative. This is not to say that the absorption of these media is a success on their part. Instead, it is in the constant struggle that the boundaries of the field shift, that logics are reconsidered and individual journalistic agents realize their limited autonomy. The conflictual activist media will always find itself on the margin but, as such, they will always have something to fight for.

## **Concluding Remarks: The Conflictual Activist Media**

In the preceding paragraphs I have laid out some of the basic elements of both Bourdieu's field theory as applied to media and alternative media scholarship. Both, one will observe, are vast and complex areas that are not

easily distilled or exhausted. In this analysis I highlighted common thinking concerning the nature of power and the media field, emphasizing the differing ways in which one can view media power and its influence on other fields. I then synthesized the varying views of the form and goals of alternative media, specifically addressing its potential to unify in conflict. It was at this point that I attempted to make a contribution to both alternative media studies and the application of field theory to media.

Alternative media is both complex and contentious. There are various foci and it seems that although many scholars find areas of agreement, they find more for debate. Where some conceive of alternative media as inherently critical and left-oriented (Fuchs 2010) others define them more openly and in relation to social movement activity (Atkinson 2008). However, common to both conceptualizations is alternative media's situation outside the current mainstream, their conflictual and combative focus on social change, and the goal, or charge, of fostering an engaged democratic populace. More, it is my proposition that to conceive of alternative journalism simply as a simple opponent to the mainstream is not enough. Instead, I attempted to formulate a view of alternative media as conflictual activist media that challenge the centres of media power both internally and externally. These conflictual activist media offer critical content, alternative voices, and rival forms that contest the mainstream in the internal struggle for cultural capital. At the same time, they mobilize the public in pursuit of social change, functioning as activists for new social organization.

This is, admittedly, only the first tentative step toward a formal model of conflictual activist media. It only scratches the surface of this ideal-typical concept and its role in the ongoing de-centring/re-centring dynamic of the media field and the struggle for symbolic power. However, it is my contention that this preliminary glimpse isolates those democratic characteristics of alternative media that might best be unpacked to expand our understanding of the interaction between the margins and the centre of the media field.

Can we conclusively say that such a model does, in fact, challenge the boundaries of field theory's application to media? Probably not. This does not, however, imply that such an endeavour is doomed from its inception. Instead, the present discussion has paved the way for further study of this segment of the media field. Future research and theoretical focus should be focused on the inner workings and power dynamics of these conflictual activist media. Where, for instance, are they situated in relation to non-activist forms of alternative media? Can we isolate specific instances of success or failure in their attempts to reconstitute the centre? These questions are, obviously, beyond the scope of this paper, but they should be considered as we continue to engage the character, boundaries, and influence of the media field.

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