

Alternative Press
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Alternative press, at its best, is a source of accurate, well-documented, counter-hegemonic, investigative reporting and analysis which can advance social movements and serve as the basis for effective social and environmental justice activism. The term, alternative press, is most often used to refer to non-corporate social and environmental justice print and, more recently, internet media. Other times it refers to all sources of alternative media, including books, radio, video, film, and television. While blogs may also serve as a source of independent information, this discussion will focus on alternative newspapers, magazines, journals, newsletters, and website media primarily in the United States.

Accurate information and analysis are essential for ordinary people who care about and want to work toward creating a better world. Democratic decision-making can be based on nothing less. Self-serving elites, governments, and business interests have long been aware that the easiest way to control people is to restrict access to information and to shape public perspectives of reality in ways which increase power and profits for the rich and powerful. Thus, various methods of censorship and propaganda have been used separately and in combination to misinform and/or disinform (lie to) people. Yet, despite such manipulation, ordinary people have often sought or created alternative ways of investigating, analyzing, and sharing information crucial for the well-being of themselves, others, and the earth. Thus, it is not surprising that the first alternative press in the United States emerged from Black, Native American, women's, and working class movements.

In order to understand why independent media sources are viewed as a powerful alternative, it is necessary to examine significant characteristics of mainstream corporate-owned media. Media analysts Herbert Schiller, Benjamin Bagdikian, and Carl Jensen (founder of Project Censored) led scholars of journalism in critiquing and documenting the methods and consequences of corporate media ownership and concentration. They exposed the inherent conflict of interest between maximizing profits and informing the public. Early in the 20th century, media corporations discovered they could make more money by selling advertisements (actually selling affluent audiences to advertisers) than selling the most papers (circulation). With this change, Bagdikian documented how media businesses became uninterested in groups that had little or no disposable income.

As media companies grew larger, they found it beneficial to interlock their boards of directors with other large manufacturing corporations, thus consolidating the interests of wealthy elites. Through purchases and mergers, the mass media became concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer corporations, whose primary interest was and is in maximizing profits, not informing the public. These corporations, who also dominate industries like weapons and fossil fuels, understand that if the public were fully informed about corporate and government activities, more than a few of which are unethical and even criminal, it would be difficult or impossible to continue them. Contrary to the myths of objectivity and fairness in reporting, this financial conflict of interest creates conditions for censorship, manipulation, propaganda, and disinformation to dominate mainstream media outlets. Corporate media and public relations firms have developed methods of creatively packaging selective information designed to gain public support for policies and practices beneficial to corporations and government collaborators and detrimental to the public interest. Herman and Chomsky aptly labeled this shaping of public opinion "manufacturing consent."

Thus, alternative press is one of the contemporary terms describing communication media that provide information and analysis not normally available through mainstream corporate-owned media. Also known as independent media, meaning independent *from* corporate ownership and control of elites, no consensus has emerged on a set of criteria for alternative press, although new media organizers are seeking to transform thinking, methods, and effectiveness of the alternative press as this is being written. In spite of the contested nature of this field, this essay will attempt to describe some core characteristics with the understanding that media that consider themselves alternative may not exhibit all of them.

While non-corporate media may span the political spectrum from left to right, the term “alternative press” usually applies to those outlets that might variously be described as critical, progressive, leftist, underground, dissident, environmental, activist, oppositional, radical, counter-hegemonic, or socially responsible. If “alternative press” is typed into a search engine, a majority of sites that emerge reveal these types of perspectives. Some corporate or right-wing media sources may try to present themselves as alternative to mainstream, but if they are closely examined, important aspects of alternative press will be missing.

Some characteristics most likely to be associated with alternative press are: 1) committing to a mission that fosters peace, social justice, and/or ecological sustainability in some way; 2) giving voice to marginalized populations; 3) being a non-profit organization or profitability not being a priority; 4) critiquing and challenging mis/disinformation; 5) investigating, documenting, and gathering information from many sources; 6) printing socially responsible advertisements or no advertisements; 7) encouraging action; 8) being indexed in alternative reference lists; and 9) aspiring to become democratic, non-hierarchical organizations. Although a particular medium may not have all of these characteristics or criteria, this list might help activists, or people aspiring to become more active, distinguish the social justice alternative press from other sources of information. There are, however, exceptions to some of these characteristics among alternative media sources.

