Book Reviews

Coyer, Kate; Dowmunt, Tony; and, Fountain, Alan, *The Alternative Media Handbook*, 2007, London, Routledge, ISBN 978-0-415-35965-8.

Bailey, Olga Guedes; Cammaerts, Bart; and, Carpentier, Nico, *Understanding Alternative Media*, 2008, Maidenhead, McGraw Hill/OUP,
ISBN 978-0-335-22210-0.

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The term 'alternative media' covers a tremendous range of activities and technologies. Sometimes referred to as community, or participatory media, it is also a somewhat flexible phrase, having a variety of meanings, depending upon the geographical and socio-economic context within which it is employed. There are however perhaps a couple of constants which help pin down a reasonably generic definition. For example, it is possible to claim that alternative media are inherently produced by those on the fringe, socially, culturally or politically. In addition, alternative media are perhaps also usefully defined by taking into account the processes which they employ and the outputs which they achieve as a result.

It is this latter starting point which underpins the approach taken in *'The Alternative Media Handbook'*, a work that is very much concerned with the delivery of alternative media outputs and, which, in particular, explores the processes by which these are delivered. The book examines a variety of platforms used by alternative media practitioners including radio, video, print, podcasting and blogging. It also includes sections on issues such as fundraising and pitching for a project. That said, this handbook is a great deal more than a simple 'how to' manual, although this is something it achieves very well. However, beyond an exploration of how alternative media are delivered, a further central aspect of its content is an examination of why such alternatives are required and what they can achieve.

Drawing on the expertise of a wide range of alternative media practitioners and academics, this book, provides a brief history of various alternative media platforms, before going on to place these in an international context through the use of a wide range of case studies, drawn from around the world. Some chapters explore particular applications of alternative media, such as student media and media activism, whilst others examine techniques such as 'Culture Jamming', or issues such as distribution opportunities and access to audiences. These are then followed up with practical information about specific production tools and techniques. Importantly, this book also attempts to contextualise alternative media's relationships with the mainstream, one chapter 'Mainstream or Alternative Media' addresses this specifically, particularly in relation to how individuals and organisations might use either or both to help deliver their particular objectives:

> The question of whether to try to use or influence mainstream media or to create forms of media under their own control or perhaps a mixture of both is a fundamental one for each organisation in the development of its media strategy. (Coyer et al., 2007:141).

All in all, this wide-ranging approach gives the reader a broad grounding; certainly enough for them to get their hands dirty by becoming involved themselves, should they so wish.

A common failing of 'how to' guides is that they can easily end up being very culture-specific, focusing, or example, almost exclusively on European or US perceptions and approaches. Perhaps because of the varied background of its contributors, *'The Alternative Media Handbook'* makes a virtue out of avoiding this particular elephant trap, carefully including a very diverse range of examples, such that it achieves wide global relevance. The chapter entitled 'Media Activism' for example provides an international overview, which deals not just with the current situation, but also puts this in an historical perspective by looking back to precursor developments, such as that of the NWICO (New World Information and Communications Order) of the 1970s.

As a researcher into radio, I am always inevitably drawn to examples which examine that particular medium, in this case specifically dealt with in some detail by chapter eight: 'Access to Broadcasting' which also includes contributions exploring TV and video. In this chapter, Kate Coyer examines community radio in the United Kingdom, touching briefly on the issue of definition, before looking at three stations in particular, Sound Radio in Hackney, Resonance FM in Central London, and Desi Radio in Southall. Although these examples have obviously been carefully chosen to cover a diverse range of community services, multi-ethnic, mono-ethnic and special interest, the inclusion of an example service with a specific geographical focus might have been a useful addition.

That said, following the examination of community radio in the UK, the next part of the chapter moves on to explaining the reasoning behind the founding of such a geographic-based community station in Tanzania. In 'Community Radio: Milango for Lives', Charlotte Hill O'Neal provides an example of the use of community radio in Africa. 'Milango', which means 'doors' in the Kiswahili language of East Africa, was the term applied by a member of the target community in relation to what UAACR (United African Alliance Community Radio) could achieve. Based in the heart of the WaMeru homeland outside Arusha, Tanzania, UAACR was intended to "serve as a door opener" (Coyer et al., 2007:153) at the heart of a community project which also included Internet provision, computer training and language courses.

As a reader with an academic background in international development studies, it was particularly satisfying to find, not only the above example of community radio being used as a tool for development, but also a complete chapter dedicated to alternative media in development. Rarely is media understood as a key development tool. Instead, in the development field, there is often a tendency to see media as something of a peripheral topic. With some laudable exceptions, in general, media projects tend either to be given somewhat derisory attention or, worse still, are seen as 'flavour of the month' when some ill-informed funder comes up with yet another hare-brained scheme to deliver development through the use of complex and inappropriate technologies!

The Alternative Media Handbook does an excellent job of setting out the potential of using alternative media approaches in a developmental context. In spite of the difficulties referred to above, used properly, alternative media can often be inherently more appropriate and effective at delivering development objectives than attempts at to co-opting more mainstream media might be. As the book makes clear, alternative media are typically delivered on a minimal budget which, despite of itself often causing problems, does at least mean that there is a potential to achieve remarkable cost-effectiveness, for example through the effective use of volunteers.

