

# Feminist Media as Alternative Media?

## Theorising Feminist Media from the Perspective of Alternative Media Studies

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### Introduction: Feminist movements and feminist media

Forms of media – in the broadest sense of this term – are an invaluable part in furthering the determinate goals and specific demands of a given political movement. This might seem a harmless enough contention; for what would a political movement be without any means of dissemination and circulating its ideas to a wider political constituency? If winning support and forging alliances are necessary prerequisites for a movement to gain what is colloquially regarded as “critical mass”, then with what means is political momentum (which a movement thrives off) possible other than through the effective (meaning the *affective*) transmissibility of ideas between a movement and what is outside of that movement? At its most basic level, the delivery of a political message between the sender and recipient entails a “medium” that shuttles between addresser and addressee. Consider the array of possible media forms that function as a transmitter of political content: more often than not the forms of delivery are associated with strictly textual output (newspapers, bulletins, zines, flyers, leaflets, etc.). This, however, is not exclusively the case. The mode of delivery could just as well be “performative”, including street theatre or musical performance, graffiti or other art forms. Today, with the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the platforms open for the transmission and dissemination of political agendas have multiplied greatly (for example, e-zines, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, etc.), providing the possibility for more immediate and responsive media output, which are in a synergistic relation with a movement that changes in accordance with the changing times and terrains of its struggles.

This chapter takes as its starting point two related observations about feminist political struggles:<sup>1</sup> First, the history of women’s and feminist

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struggles have demonstrated time and again the central role that media production has played in the dissemination of political ideas, political mobilisation and the constitution of political identities. Second, this essential connection remains largely under-theorised.

## Historicising feminist media: From *cartes-de-visite* to newspapers to Twitter

Already since the latter half of the previous century, suffragist and anti-slavery activist Sojourner Truth (born Isabella Baumfree) sold photographic *cartes-de-visite* of herself as a way of disseminating her politics and supporting herself financially (Irvin Painter 1994: 482–488; Downing 2001: *vivii*). More generally, the suffrage movements in various countries were known to be avid producers of their own press, cartoons, postcards, and posters (cf. Israels Perry 1993; Di Cenzo 2003; Di Cenzo & Ryan 2007). This rich and multifaceted feminist publishing tradition was to continue well into the twenty-first century, and has over the years taken on multiple formats, genres, modes of expression and political agendas.

Publications such as the British *Votes for Women* and Swedish *Tidevarvet* both constitute notable examples of print media in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century – and feminist publication was to peak once again during the so-called “second wave of feminism” which in many countries prospered in the spirit of 1968, with titles such as the North American news journal *Off Our Backs* (since 1970) and the long-lived and influential UK feminist magazine *Spare Rib* (1972–1993). The 1980s witnessed the birth of significant media contributions: the internationalist UK feminist newspaper *Outwrite* (1982–1988) and the self-proclaimed first ever feminist radio station *RadiOrakel* (since 1982) in Norway. In the mid 1980s, the world’s first known unlicensed women’s radio, *Radio Pirate Women* had its inaugural broadcast in Ireland. The 1990s saw the emergence of Nicaraguan feminist quarterly *La Boletina* (since 1991; also available online since 2005) and the Iranian independent feminist journal *Zanan* (subsequently banned in 2008). The decade of the 1990s also witnessed what has often been referred to as the transnational “girl zine revolution” – young women becoming involved in feminist politics through the development of feminist zines (see for example Harris 2003; Zobl 2004a; 2004b; Schilt and Zobl 2008; Kearney 2006; Chidgey 2007). Today, feminist media continue to flourish. New titles of magazines (such as the Norwegian *FETT* and Swedish *FULL*, both since 2004) and broadcast media such as the Swedish community and online television programme *HallonTV* (2008–2009) and *an.schläge tv* – the sister project (since 2005) of the long-established Austrian feminist maga-

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zine with the same name appear alongside “new media” and hybrid genres such as the UK e-zine *The F-Word* (since 2001), such blogs as the Romanian *F.I.A.* (since 2005) and the extension of the queer feminist *FUL* magazine with a monthly podcast (Sweden since 2008).