Although they may share some values and characteristics, the alternative press is not monolithic. They offer great variation of information, evidence, analysis, opinion, and proposed solutions. Each publication, e-newsletter, or website has its own interests, approach, theoretical foundation, and activism. There may be vehement disagreement on many facets of an issue among and even within alternative press publications. Because of the great diversity available, readers of alternative press can cross-check evidence and sources, and compare analytical frameworks.

Characteristics of Alternative Press

***Alternative press has a mission of social justice, peace, and/or ecological sustainability.**

Alternative media usually do not claim to be objective. They may even point out that objectivity is not possible since there are values in every aspect of selecting and presenting information. Thus, each alternative media organization has a mission that expresses both its values and focus. Some alternative press organizations have a broad mission and others a more specific focus. More often than not, alternative press publications make their value positions directly available to their readers. If the mission is not printed in their publication, it is likely to be available on their website. For example, the broad mission of *The New Internationalist*, a well-researched British based publication, claims that it “exists to report on the issues of world poverty and inequality; to focus attention on the unjust relationship between the powerful and powerless

worldwide; to debate and campaign for the radical changes necessary to meet the basic needs of all; and to bring to life the people, the ideas and the action in the fight for global justice.”

In contrast, *Rethinking Schools* has a specific institutional focus to “reform of elementary and secondary public schools, with an emphasis on urban schools and issues of equity and social justice. We stress a grassroots perspective combining theory and practice and linking classroom issues to broader policy concerns. We are an activist publication and encourage teachers, parents, and students to become involved in building quality public schools for all children.”

***Alternative press gives voice to populations not heard and views not seen in corporate media.** The voices and perspectives of indigenous peoples (e.g. *Cultural Survival Quarterly: World Report on the Rights, Voices and Visions of Indigenous Peoples*), poor and non-rich people (*Dollars and Sense*), communities of color (e.g. *Colorlines*), women (e.g. *Off Our Backs*), people with disabilities (e.g. *Ragged Edge*), queer people (e.g. *The Gay and Lesbian Review*), colonized peoples in other countries (e.g. *NACLA*), animals (e.g. *Animal Issues*), grassroots and activist organizations (e.g. *Earthfirst! Journal*) all find expression in alternative press. People marginalized within government such as the Black Caucus and the few elected officials committed to peace, earth, and justice within the Congress are provided a forum (e.g. *In These Times*), as are whistleblowers who expose government or corporate wrongdoing (e.g. *Bridging the GAP* by the Government Accountability Project). The voices of these groups critique the self-serving policies, practices, and propaganda of dominant and privileged groups, reveal the consequences, and propose creative actions and solutions to social, environmental, and global problems.

***Alternative press organizations are either non-profit organizations or their mission far exceeds profits as their primary objective.** Most alternative media organizations have non-profit status. With a few exceptions, most do not seek, nor do they receive, large amounts of funding from advertisers. Their funding, which is often limited, is usually derived from subscriptions, from donations, from social or environmental justice organizations, foundations, or institutes that support a particular cause, or some combination of the above.

Some alternative media sources are an outgrowth of a particular organization that already has non-profit status (e.g. *Amnesty International*, *Public Citizen*, *Sierra*). For others, readers can usually locate the mission and/or non-profit status of a publication by looking at the masthead page that provides information about the publication or the webpage of the media organization. *Ode* states, “We are an independent international journal, without strings to the world of commerce and power.” On the other hand, *Mother Jones*, “an independent nonprofit whose roots lie in a commitment to social justice implemented through first rate investigative reporting” prints their statement on their website instead of their magazine (www.motherjones.com).

If there is no statement about non-profit status, then it is likely that the publication has a for-profit status. This legal status, however, does not necessarily mean they are actually making a profit. Some important exceptions to the non-profit status characteristic are *The Nation* and *Utne Reader* that are profit-based. *The Nation*, one of the longest continuous alternative press publications in the United States beginning in 1865, is technically a “for profit” publication. However, they have actually lost money in all but 4 or 5 years, where they broke even or made a small profit.

