Chapter Seven: Alternative Media

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Alternative Media

This chapter explores:

(1) Alternative media and how that concept is distinct from activist media.
(2) An audience-oriented approach to the study of alternative media.
(3) An approach to the study of alternative media that focuses on production.
(4) An approach in which the researcher examines the content of alternative media.

It has often been the contention of my own research that alternative media constitute the lifeblood of modern social activism. Alternative media serve as the backdrop against which activists engage in protest and resistance. Alternative media (particularly interactive forms of alternative media) are often the connective lines of communication upon which networks are built. Alternative media aid in the formation of activists' political identity, oftentimes by way of taking part in the production process; the production of alternative media constitutes an action that solidifies critical worldviews and makes them more concrete for the activists. Without alternative media, many of the social activism and protest communities that we have seen in recent years (e.g., Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street) would not exist.

An example of the importance of alternative media for social activism can be found in my very first research project (while a graduate student). I was fascinated by a column in *Adbusters* magazine called "Creative Resistance," which featured photographs of billboards and corporate advertisements that had been vandalized. On the surface, vandalizing a billboard seems to be a pointless act of deviance; defaced property, like such billboards, are promptly cleaned or removed. Very few people ever really see the activists work. Why would someone engage in such activities? However, it turns out that many activists routinely photograph their acts of vandalism and pass them along to alternative media sources such as *Adbusters* and various activist websites. By conducting a rhetorical critique of the "Creative Resistance" component of *Adbusters*, I found that the activists were taking part in weaving an overarching "resistance narrative" about a clash of different visions of American culture. Each activist who vandalized a billboard or advertisement and photographed it took part in telling a larger activist story about corporate power and oppression in American society. The alternative media, *Adbusters*, pulled all of the individual parts together into a larger picture. As other activists read the "Creative Resistance" component of the magazine they, in turn, were inspired to go out and engage in similar activities. This gave rise to new overarching narratives woven through other alternative media sources. It was this potential for audiences to take part in the cocreation of several overlapping narratives that led me into my specific line of research: any activist, anywhere in the world, could be empowered through alternative media. For me, that signaled a significant turn in activism and social movements.

The term alternative media has typically been used to describe news media produced by activists, which is different from the concept of "activist media" discussed in chapter 2. Although the two concepts appear to be similar, they are in fact quite distinct. Take, for example, the activist vandalism of billboards and *Adbusters* magazine. One is activist media, whereas the other is alternative media. Which is which? This is a particularly tough question as I have found that there is little consensus about what does and does not constitute alternative media, or whether one should even draw a line between the two. Much of the problem stems from the overlap between both concepts. Such overlap is best shown in Lievrouw's (2011) recent work. In her research she combines the two concepts. Her book *Alternative and Activist New Media* notes that both can be categorized by five genres: culture jamming, alternative computing, participatory journalism, mediated mobilization, and commons knowledge. Essentially, Lievrouw's genres help to demonstrate the idea that there are different forms of media activism. One could very well envision the different genres as concentric circles in which some overlap a little, while others overlap a lot. Culture jamming deals with the appropriation of images and popular texts for

the purpose of critique, while alternative computing refers to hacking and file sharing. These two genres have little overlap with the remaining three genres, and both are more associated with the type of activism described in chapter 2 and the activist strategies noted in chapter 6. Participatory journalism, mediated mobilization, and commons knowledge are the alternative media niches as described in much of the research of Atton (2002; 2004), Downing (1984; 2001), Kenix (2009; 2011; 2012), and others; these "circles," or genres, have significant overlap. Participatory journalism is a reference to news, blogs, and reporting about activist issues and events. Examples of this genre include the activist websites Indymedia.org and RedState.com. Media that fall under the classification of media mobilization present information or news about activist events and resources; such media are used to link activists and direct them toward particular events. Examples of this genre include Protest.net and list-servs (e.g., Reverend Billy Bulletin) that circulate information about upcoming protests and actions or provide links to other news sites. Finally, commons knowledge is manifest in websites and wikis in which anyone can contribute knowledge, information, or news; this can be seen in various websites that allow for users to contribute information through threads or posts. The DetroitYES! forums from my research endeavors with Rosati provide a good example of commons knowledge. We found that the forums allowed users to post information about the city, along with photographs, videos, maps, links to news stories, and much more. In this way, knowledge about the city of Detroit grew and transformed as activists posted more information.

The shared thread that connects the overlapping genres of participatory journalism, mediated mobilization, and commons knowledge is the idea of people working together for the purpose of producing media content. Atton (2004, ix) notes that alternative media are those projects that attempt to "develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of 'doing media.'" Essentially, alternative media for Atton are new ways of gathering, producing, and circulating news and information. Given Atton's basic premise of alternative media, it is possible to see the distinction between the billboards and the magazine noted at the beginning of the chapter. The vandalized billboards constitute activist media; the activists engaged in a strategic event for the purpose of drawing attention to particular social problems that stem from American corporations. For some, calling vandalism or graffiti an event might seem to be a stretch. However, like cave drawings of ancient humans, the alterations made to a billboard are rituals that contain and convey symbolic meaning. The point here is not to argue that this is a significant or effective event, but that such actions constitute activism and activist events as defined in chapters 2 and 6. Specifically, the alterations of billboards fits the situated model of activism described in chapter 2; the activists appropriated corporate images and attempted

to reframe them in a way that new meanings were conveyed to the public. More specifically, this strategy of activism can also be classified as promulgation, as described in chapter 6. Conversely, *Adbusters* magazine and its companion website (Adbusters.org) constitute alternative media, in that the producers stand in opposition to conventional practices of mainstream news media, journalism, and the circulation of information in society; their magazine and website are experiments in new forms of journalism and knowledge building. Therefore, for the purposes of this book, Lievrouw's genres of culture jamming and alternative computing constitute activism, or strategic activist events that are initiated and engaged in by social activists. Participatory journalism, mediated mobilization, and commons knowledge constitute alternative media that stands as modes of "doing media" as noted by Atton.