Given this rich history of feminist media production, it is surprising that – despite the recently growing interest in the phenomenon – the terrain is still somewhat uncharted, both empirically and theoretically (cf. Riaño 1994; Steiner 1992; Byerly and Ross 2006). Specifically, this chapter shall attempt to rectify the theoretical inattention to the *constitutive* role that media production has for feminist and women’s movements more generally. To this end, my particular focus for this chapter will in the first instance be a trend in media research captured under the appellation “alternative media studies”. The purpose of this intervention is to examine the existing literature in this field and to offer an assessment of the tools that this literature makes available for the specific treatment of feminist media production.

With these broad intentions outlined, the structure of this intervention shall take the following form: I will first begin by addressing the strand of theorisation which emphasises alternative media mainly as oppositional, or counter-hegemonic, in their relationship to the state and the market. This strand of alternative media theory shall mainly be represented by media scholars John Downing and Chris Atton. Second, I will discuss a number of critiques that have been raised against these former approaches, and via these introduce alternative conceptualisations such as the notion of “citizens’ media” (Clemencia Rodriguez) and the more recent idea of “rhizomatic media” (Olga Bailey, Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier).

## **Defining alternative media: Between formal specificity and historical complexity**

Still suffering from being largely under-researched, the field of alternative media can be characterised by the continuous attempts made by researchers to find and refine suitable frameworks as a way of, first, complementing existing media theories which have proven insufficient at understanding the specificity of these media forms in opposition to dominant mass media, and, second, in a way that takes into account the vast complexity within this subset of media production. These overarching – and occasionally conflicting – aims often pose a dilemma in distinguishing “dominant” or “hegemonic” from “alternative” media, while at the same time avoiding the reductive and inflexible binary oppositions drawn between “mainstream” and “alternative”. The field is characterised by what I see as a somewhat problematic tension between formal specificity and historical complexity.

At its most anodyne, alternative media is defined as *any form of media which constitutes an alternative to, or positions itself in opposition to, widely available and consumed mass media products* (Waltz 2005: 2). A very general and formal definition, the inclusivity of it is only a strength for as long as it is used as an intuitive, “commonsensical”, umbrella term. Here, the problem

is that the terminology contributes very little to any sustained and rigorous study of these phenomena (cf. Comedia 1984: 95). Indeed, at this, the most basic definitional level, many have questioned the utility of the appellation “alternative”, claiming that its nebulous nature means that what counts as an instance of “alternative” media is easily abused by personal predilection and self-definition (see Abel 1997). John Downing – who is known to prefer the term “radical media” – has argued that “alternative media” is a term that is nearly oxymoronic: “Everything, at some point, is alternative to something else” (Downing 2001: ix).

The most commonly deployed solution within alternative media scholarship to the vagueness of the term has been to denounce vague definitions and conceive of “alternative media” not only as “alternative”, but more specifically as media positioned in opposition to dominant mass media – as *counter hegemonic*. This has the merit of excluding “apolitical” media forms such as niche special interest media such as sport club newsletters) (see Downing 2001: xx). More specific still, Michael Traber defines alternative media as media which aims to effectuate “change towards a more equitable social, cultural and economic whole in which the individual is not reduced to an object (of the media or the political powers) but is able to find fulfilment as a total human being” (Traber 1985: 3; also in Atton 2002: 16).<sup>2</sup>

The definitions so far surveyed all make the same assumption, namely that “alternative media” breaks free from the status quo, presenting alternative resources antagonistic toward “mainstream” and “official” channels. The work of James Hamilton is in this regard conspicuous in the attempt he makes to complexify the prevailing way that “alternative media” is understood. Notably, Hamilton sees congruence in the *ends* of media production, whether alternative or mainstream. Both tend to educate and mobilise a general public in the sense of a particular movement or political cause.