Utne Reader, started in 1883 and with a current circulation of 225,000, is another “for profit” publication careful not to compromise its values for money. Their mission as “an independent media company” emphasizes the priority of initiating change through “personal evolution...(and) the essential information, people, and trends that inspire our audience to take action to make the world kinder and greener.” For-profit alternative press publications are challenged to cover all their costs

through subscriptions and advertising since they receive little to no financial support from other sources. The strong value-based missions of these publications, their employees, and their constituencies maintain their advocacy for peace, social justice, environmental concerns, and oppressed or persecuted groups.

It is important to differentiate these strong value-based independent publications from city entertainment weeklies that may call themselves alternative press and have some content which challenges corporate and government elites but which are profit-based publications that survive on non-restricted advertising.

***Alternative press is counter-hegemonic, critiquing and challenging corporate, government, and/or dominant group mis/disinformation:** Another role of alternative press is to check the accuracy and credibility of evidence, and rebut false claims and fake news made through corporate, public relations, and dominant group media outlets. Although all alternative press perform this role on their particular topics of interest, some alternative media focus their critique on the corporate media directly. Some examples are *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR)*, *Project Censored*, *Center for Media and Democracy*, and *Media Matters in America*.

One organization, Project Censored, demonstrates the significance of this role by exposing the top twenty-five stories censored by the mainstream media every year (www.projectcensored.org). Almost all of these stories are revealed by alternative press publications. Since they do not have to ingratiate themselves to the powerful or the corporations in order to get copy or be published, alternative presses are free to pursue stories that corporate editors eschew for fear of offending their parent companies or advertisers.

***Alternative presses provide evidence and documentation from many places, not just official sources from government and corporations.** Because alternative press challenges the myths, misinformation, and false realities generated by the corporate media, many alternative press publications go to special lengths to provide evidence, documentation, and sources in their articles. In contrast to corporate media that continue to reduce the size of the news staff while passing on the views and claims of elites, politicians, or corporate public relations (PR) releases as “news,” alternative presses seek out and publish investigative reports, independent journalists, and research conducted by human rights, peace, animal rights, or environmental advocacy organizations. Alternative publications often cite their sources so readers can investigate the accuracy of the information for themselves.

Commondreams.org is a good example of an alternative press website that posts breaking news and analysis daily from independent journalists and alternative newswires, highlights key reports from activist organizations, draws the best reporting and analytical pieces from corporate sources, and links to international articles of import. In some cases, investigative journalists are hired or sponsored by alternative media. At times they provide reports at great personal risk in war zones or in places contaminated with hazardous substances, venturing into life-threatening situations to bring eyewitness accounts, pictures, and critical news. This material may then be located in a variety of places: in the sponsoring journal, on the reporter’s website, picked up by other alternative internet sites or published in alternative print publications.

***Alternative press either has no advertisements or accepts only socially responsible advertisements.** While some publications take no advertisements (*Worldwatch, Yes!*), and others use their publications to disseminate a catalogue of their own products (People for the Ethical

Treatment of Animals), many alternative press publications do accept some advertisements. Most commonly, they publish advertisements for other alternative press or books, for socially responsible investment funds, for activist organizations, and for educational programs. When products are advertised, they usually have some claim for health, environmental or social responsibility, like organic or fair trade products (beverages, food, clothing, furniture, personal care, homecare), recycled products, vegetarian or vegan products or restaurants, socially conscious internet, phone, or automobile companies, or art, music, and festivals. Since alternative press, “profit” or non-profit, do not have to worry about offending advertisers withholding millions of dollars in revenue, alternative press organizations have the freedom to investigate and critique dominant corporations, officeholders, and their policies and practices.

***Alternative press organizations encourage readers to engage with social movements and may provide suggestions and resources for activism.** In contrast to corporate media that tend to lull the public into passivity by a false sense of well-being, or alienation through fear-mongering, carefully documented alternative press publications tend to energize readers, encouraging them to take action for themselves, for others, and the environment. Alternative press organizations often try to publish specific actions, campaigns, conferences, or organizational websites where readers can influence policies or practices of governments or corporations. Actions may range from boycotts, to buying fair trade products, to screening documentaries, to writing letters to officials or editors, to marching in rallies or protests, to initiating creative new methods.