WHAT ARE ALTERNATIVE MEDIA?

To fully understand alternative media, as opposed to activist media, it is important to look at how the concept was developed. The study of alternative media was initiated in the 1980s when David Armstrong (1981) chronicled the different radical media published by social movement actors in the United States since the early days of the Republic. Over the years the study of alternative media has developed through four primary trends: (1) content, (2) production, (3) audience use and interaction, and (4) intersections with mainstream media. Initially, Armstrong's descriptions of different media produced and used by activists established alternative media as media that originates from social movements; the fact that the content of such media critiqued dominant power structures is what ultimately made it alternative. Later, Downing (1984; 2001) engaged in a similar chronicle of different alternative media around the world, noting the different forms of media that could be used (e.g., radio, print, wood carvings) and the different sources that produced such media. Downing's chronicle demonstrates that social movement organizations were not the only sources of alternative media. There were instances in which nonactivists, such as female street traders in Morocco and African Americans living under Jim Crow oppression in the American South, produced and used their own forms of media outside of mainstream channels. This research later gave rise to the work of McLeod and Hertog (1992; 1995) and other scholars who studied the concept of the protest paradigm. Within that line of research, coverage of protests in mainstream and alternative media content stimulated different views about activists and activist events. Ultimately, this early research constitutes a content-oriented approach to alternative media. According to Armstrong, Downing, McLeod and others, media were considered alternative because of the use of

language that challenged power structures, called for sweeping social change, or called into question particular social roles.

Later, Atton (2002; 2004), Caldwell (2003), and Meikle (2002), among other scholars, expanded this content-oriented trend in the study of alternative media, by illustrating the important role of production in alternative media. For these scholars, a medium was ultimately made alternative by the manner in which it was produced. For Atton, alternative forms of media were typically forced out of the public sphere by the monopolization of resources by corporate mainstream media and increasingly relegated to a "ghetto sphere." Because of the lack of resources, producers of such media had to adopt innovative methods to produce and circulate their content. One particularly inventive technique for producing content was to call upon readers to act as writers; this type of (largely) volunteer work yielded free content for the producers. In addition, Meikle noted that groups who sought to solidify new political identities for people typically used alternative media. Open source publishing associated with online alternative media was necessary for such identity building; writing for alternative websites aided in the solidification of critical worldviews and new political identities. Caldwell's research also helped to refine this new trend in alternative media research, as he explored media circulated and used within immigrant communities in Southern California. In that research, Caldwell examined the Latino communities pressed against affluent white farming neighborhoods that survived by selling their labor for farm work and house cleaning. Within the Latino community, people cobbled together videos and VHS units from the garbage thrown out by their affluent white neighbors. The videos and VHS unit were circulated throughout the community so that everyone knew what the white neighbors liked and disliked; such knowledge helped the immigrant community to position themselves more effectively to gain jobs. This trend of research concerning production later gave rise to research concerning community media developed by Rodriguez (2003; 2011) and Howley (2005; 2013). These research projects focused on the ways in which particular media and journalistic practices were used to give voices to oppressed or marginalized groups; such media offered empowerment for those people, as well as the audiences. Ultimately, all of these scholars defined media as alternative whenever the producers engaged in unconventional practices to create content. The practices of production, more than the content, is what designated media as alternative.

Another trend in alternative media research emerged that examined such media from an audience-centered perspective. Rauch (2007) and I (Atkinson 2010) focus on the ways in which activists read and make use of alternative media content. Rauch notes that the interpretive strategies used by audiences

for reading media content was what made it "alternative." The concept of interpretive strategy was developed by Stanley Fish (1980) to explain the different ways in which literary scholars read and understood classic novels such as *Moby Dick*; it was later applied to the study of mass media audiences by Lindlof (1988) and David Machin and Michael Carrithers (1996). According to these mass media scholars, audiences belong to different interpretive communities that teach them strategies for reading and understanding mediated texts. Growing up in a family with strong political commitments would constitute a good example of an interpretive community. As a member of a conservative family, children would learn about concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, which would later impact the way that they read and interpreted news about climate change or the 2012 terrorist attacks on the US embassy in Benghazi, Libya. As news about these issues appeared on television, the grown-up children would use their interpretive strategies and pay attention to different aspects of each story while ignoring others. Thus, news stories about these issues would appear altogether different to viewers who grew up in a liberal family and used different interpretive strategies to read such news content. Such is also the case with alternative media. Essentially, if a reader of a zine or website determines that the text stood in opposition to dominant power structures in society, then they would consider it to be alternative media.

This audience-oriented view of alternative media is an interesting position to take, as there are some publications that adhere to one of the trends noted earlier, but not the other. Are such media in fact alternative? Take for instance the *Progressive*, a monthly print magazine that reports news from a left of center perspective. The magazine routinely criticizes and challenges corporate and government power, including powerful figures affiliated with the Democratic Party; in this way, the magazine adheres to the content-oriented notion of alternative media developed in research by Armstrong and Downing. However, the magazine is produced and operated using typical ways of "doing media"; the magazine is run by an editor in chief, employs writers, and uses advertising to raise the funds necessary to continue operation. In this way, the magazine deviates from the production-centered trend that has emerged from the research of Atton, Meikle, and others. This seems to place the magazine in something of a grey area. Rauch's notion of interpretation by the audience, however, helps to solve this problem. Many (left-leaning) activists regularly read the *Progressive*, and they interpret it as outside of dominant forms of media production and consider it to be "alternative." Because the *Progressive* contains critical content and the audience read it as alternative, the magazine can be considered as alternative media; this is despite the fact that the magazine emerges by way of "traditional" means of media production. Expanding on these studies concerning interpretation, my own research focused on how activ-

ists' worldviews and use of alternative media shaped their communicative resistance against dominant power structures (Atkinson 2010). Essentially, the alternative media content constituted a backdrop against which resistance was performed. The process of reading that content and interacting with other activists shaped the interpretation of the content and, consequently, the form of resistance taken through protest and other actions. In these cases, I found that the audience made media alternative through their use of the content. The way in which the audience uses and reads media can make them alternative; in fact, the reading of media can help to differentiate media that appear to fall into a grey area between two of the trends noted earlier.