If seen simply as a technological process of manufacture, distribution and consumption, Hamilton argues, media/communication then simply names the *use* of media products. The resulting implications are that communication is functionally equivalent to any other consumerist practice and that it is an optional add-on to society – at best, a means of conveying ideas about more basic and important processes – rather than essential to it (Hamilton 2000: 361). Instead, he wishes to make a distinction between “media” and “communication”, defining the former as “physical techniques of amplifying and making durable the expressions of individuals, thereby making them available to many more people than would other-

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2 Within the category of alternative media Traber advances a further distinction between *advocacy media* and *grassroots media*. Alternative *advocacy media* is any media project and product embodying values other than the established ones and which in the process introduces “new” social actors (such as the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised etc), but is nevertheless produced “professionally”. *Grassroots media* is a more “thorough” version of alternative media, according to which the media is produced by the people whom it aims to represent. Professionals may (or may not) be involved in these publications, but if so, only as advisers to support non-professionals to produce their own independent media (Traber 1985: 3; *ibid.*, Atton).

wise be the case" (ibid.). The latter, he argues, is "related to and dependent on technical processes of reproduction, amplification and fixing (making durable)", but not equivalent to them. Instead, communication is described in terms of cultural processes, as the "creative making of a social order" (ibid.). Hamilton thus argues that alternative media must *enable* "alternative communication" that, in turn, facilitates "an articulation of a social order different from and often opposed to the dominant" (ibid. 362).

The work of Downing, more contextual and descriptive than Hamilton, offers instead an improved definition of "alternative media" which avoids both the risk of vacuous generality on the one hand and a specifiable purity as to what "alternative media" ought to be on the other, which rarely if ever exists in reality other than in the books of normative theorising. Thus, and in an attempt to offer a more workable terminology, Downing defines "alternative *radical* media" as any "media, generally small-scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to *hegemonic* policies, priorities, and perspectives" (2001: v, emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> Apart from this definition, which positions radical media (or, radical alternative media) as distinctive from the merely "alternative", Downing steers clear of any clear-cut definitions. Instead, he argues that:

There is no instantaneous alchemy, no uncontested sociochemical procedure, that will divine in a flash or with definite results truly radical media from the apparently radical or even the non-radical (Downing 2001: vii).

This is already a step further than Hamilton and other alternative media theorists. Instead of resorting to simple binaries, Downing argues that *context* and *consequences* should be the key to demarcating the radicality of a specific medium (Downing 2001: x). To give an example, Downing highlights the contextual importance of Truth's *cartes-de-visite* depicting her as a "lady", a respectable women of her times, most often sitting down with her knitting placed on her lap, and often dressed in glasses and with a book strategically placed on her side table (Downing: vi-vii; Irvin Painter 1994; Israel's Perry 1994). While, when measured by contemporary standards, this representation of femininity could hardly be considered revolutionary, in the context of the mid to late nineteenth century, it is to be read as a radical refusal to identify with her previous status of enslavement. This historical example, therefore, represents a potential rearticulation of black femininity.

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<sup>3</sup> In a related manner, Waltz has stressed the need for further terminologies to complement the notion of alternative media, using instead the overlapping (but not equivalent) distinction between "alternative" and "activist" media. The latter would, she argues, involve encouraging readers to "get actively involved in social change" (Waltz 2005: 3). Similarly to Downing's definition of radical media, activist media can include media promoting any ideological strand, ranging over the whole scale from "left of left" to far right extremism (ibid.). In addition to this, however, Waltz's concept of activist media can – when the additional label of "alternative" is left out – also include media which advocates views that support what would generally be understood as "mainstream" (such as voting) (ibid.).

Chris Atton, author of the book *Alternative Media* (2002), has celebrated Downing for his nuanced and theoretically eclectic approach of drawing together theories of counter-hegemony, counter-publics and resistance, but sees at the same time his approach as overemphasising the collective dimension of radical alternative media production, thereby constructing a theory suitable mainly for the study of the media production of social movements. By doing so, Atton argues that Downing ignores the fact that

hybridity and purity as problematics of alternative media are certainly accessible through an examination of new social movement media, but they can also be approached through media that accommodate themselves rather more cosily with mass media and mass consumption (Atton 2002: 21).