A further reason for such efficiently is that alternative media outlets are often willing to make use of low-budget technologies to aid their delivery. Many practical implementations of such technologies are described in this book, in a chapter entitled 'DIY Media-Making Resources', a chapter which also covers organisational issues and matters such as training. The chapter is split up into a number of sections, each of which deals with a particular platform including radio, video, press, or Internet based techniques such as web-site publishing and blogging. This chapter is followed by an equally useful one dealing with funding and finance which, as well as giving practical leads about how to track down financial support, also provides guidance as to how best to develop and implement approaches to securing required funding.

If you're looking for a comprehensive and 'hands on' guide to the practice of alternative media, this book is an excellent place to start. However, if what's wanted is a book which concentrates primarily on the theory underpinning alternative media, then it's probably better to search elsewhere, which is where the Open University's *'Understanding Alternative Media'* comes in. This publication, part of the 'Issues in Cultural and Media Studies' series, takes, by comparison with *The Alternative Media Handbook*, a somewhat more overtly theoretically-based approach to the subject. This does not mean that alternative media practice is ignored, as this title also takes a global approach, providing a diverse range of case studies as a useful to compliment the rest of its content.

Understanding Alternative Media (which in some places seems to use the terms 'alternative' and 'community' interchangeably) argues strongly that existing definitions of alternative media are in need of revision suggesting that "the existing genealogy of alternative media relies on an unsustainable set of distinctions such as that between non-commercial and commercial or radical and non-radical…". (Bailey et al. 2008:xii). Its first chapter, 'Four Approaches to Alternative Media' sets out differing definitions of alternative media and places each in a theoretical context.

The four theoretical approaches explored include two which take an essentialist view, based on ideas of an autonomous identity for alternative media. The first of these conceives it as serving a particular community, whilst the second considers it as part of wider civil society. The other two approaches explored are both relationalist, that is, they consider the identity of alternative media in relation to other identities. Here, alternative media is defined either against the mainstream, or again as part of civil society. The fourth approach is, in many respects the most complex, being described as rhizomatic, focusing on three aspects of alternative media: "their role at the crossroads of civil society, their elusiveness, and their interconnections and linkages with market and state"(Bailey et al. 2008:27). Perhaps not surprisingly, the authors conclude that none of the four approaches examined

> can be considered as giving a sufficient overview when applied independently, as we postulate that the only way to capture the diversity that characterises community media is [via] the simultaneous application of these approaches. (Bailey et al. 2008:30).

The level of detail in which the various approaches are described and explored is considerable. This detailed approach is also maintained throughout the rest of the book, which also makes prudent use of tables and other diagrams for clarification of particular points. As with *The Alternative Media Handbook*, a further strength of this book lies in its use of examples. Once again, I found myself jumping straight

to radio-specific examples, in this case examined in chapter three: 'Community Approaches in Western Radio Policies'. This chapter includes brief overviews of the development of community radio policies in the USA, the UK and Belgium. Whilst, at least in the case of the UK example, there are some regrettable minor factual errors (regarding the demise of offshore 'pirate' broadcasters) and important omissions (legal temporary community broadcasting since the 1980s), within the space available, these examples do provide a useful insight into the varying approaches taken by different jurisdictions over the years.

The range of topics covered in the rest of *Understanding Alternative Media* is considerable. The various theoretical approaches explored in chapter one are contextualised in chapter two, through an in-depth analysis of the Brazilian film, 'Radio Favela'. Following the chapter on western radio policies, referred to above, chapter four takes a more global perspective, examining 'Diasporas and Alternative Media Practices'. Chapters five and six are concerned with blogging during the second Iraq war and ethnic religious groups in alternative media respectively, whilst chapters seven and eight both address linking alternative media to civil society ('Online Participation and the Public Sphere: Civil Society Mailing Lists and Forums', and 'The Brazilian Landless Rural Workers' Movement: Identity, Action, and Communication'.) The final two chapters of the book (nine and ten) are entitled 'Translocalisation, Glocalisation and the Internet: The Radioswap Project', and 'Jaming the Political: Reverse-Engineering , Hacking the Dominant Codes'.

As can be seen from the above chapter headings, *Understanding Alternative Media* tries hard to cover all the bases, not limiting itself to traditional media and carefully contextualising complex theory through a diverse range of examples. Certainly, this is not a book aimed at undergraduates, although some of its contents, in particular some of the practical examples, might be of interest for some such students, especially those coming towards the end of their degree. This book examines alternative media in both breadth and depth and, as a result (for this reader at least!), was, in places, sometimes a little impenetrable at first reading. However it is undoubtedly a book which rewards perseverance and one which certainly contains a great deal to think about.

Whilst both the publications under review here are undoubtedly useful contributions to the study of alternative media, despite some overlaps they are also, in part, very different, particularly in terms of their respective approaches towards prioritising either theory or practice. Although both titles provide a range of interesting case studies, *The Alternative Media Handbook* takes, as its title suggests, a more practical approach, making it undoubtedly the more easy to read and accessible of the two books. By comparison, *Understanding Alternative Media* is the book to opt for instead if the potential reader is more concerned with exploring in more detail the theories which underpin alterative media.

Readers relatively new to the topic would do well to start with *The Alternative Media Handbook*, and then move on to *Understanding Alternative Media* should they so desire. These two books, each admirably achieve their own objectives, but the differences between them are such that in many respects they are also complimentary. Specialists in the field of alternative media should certainly have both on their book shelves, where they are each unlikely to gather dust.