The most recent trend that has emerged in the study of alternative media focuses on intersections between alternative and mainstream media. According to Kenix (2009; 2011), much of the literature concerning alternative media has been flawed as scholars have assumed such media to be in binary isolation from the mainstream media. The typical assumption about the alternative media has been that these media stand in stark contrast and opposition to mainstream media. Such an assumption is largely based on the trends in research noted earlier, particularly the first two. Those research trends had established alternative media as content that challenged power structures (e.g., Downing 2001), or were media that were produced through alternative organizational practices (e.g., Atton 2002); in both cases the content and production were understood as a contrast to mainstream media. However, Kenix (2011) effectively demonstrates that the two forms of media are not as separate as earlier research implied. Both forms of media often intersect in terms of "individual motivations and identities, organizational practices, media ownership and ideological influences" (Kenix 2011, 11). Organizational practices are of particular interest, as the practices adopted by different media can lead to some of the most observable intersections. In some cases, the different media outlets learn from one another and assimilate practices utilized by the other. For instance, many mainstream news outlets have adopted the practice of reader-writers in recent years, in which they solicit feedback from the audience through interactive media and use such feedback as content. For instance, CNN instituted a program called "Talkback Live," in which viewers post comments about stories as they are featured on the show; audience comments are quickly assimilated into the content. In addition, blogging has become a practice associated with both forms of media, as mainstream and alternative websites regularly feature blogs by their more renowned writers (Kenix 2011), as well as (sometimes) giving the audience the opportunity to establish their own blogs. Furthermore, individuals who contribute to alternative media sources are also often called upon to contribute to mainstream news media. For instance, Erick Erickson is the creator and chief contributor to the conservative activist website RedState.com;

Erickson is also frequently interviewed by mainstream news media such as CNN to provide a "conservative perspective" on a variety of political issues. In fact, CNN regularly pits Erickson against Van Jones (contributor to liberal alternative media sources like *Mother Jones* magazine) in split screen debates. Ultimately, this latest trend in the study of alternative media has effectively demonstrated that there are significant intersections between these two forms of media. Kenix argues that scholars should not think of the media in binary terms, but rather a continuum that ranges from mainstream to alternative.

In order to start thinking about the use of qualitative methods for the examination of alternative media, it is useful to adopt the framework of multilevel analysis developed by Zhongdang Pan and Jack McLeod (1991). These scholars claim that people often make the mistake of discussing media as monolithic; that is, they talk about media as if production, content, and audiences are all lumped together. Instead, they suggest that people think about the media in terms of four distinct, yet interconnected, levels: production, content, audience, and feedback.

Figure 7–1 lays out this notion of multilevel analysis as four lines that overlap and construct a continuous loop. Producers construct content that is transmitted to audiences (or consumed and spread by the audience, depending on your paradigmatic approach to media and audiences). These audiences provide feedback of some sort, which is in turn received by the producers; such feedback aids in the formulation and production of future content. In the following discussion, the approaches that researcher can take in the examination of alternative media will be addressed according to these different levels (feedback will be addressed within the section on content, as the reader-writer strategies utilized by producers of alternative media often make audiences feedback part
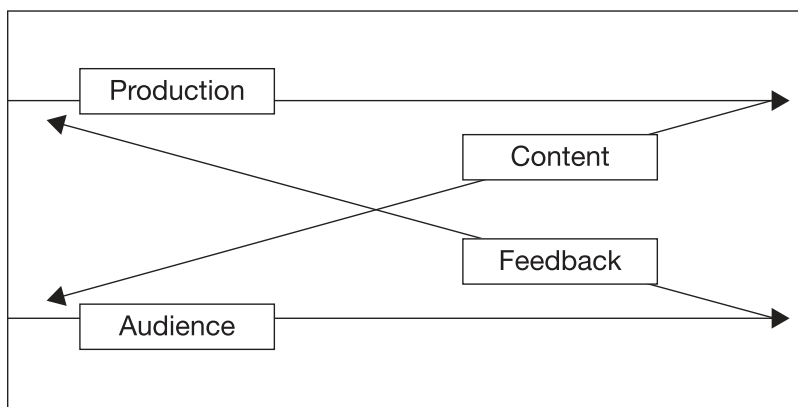

FIGURE 7-1.   A representation of Pan and McLeod's multilevel analysis network.

of the content). Indeed, three of the trends that have developed in the study of alternative media conveniently fall within this framework: modes production, audiences use and interpretation, and content. However, mainstream and alternative media intersect in multiple ways as mentioned earlier.

In the exploration of alternative media production, it is important that the researcher have access to individuals who engage in the production of content; it is also preferable for the researcher to be able to observe production in some capacity. Essentially, the researcher should have access to either the people behind the production of content, or to the processes by which those individuals produce content for alternative media. If such access is not available, then the researcher may engage in textual analysis to make determinations about the finished product. However, such an approach to this aspect of alternative media will not actually provide much insight into the processes and politics of production; textual analysis can serve as a good supplemental method to the exploration of alternative media production, but not a core approach to such assessment. Past research that has explored the production of alternative media has typically relied on interviews and focus groups, as well as participant observation.