Atton (2002), therefore, proposes a theory of alternative media that is considerably more far reaching than those assessed thus far. Building and expanding upon the work of Downing (1984; 2001), Stephen Duncombe (1997) and Robert Dickinson (1997), Atton constructs a theory which includes not only the more politically radical variants (or the so-called “resistance media”), but one which includes also media forms such as zines, video, mail-art and creative writing, and “hybrid forms of electronic communication” – forms of media production which are not necessarily in themselves aiming at any radical social change. This theoretical perspective stresses “the transformatory potential of the media as reflexive instruments of communication practices in social networks” and focuses therefore on the *processual* and *relational* aspects of these media forms (Atton 2002: 7–8). Drawing on a wide range of discussions on alternative and radical media, Atton has constructed a “typology of alternative and radical media” (reproduced below):

1. Content – politically radical, socially/culturally radical; news values
2. Form – graphics, visual language; varieties of presentation and binding; aesthetics
3. Reprographic innovations/adaptations – use of mimeographs, IBM typesetting, offset litho, photocopiers
4. “Distributive use” (Atton 1999b) – alternative sites for distribution, clandestine/indivisible distribution networks, anti-copyright
5. Transformed social relations, roles and responsibilities – reader-writers, collective organisation, de-professionalisation of e.g. journalism, printing, publishing
6. Transformed communication processes – horizontal linkages, networks (Atton 2002: 27)

These six elements form the basis of Atton’s model, with each element representing a dimension of alternative media. The first three elements in this typology specify “products”; the last three specify processes of communication (i. e. distributing, writing, printing) (Atton 2002: 27).

Atton’s procedures allow, in principle, for a more refined study, sensitive to the inconsistencies of a given media project. Broken down into its composite dimensions, various aspects of a specific media form can be

judged specifically as to the extent to which its constituent dimensions break with established practices, modes of representation and organisational relations respectively. For example, there could be inter-dimensional discord: the same medium can be “radical” in terms of its distribution, but “conservative” with regards to political contents. There could also be intra-dimensional ambivalences, so that *within* each dimension there are complexities to take into account that preclude easy categorisation: if, for example, a media form only allowed professionals to write, but had a collective process of decision making (2003: 28). One also needs to weigh up both historical and geographical contingencies, and appreciate that the absence of radicality (at least according to the properties listed in the typology) need not necessarily prevent its overall radical/revolutionary potential. For a certain dimension might not be available for radicalisation in certain cultural and historical contexts.

Attention to all this would enable an analysis of the “mixed radicalisation” of alternative media – looking at hybridity rather than a set of characteristics to determine “purity” of these publications (2003: 29). Atton’s model thus tries to capture the *contents* of these media, as well as their *sociocultural contexts* and *modes of organisation*. In this manner, he wishes to provide a definition which includes not only their critical reactions against cultural stereotypes circulating in the mainstream, but also to create an alternative space which builds on different values (Atton 2002: 10). These media, he argues, provide forums for the “direct voices” of “subjugated knowledges” in the Foucauldian sense (cf. 1980: 81–82), offering spaces for what Raymond Williams would call *democratic communication*, the “origins” of which are “genuinely multiple”, affording the possibility of “true” communication and “active response” between all participants (Atton 2002: 9; Williams 1963: 304). In the context of feminist media production, such a possibility might hold true for media forms using easily accessible and cheap technologies such as zine production and blogging. However, it would be more difficult to sustain the argument for, for example, non-commercial but established feminist cultural magazines (e.g. the Swedish *Bang*) that might, which might not be free of a certain exclusionary agenda-setting (even if, indeed, this “agenda” might be based on different, and perhaps even more democratic, principles than the ones generally found in the mainstream media).

Atton states that the ultimate “test” of a theory of alternative media would, in addition to its explanatory value, be its aptitude to capture diversity in the phenomena under study (Atton 2002: 9). The question is whether Atton’s theory itself passes this test: Despite its break away from a *rigid* dichotomisation, Atton remains faithful to the basic grammar of “alternative media studies”, which as a consequence imposes certain restrictions on both the plasticity and durability of his proposed theory vis-à-vis concrete instances of media production. Focussed, still, on normative judgements and evaluative criteria between radicality and non-radicality, Atton himself reintroduces the binary opposition he wishes to avoid, preventing, ultimately, the analysis of the complex relationships of interconnectedness be-

tween various media forms. Even though much feminist media has indeed managed to fill the various criteria as stated by above mentioned authored (see DiCenzo and Ryan 2007), such a dichotomous logic cannot capture the diversity of these practices. Instead, study of feminist media production needs to take into account a varied range of practices. In other words, analyses of feminist media production needs to show an ability to capture media which, to paraphrase Clemencia Rodriguez, are:

... legal, a-legal . . . illegal, pirate, commercial, amateur, local, regional, diasporic, moni-lingual, bilingual, daily, weekly, monthly, once-in-a-while (1992: 64).