Alternative press websites facilitate grassroots organizing further by providing quick links to sign petitions or letters to Congress or others about a particular issue, even writing out key points readers can use if they wish. Some political web organizations like *Moveon.org* and *InternationalANSWER.org* (Act Now to Top War and End Racism) emerged out of specific activist agendas. While not claiming to be alternative press, they still serve the purpose of disseminating critical information using extensive email lists in order to stimulate mass actions.

Similarly, state and local activist organizations may disseminate information to their members or community through newsletters or newspapers. While these publications may not have large circulations, they serve a powerful role by announcing local events, encouraging local actions, and making connections between local and state events with national and international movements.

***Alternative press publications are often found in alternative indexes or through media analysis sources.** Many alternative presses and their publications can be found in alternative reference sources. Bibliographic and Web Tools for Alternative Publications lists such references as the Alternative Press Index, Alt-Press Watch, Alternative Internet Directory, Ethnic News Watch, Environmental Periodicals Bibliography, INK, the International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses, the Left Index, MediaChannel, NewPages, or Street Librarian: Independent & Non-corporate Media.

The Alternative Press Center (www.altpress.org), is the most comprehensive list of US alternative press on the internet. It still only accesses a portion of the publications available. Some alternative press with larger circulations or longevity of publication may also be listed in the mainstream indexes as well (e.g. Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature) but most are not. Alternative press organizations increasingly are collaborating (rather than competing) to support their collective goals and needs through groups like the Independent Press Association (US), Independent Media Center, or the Independent News Collective (UK).

***Alternative presses try to live the values they espouse, organizing themselves in more democratic, non-hierarchical ways.** This criterion may have the most variation in practice. In theory, however, since the alternative press is challenging injustice and seeking to give voice to underrepresented groups, decision-making, work assignments, and salaries should be socially just and established through democratic, cooperative processes and policies. As Michael Albert, one of the founders of *Z Magazine* contends, strong efforts should be made to reject and reduce hierarchies based on race, class, gender, or any other oppressive category. Still, if the mastheads, websites, the authors or editors of articles of alternative press publications are perused, it may reveal that some are not as inclusive as they might wish or claim to be.

Electronic Alternative Information Dissemination

Activist organizations – national, state, and local: Some organizations with limited staff and/or budgets, or who focus their energies on particular areas of activism, not information dissemination per se, may not publish extensive monthly or quarterly publications. Instead, they may communicate primarily through newsletters, e-newsletters, and their own websites (e.g. *Move-on.org*, *Rachel's Magazine*, *Organic Consumers*). These sources of alternative information and organized actions have quickly motivated millions of people to donate money, contact senators and representatives, and participate in local and national actions.

Alternative press websites like *commondreams*, *truthout*, *altnet*, *indymedia*, *tompaine*, and *zmag* are the most significant development in the history of alternative press reaching millions of readers per month as opposed to tens of thousands. They have dramatically increased access to alternative press, bringing censored information to the public and exposing propaganda as it happens. The immediacy and flexibility of the internet allows these sites to draw news, opinions, announcements, studies, and reports quickly from sources that ordinary people would previously be unlikely to encounter. In some cases print circulation has actually decreased with the advent of an extensive website, but the immediacy increases the knowledge and power of busy readers who can take action quickly on issues of concern instead of having to wait to get their publication in the mail.

To support participatory democracy, alternative internet media organizations provide links to the websites of key grassroots non-profits and advocacy organizations which often encourage readers toward a variety of actions or provide action links on their sites. Further, many provide opportunities to directly contact state and federal senators and representatives. Because these information outlets are making it much more difficult for elites to control the opinions and actions of the populace, plans and policies to severely curtail and/or inhibit access are being promulgated. Given the increased consciousness of the public through these websites, it remains to be seen if they will be successful.