Kejanlioğlu, Çoban, Yanikkaya, and Köksalan (2012) and one of my own studies (Atkinson 2008) provide good examples of research based on interviews and focus groups with alternative media producers, whereas Pickard's (2006a; 2006b) research is an exemplar of participant observation used to explore processes of production. Kejanlioğlu et al.'s research does not explore a broad swath of producers, but focuses on the producers within a single organization in Turkey called Independent Communication Network (ICN). This organization produced a website that is in many ways similar to the Indymedia websites that were first developed in the United States; the producers maintained the website and edited materials, while audiences submitted articles to the site or made comments about articles that they read. Content submitted to the site typically focused on human rights and oppressive practices in Turkish society. In their research, they examined participation by the audience in the processes of production; they were essentially exploring Atton's concept of reader-writers who contribute materials to alternative media sources. Through their efforts, Kejanlioğlu et al. have demonstrated that the inclusion of audience-producers into the production of content through the ICN website built a series of intertwined political and social relationships that constituted a complex counter-public; such a counter-public could effectively voice concerns to the citizenry about human rights violations or oppressive practices. My own research explores

the interconnections between local producers of alternative media and those producers at the global level. Essentially, my research demonstrates that producers of local content (e.g., zines, activist newspapers, and radio programs) were often bolstered by simple feedback from their audiences (e.g., encouragement). In contrast, producers of global content (e.g., nationally and internationally distributed materials) frequently received complex feedback (e.g., ideas for future articles, critiques of information in previous articles) from their audience; audiences that provided feedback to the global producers were typically producers of local alternative media. Finally, Pickard's research explores the Indymedia network of news websites coordinated by activists around the world; at the center of the network is one main Indymedia website that is interconnected with several local-level websites (e.g., Indymedia Chiapas, Indymedia Los Angeles). Pickard reveals that decisions within Indymedia typically required a consensus, which held negative implications for the ability of the producers at the alternative media forum to stimulate social change (2006a); in addition, his research demonstrates significant "tyrannies" within the Indymedia organizational structure that shaped the content on the websites (2006b). Both of these projects have been covered in great detail in earlier chapters. In terms of the first project, he found that all of the local Indymedia production sites within the network had to agree on one option when the entire network faced a decision. The second project demonstrates tyrannies that existed within the Indymedia sites that impacted the content that would be published. Despite the fact that the Indymedia network had been founded on the premise that all voices are equal, Pickard noted that was not always the case. He observed different aspects of the network that filtered content that was posted on the main website; these tyrannies emerged from the rigid ideologies of many activists and the anonymity provided by the Internet.

The use of interviews and focus groups demonstrates two important aspects of this approach to the study of alternative media: the exploration of multiple levels of production (e.g., local and global) and the examination of different production roles (e.g., professional producers, reader-writers). The first approach entails a variety of different producers within or across multiple levels of production, while the other typically focuses on the different ways in which activists can engage in production. In reference to my own study, I started my project by interviewing activists so as to discover important locally and globally produced alternative media that they frequently read and used (this played an important role in much of my research, as it demonstrates that alternative media production is relevant as I will discuss shortly). After I had identified the key alternative media sources used by many of the activists within the local network, I invited producers of both local and global media to take part in the interviews. Overall, I conducted postmodern interviews with six local produc-

ers and seven global producers of alternative media content; the local producers were interviewed face to face, whereas the global producers were interviewed via telephone. The interviews focused on the producers' opinions concerning various activist issues (e.g., corporations and corporate power), their identification with social movement organizations and networks, and their interactions with audiences. The questions concerning opinions and identification helped to place the producers within the larger scope of activist organizations, networks, and causes throughout the world. The questions that focused upon their interactions with audiences demonstrated the ways in which feedback and interactivity played roles in local- and global-level alternative media. In fact, the questions concerning feedback with audiences were crucial for demonstrating an important relationship between the global and local levels. By asking the producers at each level about their relationships with audiences and other producers, I was able to discern that the global producers often gained ideas for new content through the feedback that they received from local producers. Essentially, the questions were integral for illustrating interconnections between the different levels of alternative media production.

Kejanlioğlu et al. did not examine different production levels, but focused instead on a single organization that produced alternative media content; the goal of their research was to explore the different types of production within ICN. In order to accomplish their goal, they first engaged in survey interviews with key producers associated with ICN (e.g., editor, reporters) so as to ascertain how the production process was actually carried out; these interviews covered economics of the website, political affiliations for the organization and website, content policies, and perceptions about audience-generated content. These interviews not only provided insight about the internal operations of the organization and website, but also helped to craft focus group questions that were later used with those reader-writers who occasionally provided content through the website: "Two focus groups we conducted in summer 2011 (with university students) and winter 2011 (with activist women) aimed to provide attitudes, cognitions, experiences and points of view about participation in and through media and [ICN]'s alternative journalism. The focus groups were conducted as open-ended group interviews with the moderator encouraging interaction between participants" (Kejanlioğlu et al. 2012, 282). The focus groups were more postmodern in format—as "the moderator raised topics and encouraged the group to carry on the discussion" (283)—and featured questions that enabled the participants to describe their own experiences reading, using, and contributing to ICN. This enabled Kejanlioğlu et al. to reveal different modes of production for ICN, as well as the participation in the production process by people inside and outside of the core organization. The interviews helped to establish a framework for understanding how media was

produced by ICN. The focus groups then explored that framework and provided greater insight into the specifics of how activists operated within the constraints of the ICN framework.

Pickard's research concerning the Indymedia network demonstrates the use of participatory observation to explore alternative media production. Pickard spent three years observing and working with the Indymedia site in Seattle: "[My] analysis is informed by extensive background information stemming from nearly three years of volunteering for and participant observation of the Seattle IMC. During this time, I participated in approximately 50 meetings and events, wrote several news stories for the newswire and received daily emails, usually several per day, from the general, media, media literacy and liaison IMC listervs" (Pickard 2006b, 327). As noted earlier, his access to the site gave him the opportunity to go to meetings and work with a variety of different individuals within Indymedia Seattle. Most important, however, is the fact that Pickard actually took part in the process of producing content and submitting it to the Seattle website; such work was particularly important as it provided him with insight into the organizational and cultural practices associated with the production of content for Indymedia. Had he simply engaged in interviews with key producers or audience-producers (as in the two cases noted earlier), he might very well have not been able to identify key "tyrannies" that shaped content on the website (few producers would likely vocalize such problems associated with their organization or alternative media content). According to Pickard (2006a, 24): "I sketch recurring pressure points and tensions by facing off critiques of participatory models [of democracy] with my observations of Indymedia practice." The key to Pickard's research was the fact that he took part in the processes of production within the Indymedia site and learned firsthand about the cultural practices that went into the alternative media production. As he observed those practices over time, he was able to discern the pressures and tensions that hindered or filtered the content placed onto the main website.

Ultimately, the study of alternative media production involves the examination of the ways in which production takes place; illustrating the cultural and organizational practices that give rise to content. One way to go about doing this is to identify key producers and then engage in interviews and focus groups. This enables producers to tell the researcher what it is that they do to produce content for an alternative media forum. Another way to accomplish such an exploration of production is through participant observation, in which the researcher actually take part in the production of alternative media alongside activists and advocates for social change. These methods alone are often not enough to fully explore production, as many procedural and organizational aspects are involved. In many cases, supplemental methods are used to aid in this exploration. Aside from his participant observation, Pickard also con-

> **Recap 7-1. Production-oriented Approach to the Study of Alternative Media**
>
> - Reveals cultural and organizational practices in the production of alternative media content.
> - Uses interviews and focus groups to elicit perspectives and descriptive information from producers.
> - Uses participant observation to help researchers gain firsthand experience of process and practices.

ducted interviews with ten key members of the Seattle Indymedia site; such interviews enabled the activists to explain their own experiences and perspectives on the processes of production. In addition, he also engaged in textual analysis of materials circulated through the Indymedia listservs; such analysis helped him to tie "pressure points and tensions" in the organization to the content that was produced. Similarly, Kejanlioğlu et al. engaged in a textual analysis of materials submitted to the ICN website in order to link content with the processes of production. As noted earlier, however, such textual analysis reveals very little about the modes of production without the larger data and information from the producers themselves.

APPROACHING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA AUDIENCES

The study of alternative media audiences typically either focuses on audience's interpretive strategies or reveals the ways in which audiences use the information through alternative media content. Essentially, the researcher engages with the audiences and allows them to describe the ways in which they read or use alternative media. Interviews and focus groups have been the predominant means for gleaning information from activists, although ethnographic methods such as participant observation may have yielded the same results. Rauch (2007) and I (Atkinson 2007; 2010) provide good examples of the ways in which audiences read or make use of alternative media. Rauch explores how audiences look at news and subsequently determine whether the source constituted alternative media. Essentially, she found that activists looked at three different "ideals" in order to decide whether the news could be considered alternative or mainstream: if the news was sponsored by nonprofit or noncommercial interests, committed to social change, or encouraged participation from audiences, it was deemed alternative. As activists viewed news stories on television or read magazines or newspapers, they would pay attention to these details to make a decision about whether or not it was alternative; alternative media were perceived as more trustworthy than mainstream media. In my own work, I examine

the ways in which critical theory constitutes interpretive strategies for activists. My research shows that reading Karl Marx or Antonio Gramsci impacts the ways in which activists read and understood alternative media (Atkinson 2007). Later, I explored the ways in which activists made use of the information that they gleaned from alternative media. As noted earlier, I demonstrated that activists used alternative media content in the context of organizations that constructed a backdrop against which the activists performed communicative resistance. I found that there were different backdrops against which radical activists engaged in militant resistance and reformist activists performed adjustive or legal resistance. In addition, all of the different backdrops came together to form a communal place of performance in which all activists—radical and reformist—could join and engage in resistance (Atkinson 2010). This was similar to Best's (2005) notion of mesomobilization, in that these communal sites of performance were only temporary; disputes often arose between different types of activists from their disagreement about tactics for resistance (militant versus adjustive).

In reference to research focused on interpretive strategies, Rauch's research, as well as my own research, can provide important insight into methods. My research concerning interpretive strategies explores the ways in which activists constructed cultural capital through their use of alternative media, as well as through their affiliation with activist organizations; different forms of cultural capital could give rise to different interpretations of alternative media content. Essentially, I conducted postmodern interviews with a series of activists in which I asked questions about the alternative media that they used, the topics in which they took particular interest, with whom they discussed the content and demographic information. This format enabled the activists to weave narratives about how they read through texts and shared information from those texts with other people. Rauch's research sought out similar information about interpretation of alternative media by the audience, but used focus groups rather than one-on-one interviews. Overall, the study included twenty-four activists, who were split up into focus groups of four or five members. In each group, Rauch had the activists watch a taped newscast of *ABC World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, and then she engaged in a discussion with the activists; the discussion was organized within the postmodern process, in which she asked broad questions that allowed the activists to elaborate and weave narratives: "After watching this newscast, small groups of four or five talked about: what stood out in their minds about the program, what they learned from it, anything they didn't like about it and how it made them feel. Using open-ended questions, I gently steered the conversation by paraphrasing their comments, giving non-judgmental prompts and asking them 'how they knew that' or 'why they thought that.' This approach helped to elicit the distinctive

language with which these activists talked about the news" (Rauch 2007, 998). Although the newscast did not meet the criteria for "alternative" held by any of the activists—nor would it constitute alternative media under any of the definitions utilized within this book or any alternative media literature—the program was a starting point for discussions about what does and does not constitute alternative media. By starting with an example of what was clearly not alternative media, she provided the activists with the opportunity to critique the newscast and discuss other media; the mainstream media news served as the starting point for a dialogue between her and the activists. This is particularly important, as participants within a research project may often require examples so that they may begin weaving their narratives. This is something that was missing from my research and could significantly hamper any endeavors to explore audiences' interpretations. Had Rauch simply asked them to talk about alternative media, they may have had no idea about what they should discuss; after all, alternative media is a nebulous term used to describe a wide variety of different things. Scholars often cannot fully agree on what constitutes alternative media. The mainstream media example enabled the activists to explain how the newscast was not alternative and then go on to provide examples of what they perceived to be true alternative media.