The Importance of Open and Fair Internet to the Alternative Press

Maintaining an internet environment that is free from corporate, government, or military domination of content and access will be an ongoing struggle. Despite initial and continued campaigns to maintain diversity and democracy in print, radio, and television media, they all were eventually severely compromised by corporate ownership, censorship, and propaganda with alternative press relegated to non-threatening roles on the fringe. Accessed only by readers, listeners, and viewers who knew mainstream media outlets disseminated corporate biases, they had

to go to some trouble to locate and use alternative, accurate, well-documented information for the public interest.

The internet dramatically changed this scenario by making alternative information and viewpoints quickly and easily available to anyone who had access to a computer. Since computers are expensive and differentially available in public schools, libraries, and the like, this still leaves a substantial component of the U.S. and global population without access. Even with this restriction, the popularity of independent information from alternative media, non-profit organizations, and blogs has spread through other channels to produce a public sea change on many key policies. However, this open and fair exchange of information on the internet is threatened by two sources: corporations and the Pentagon.

Corporate Domination or Internet Neutrality: Freepress.net defines internet neutrality as meaning “all online activity must be treated equally, and companies like AT&T must allow Internet users to view the smallest blog just as easily as the largest corporate Web site.” In what is likely to be just one of many attempts to control and profit from the internet, giant telecommunications corporations who own the telephone and cable lines (Verison, Bell South, Comcast, AT&T, Time Warner) are lobbying for legislation to operate the internet as their own private service free from government oversight. To confuse the public, they have set up phony front groups like “Hands Off the Internet” to disseminate propaganda touting the “benefits” of privatization. They want to be able to decide for the public, like they do for cable TV, what sites will be available for what prices, the speed of the sites, and even be able to block sites altogether. Examples of blocking content for purposes of censorship have already occurred. Content providers and individuals would have to pay for most or all online activities, with preference given to the telecom’s own services and to content providers who can pay the most for high visibility and speedy access – primarily other corporations. Under these conditions, Chester suggests that “it is possible that all forms of civic and noncommercial online programming would be pushed to the end of a commercial digital queue.”

Further, phone and cable companies have new technologies that can create a detailed profile of each individual internet user for purposes of tracking, marketing, metering, and billing. In addition to further corporate targeting, such technologies may inhibit internet users from accessing alternative press internet sites since the Patriot Act allows surveillance of private citizens without one’s knowledge. Revelations of illegal government surveillance and harassment continue to emerge. Public accessibility, already limited to people who can gain access to computers, could be further curtailed.

Information Democracy or Propaganda Warfare: In an equally disturbing development, the British Broadcasting Corporation has revealed a Pentagon plan, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, to use the internet for military propaganda, psychological operations, and electronic warfare to ‘provide maximum control of the entire electromagnetic spectrum.’ Using terms like “fight the net,” the Information Operations Roadmap, a Pentagon document written in 2003, lays out strategies to control, plant, or disrupt information, even to destroy communications systems. Among the many questions are, who would be defined as the “enemy,” and what are their plans for the US and global publics.

While even BBC raised significant concerns about the document, Whitney, in an Alternative Press Review article, points out that the military is worried about the internet because the mainstream media is “already a fully-integrated part of the corporate-system providing a 24 hour per day streaming of business-friendly news...(and) as a de-facto franchise of the Pentagon, a reliable

and sophisticated propagandist for Washington's war of aggression and political subterfuge." As changes in public sentiment about the Iraq war have made clear, it has proven impossible to manufacture consent among an informed and activist public educated by alternative internet media.

In conclusion, there is no single requirement for social movements more important than accurate well-documented information upon which people can take action. Alternative press, now available to millions of people 24 hours a day through the internet, must be preserved in order to provide the foundation for such democratic citizenship and activism.

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See also: Free speech activism, Alternative bookstores, Guerilla Television, virtual sit-ins, political satire, Jacobo Timmerman, *Dissent*, FAIR, Electronic Privacy Movement, Adbusters, Culture Jammers, Indymedia, MoveOn.org, Talk Radio, Cyber Rights, Blogging, digital activism, Yo Mango, Mumia Abu Jamal, media activism, civil society, Amy Goodman, Neil Postman, H.L. Mencken, Gary Webb, Media Literacy, Media reform movement, Znet, Zines.

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