Another study of mine concerning activists' alternative media use and resistance (Atkinson 2010) also provides insight into the use of qualitative methods. This study did not examine interpretive strategies used to read and understand alternative media, but rather the ways in which activists use alternative media and content in their own performances of resistance; I was interested in what they did with the content and how it aided their endeavors. As with the two research projects noted earlier, my examination of activist audiences of alternative media was based on interviews. In this case, the postmodern interviews focused not only on the use of alternative media but how the activists incorporated the alternative media content into their own activism and interactions with other activists. In addition, the interviews attempted to gauge the role of these audiences in the production of alternative media content; this is particularly important, as reader-writers, according to Atton (2002), are a key strategy for alternative media production. In fact, alternative media production cannot simply be limited to writing content but can also include commenting on articles that are found online (Meikle 2002) or providing feedback to alternative media producers (Atkinson 2008). For that reason, I delved into a variety of subjects, including the activists' worldviews, their roles in organizations, and alternative media production:

> During the interviews, I would ask the activists and producers about 1) their opinions about dominant power structures in society (e.g., What are your

opinions about the possibilities for corporate reform in society?), 2) their affiliations and work with "social justice" organizations (e.g., What organizations do you work with here in Erie City? What role do you play in that organization?), 3) their use of alternative media (e.g., What alternative media titles do you regularly use? Do you ever interact with any producers of alternative media? Do you ever write or produce any alternative media yourself?), and 4) demographics (e.g., What is your age?). (Atkinson 2008, viii)

These broad questions enabled activists to talk at length about their own experiences and knowledge and weave narratives that addressed the central issues of the research. As alternative media audiences exist within a world of activism that includes organizations, networks, and events, it was important that the interview questions focused on the connections that activists perceived between those things and the media content that they read and used.

Of course, it is not enough to simply ask activists about the connection between the alternative media that they read, watch, or listen to and their activism (e.g., role in organizations, acts of resistance at specific events); indeed, many connections may be hidden from the activists themselves, or they may not be able to make connections. It is also entirely possible that there are some aspects of their activism that they do not necessarily want to discuss in interviews, which keeps those interests of opinions hidden from the researcher. For instance, I discovered in a project that I conducted with Berg that Tea Party activists deliberately tried to mislead us about their activism and role in activist organizations during a focus group; when the deception was noted during the discussion the activists admitted to it, but dismissed the issue as insignificant (Atkinson and Berg 2012b). These problems can be resolved in a number of ways. One way would be to incorporate participant observation of activists within their organizational setting, much like the focused approach described in chapter 4. This can provide the researcher with insight about conversations that take place within an organization and the topics covered in such conversations, as well as whether those conversations relate to alternative media content that is typically circulated within the organization. In addition, participant observation would enable the researcher to engage in unstructured interviews with members and give rise to discussions about the connections between alternative media and specific organizational structures or worldviews. Another solution is to engage in an investigation of alternative media content used by the audiences. Such textual analysis can help the researcher to craft new questions about alternative media that can be asked of audiences in second and third rounds of interviews; the researcher can essentially contact the activists with follow-up questions that might emerge from textual analysis. This latter approach, in fact, enabled me to enrich my study of activists' use of alternative media. Alongside the interviews that I conducted with the alternative media

audiences, I also conducted qualitative content analysis of numerous alternative media titles that were described in the interviews. This particular content analysis corresponds with my other studies (see the following section); the interviews informed the qualitative content analysis, and the emergent concepts from both were discussed with key activists in follow-up interviews. I used the two methods in order to be able to construct a full conceptualization of the use of alternative media for these audiences.

In general, the focus group and interview methods are common in the study of alternative media audiences. The examples cited here provide some important insight into how to approach the study of such audiences. First, always use examples, even if those examples are not alternative media. As the concept of "alternative media" is rather vague, it is important to establish an understanding with participants as to what defines alternative media; examples such as the *ABC World News Tonight* newscast used by Rauch can help establish what is and what is not alternative media. In addition, it is important to understand that the alternative media audience stands at the intersection of multiple research sites; they read (watch, or listen to) alternative media, they often participate in the production of alternative media, they are members of (or allied with) various activist organizations, and they frequently take part in activist events. Bringing all of these dependencies to bear in an interview or focus group can be incredibly cumbersome, and those methods may not provide a complete picture of the alternative media audience. Hence, such research should be supplemented by participant observation or textual analysis which will help capture a richer picture of the audience.

Recap 7-2. Audience Approach to the Study of Alternative Media

- Reveals the ways that activists use and understand alternative media.
- Uses interviews and focus groups to evaluate interpretive strategies and uses of alternative media (optional).
- Uses examples in interviews and focus groups to establish what does and does not constitute alternative media.

INVESTIGATING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA CONTENT

Textual analysis of alternative media content is typically conducted in order to accomplish one of two outcomes: reveal any themes or characteristics within the content or explain how the content should be understood within a larger context (e.g., within the context of society or within the context of a social movement). Two methods that can accomplish these goals are qualitative content analysis and rhetorical criticism (see chapter 3). Qualitative content analy-

sis is a method that can uncover prominent meanings within a mediated text (Altheide and Schneider 2013; Mayring 2000), whereas rhetorical criticism is a way in which a researcher can help other people to understand a mediated text as it pertains to culture, social institutions, or communities (Foss 2004; Herrick 2012). Qualitative content analysis tells people what is in a text; rhetorical criticism tells people how the text fits into a context. Research conducted by Kenix (2009; 2012), as well as my own research (Atkinson 2005) and my collaboration with Berg (Atkinson and Berg 2012a), provide insight into the use of qualitative content analysis in the exploration of alternative media. Ross Singer's (2011) research demonstrates the use of rhetorical criticism in such endeavors.

Kenix set out to show blogs as a form of alternative media, as well as the conflicts between the ideology of an organization and the content produced by that organization. In the first case, Kenix (2009) engaged in textual analysis in order to uncover uses of language in blogs, as well as any emergent narratives. Her research demonstrates that many political blogs (liberal and conservative) essentially reported on issues and events that had already been covered in the mainstream media news. The language used in the blogs, however, differed slightly from the language used in the mainstream media, as the bloggers used meanings that were affiliated with particular political positions; for instance, the mainstream media might use the term *freedom fighter*, whereas a blogger would use *terrorist*. In the other case, Kenix (2012) uses qualitative content analysis to examine blogs produced by various activist groups that were guided by Marxist thought. According to Kenix, some scholars have argued that mainstream media forums, which are corporate owned, are much more hierarchical and top-down in their production and approach to the audience, whereas alternative media guided by Marxist thought entail a more egalitarian approach to both production and the audience. In her qualitative content analysis, she looked for language and emergent narratives that would support or repudiate the arguments about mainstream versus alternative media. Interestingly, she found that the narratives that emerged in mainstream media promoted a slightly more community-oriented view than the Marxist alternative media; her analysis reveals that alternative media narratives gave rise to an individualistic and "opportunistic" view of issues.

In my own research (Atkinson 2005), I explored the different conceptualizations of corporate power that emerged from alternative media content regularly read by activists within a local network. My research demonstrates that some alternative media publications (such as Indymedia.org) used terms that evoke a "traditional" form of power in which resources, and the control of resources, stood as power in society; corporations controlled these resources, and thus it

was important for activists to disrupt such control. Not all forms of alternative media used this form of power, as other texts (e.g., *Z Magazine*) used terms that constructed a "hegemonic" form of power. In this case, meaning and ideology constituted power, so education and public dialogue were crucial for activists. Similarly, my project in collaboration with Berg entailed a qualitative content analysis of alternative media used by Tea Party activists; rather than searching for power, we explored the construction of heroes and villains within the texts. Through our examination of various Tea Party websites and blogs, we found that the ways in which heroes and villains were constructed gave rise to an overarching meta theme within the content about "purity"; this meta theme enabled conservative activists to scrutinize Republican candidates in elections and determine whether they were essentially good or evil. In reference to rhetorical criticism of alternative media, Singer's (2011) research focuses on the 2004 film *Super Size Me* (*SSM*) by Morgan Spurlock; the film follows Spurlock as he spent one month eating only food from McDonalds. The critique applies Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque in a close reading of the movie. Essentially, Singer uses the premise of carnivalesque (in which grotesque themes are used to elicit humor) as a lens through which he examines the film, so as to understand how particular activist audiences are constructed. This close reading of the text enables Singer to demonstrate that the grotesque distortions of Spurlock's body throughout the movie stands as self-subjugation; that is, Spurlock temporarily gave up his body to an exploitative system in order to shock audiences into an alternative understanding about that system. Such representations hail into being an audience that questions and resists corporate food production and sales.

The five research projects noted in this section demonstrate two key research considerations: selection of texts and process for analysis. In order to conduct a qualitative content analysis of alternative media, it is important that the overall process of the research be very systematic. It is important that the researcher engage in a systematic collection of texts for analysis; it is vital to not simply select texts that are interesting or most noticeable. One way to accomplish this task is through interviews with activists who use alternative media. For instance, in my own research (as well as my work with Berg), I used interviews to learn about the most frequently used alternative media. Essentially, I asked activists to list alternative media that they regularly read or use and then looked for those that were most frequently used across the entire population. In fact, in my 2005 research I interviewed twenty-seven activists and asked them about the alternative media sources that they most frequently used; from their responses, I conducted a qualitative content analysis on those texts that were accessed by no fewer than 20 percent of the activists. I used the same process in

my research concerning activists' uses of alternative media. According to my 2005 proceedings, "by reaching 20 percent of the audience participants [an alternative media source] demonstrated that it was a significant part of the social justice communities" (78) in that region. This enables me to analyze the relevant alternative media used by particular activist organizations and communities.

Conversely, Kenix (2009; 2012) identified relevant alternative media for examination through quantitative content analysis. In her research concerning blogs as alternative media (Kenix 2009), she generated a list of the one hundred top blog posts using an online memetracker called Tailrank. The program, developed by a small company in San Francisco, uses an algorithm to comb through blogs and identify the most popular ones. Taking the list of the top one hundred blogs, Kenix examined each one and took note of the links and coded the nature of the links; to what kind of sites was the blog linked? She then used a statistical analysis of her coding:

> Every link found within the text of each blog was coded. The links were coded within the following categories: itself, apparent like-minded blog, apparent opposite-minded blog, blog with unknown political position, mainstream news source, mainstream news blog, alternative news source, alternative news blog, mainstream pop culture source, nonprofit organization, petition, personal website, government, or other. . . . Significance was measured through chi square and p values and strong adjusted residual scores, or the difference between expected and observed counts that demonstrates actual effects of this relationship. (Kenix 2009, 798)

Although the quantitative coding and statistical analysis do not fit within the framework of qualitative methods described here and elsewhere (e.g., Lindloff and Taylor 2010), such methods can help to identify crucial texts that can be examined later through qualitative content analysis; such was the case in Kenix's research. The process of coding and statistical analysis enabled her to determine which blogs had the most traffic and were frequently accessed and used by activists and audiences. As in the case of the other research examples, Kenix was able to effectively select alternative media texts that held relevance within activist communities. With these findings, she was able to move forward with a qualitative content analysis of the relevant texts.

After selecting alternative media texts for qualitative content analysis, the researcher must use a systematic process. This can be accomplished through deductive category analysis or inductive category development. The examples of the research projects conducted by myself (and in collaboration with Berg) constitute a qualitative content analysis from the deductive approach, while elements of Kenix's research projects are examples of the inductive approach. In

my research project and collaboration, categories were first developed from preexisting theories; close reading of the texts allowed for the categorization of the content. In the case of the project focused on the construction of corporate power, theories of power were used as categories that could be sought out throughout the alternative media texts. The concept of traditional power was developed from theories about physical resources used as power that had been noted in previous communication research (e.g., Fairhurst and Sarr 1996; Pfeffer 1992), while the notion of hegemonic power emerged from the writings of scholars interested in ideology and hegemony (e.g., Deetz 1992; Gramsci 1971; Mumby 1997). After I had decided on these categories, I conducted a reading of eighty-seven articles from a variety of alternative media sources, searching for references to corporations and corporate power. For every instance I encountered, I examined the ways in which corporations and power were discussed within those texts; if the language used to describe corporate power adhered to one category, noted it as such. This enabled me to find patterns in the descriptions about power throughout different alternative media used within different activist organizations. Similarly, my collaborative research with Berg relied on research concerning right-wing organizations and activists to build a framework for reading through different alternative media texts frequently used by Tea Party activists; previous research often noted that right-wing groups are often guided by a conspiratorial worldview, in which people are either with the activists or against them (e.g., Atton 2002; Downing 2001; Stewart 2002). As we read through over nine hundred articles, we looked at the way in which this conspiratorial worldview was developed through language choices about heroes and villains. From our analysis, we were able to show a thematic trend about "purity" that helped to reinforce the conspiratorial worldview. In each of these cases, we used theories to develop categories and then applied those categories to the texts under investigation; when we came across an example in the texts, we determined whether it fit into one of those categories.

Kenix's (2012) research constitutes the approach of inductive category development. In this case, the researcher engaged in a close reading of the text in order to uncover narrative components or themes embedded in the content; Kenix developed categories as she conducted her analysis. In her examination of blogs developed by Marxist organizations, Kenix briefly explains her approach to the qualitative content analysis of the texts: "This inductive approach began with a loose, preconceived idea of the discursive elements that may exist in content and then slowly proceeded in an attempt to reveal narratives utilized that may not have been considered" (84). In this inductive approach, the researcher first developed criteria for selecting examples; these criteria were based on characteristics of alternative media that had emerged

from past research. Specifically, Kenix searched for examples in the content based on the following criteria: "Expansive analysis (Duncombe 1997); independent reporting (Atton 2002); unique stories not covered elsewhere (Makagon 2000); two-way patterns of communication between writer and reader (Rodrique 2001); engaged and open discourse (Ostertag 2007); personalized reporting (Atton and Wickenden 2005); and encouragement of social participation (Tracy 2007)" (87). As Kenix read through the content, she identified examples of each of these criteria and then looked for stories or themes within them. Narrative components or themes that emerged in the content were sorted using the constant comparative method; categories slowly developed and were refined through this ongoing process. Eventually, Kenix developed categories, as well as patterns associated with those categories; such patterns demonstrated interdependencies between different categories within the content.

   In contrast, Singer's research did not systematically demonstrate that the text under investigation was relevant to a population of activists. Instead, it was important that he first demonstrate that the text was both broadly relevant within contemporary society and more narrowly relevant to a particular social movement (see chapter 6). According to Singer (2011, 136):

> Upon *SSM*'s theater release, it drew over $11.5 million dollars in ticket sales, earning a slot among the top ten most successful documentaries of the last 30 years. This feat is especially remarkable when considering that most documentaries ranking ahead of it played a nearly 2,000 more theater venues. In addition to being nominated for an Oscar, *SSM* earned awards from the Sundance Film Festival, the Edinburgh International Film Festival, the Writer's Guild of America, among other organizations. Politically, *SSM* and its companion book *Don't Eat This Book: Fast Food and the Supersizing of America* contributed to the visibility of an emerging anti-corporate food movement.

In this way, Singer was able to demonstrate the importance of the text to activist organizations and communities and how it held the constitutive power to shape audiences and publics; the context and information that he provided reveal that the film was worthy of rhetorical analysis. To conduct his analysis, he then moved forward by finding those elements that adhered to Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque in the film; grotesque images and representations became the units of analysis that he pulled out of the film and examined in depth. Those units of analysis were the images and representations of Spurlock's body as he spent weeks eating only McDonald's food. Essentially, Singer moved through the text examining these units of analysis in order to discover how they related to one another, as well as the overarching topic of the film

> **Recap 7-3. Content-oriented Approach to the Study
> of Alternative Media**
>
> - Provides insight into themes or characteristics of alternative media content.
> - Uses textual analysis to examine content:
>   - Qualitative content analysis reveals what is within the content.
>   - Rhetorical criticism demonstrates how people should understand
>   alternative media texts within particular contexts.

(e.g., corporations and food production). This gave rise to the concept of self-subjugation, in which Spurlock gave up control of his body to the corporation so that he could demonstrate an alternative view of that corporation.

SUMMARY

This chapter conceptualizes alternative media as a research site by discussing the different levels of such media and different approaches to studying those levels. Essentially, alternative media, like all media described by Pan and McLeod (1991), exist as multiple levels of production, audiences, content, and feedback. Researchers seeking to understand alternative media can focus on a single level, or they may attempt to examine multiple levels using qualitative methods. In the past, the study of production typically involved either interviews or focus groups with key producers of alternative media, or ethnographic work alongside alternative media producers. Earlier research concerning audiences commonly used interviews or focus groups with activists who regularly read and use alternative media; such research typically explored either the interpretive strategies of the audiences or the role of the alternative media in their resistance and protest. Researchers interested in content of alternative media have typically relied on qualitative content analysis, but rhetorical criticism has also proved to be an important tool in such endeavors. The study of feedback has typically emerged in examinations of one or more of the other levels. For instance, I asked key producers of alternative media about the role of feedback with audiences in their production of content (Atkinson 2008). Along a similar vein, when conducting interviews concerning the formation of communicative resistance (Atkinson, 2010) I asked activists about feedback that they might have provided to producers. Pickard's (2006b) exploration of the Indymedia network relied heavily on participant observation and was supplemented by an analysis of materials circulated through various IMC listservs; much of the material on the listservs was comprised of audience feedback to IMC.

The fact that this research site is constructed from four intertwined levels makes it particularly complex. For this reason, researchers typically engage in

several studies at one time, focusing on multiple levels of the media and using numerous qualitative methods, and which is why I focused on Pickard's (2006a; 2006b) and my own (Atkinson 2005; 2008; 2010) research. In each case, the researcher engaged in one large-scale study of multiple levels associated with alternative media; the findings were so expansive that publication in a single article or forum was prohibitive. Ultimately, good qualitative research concerning alternative media spans these multiple levels and addresses them through multiple qualitative methods.