## Connecting feminist media: The rhizomatic alternative

Instead of, and in a response to, the aforementioned attempts to distinguish between more oppositional, radical or activist media forms, Olga Bailey, Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier have formulated a theoretical framework that seeks to further the move from a rigid economy of oppositions. Building on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's conceptualisation of the rhizome, which juxtaposes the *rhizomatic* (non-linear, nomadic, connective) with the hierarchical tendencies of the *arborescent*, or tree-like, systems (linear, unitary, with fixed points of origin and sub-divisions) (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 3–25), Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier argue that this metaphor does better justice to “alternative” media systems by accenting their contingent character in contrast to the more “arborescent” and rigidly organised mainstream media (Bailey et al. 2008: 29). Similarly, the notion of the rhizome has previously been employed as a perspective to shed light on the riot grrrl movement, arguing that their zine networks, websites and distros are typically rhizomatic, stressing their character of an “underground culture multiplying via lines of connection that are not controlled from a primary location”, but rather as a polymorphous de-centralised movement without leaders, spokeswomen or a unified political agenda attached to its name (Leonard 2007; see also Piano 2002). In Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier's understanding of rhizomatic media, however, the emphasis lays not primarily in the “subterranean” nature such rhizomatic networks. Rather, I would argue that its analytical strength lies in its ability to explore their elusiveness and contingency *as well as* possible interconnections and linkages with the state and the market (2008: 27). As such, this approach has proven useful to understand also alternative media which do not easily fit into models of counter-hegemony (such as certain zines or blogs, for example).

## Feminist zines and rhizomatics

Although the majority of existing feminist zines may subscribe to the antagonistic ethos of anti-commercialism, anti-elitism and anti-professionalism, far from all of them do. A recent case study by the Central and Eastern



European *Plotki Femzine* provides an instructive example of a media project which, while motivated partly by the knowledge of existing “grrrl zines”, also have employed non-prototypical strategies of media production. While the first edition of *Plotki Femzine* was a cheaply produced photocopied zine, the editorial team later successfully applied for funding from the German-Polish Youth Foundation in order to print a somewhat more magazine-like second edition, thereby negating the widespread assumption that zine production is inherently anarchist and anti-state (Chidgey et al. 2009). Similarly, the Swedish feminist magazine *Bleck* initially employed the DIY format of the zine, only later to be re-launched as a more costly magazine, which in turn assisted the editor Linna Johansson in establishing herself as a well-known columnist in one of the major national tabloid newspapers (cf. Gunnarsson Payne 2006).

In light of these ambivalences, the concept of rhizomatic media has the asset of steering clear of simple oppositions between “mainstream” and “alternative”. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, the relationship between the rhizomatic and the arbolescent is not one of mutual exclusiveness, but,

A new rhizome may form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch. Or else it is a microscopic element of the root-tree, a radicle, that gets rhizome production going (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 15).

The analytical value of this statement is one which should not be underestimated – but one which has yet been downplayed in both the work of Leonard and in the alternative media theory of Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier. This calls for further investigation, as it offers a much-needed analytical possibility which manages to avoid romanticised ideas of alternative media as *inherently* democratic and radical, as well as demonising and simplified meanings of the “mainstream” as completely devoid of any potential for the production of counter narratives. Thereby, the rhizomatic approach may offer a potentially fruitful solution to the aforementioned tension between specificity and historical complexity in alternative media theory. Although I agree that the former *tend* to be more rhizomatic in character, and the latter more arbolescent, this impasse allows for analyses of, for example, the ways in which arbolescent hierarchies can and do form also within alternative media frameworks and, subsequently, how journalistic practices occasionally manage to subvert meanings and instigate social change.

## **Tactical media and hegemonic appropriations: Culture jamming as rhizomatic media**

The term *tactical media* has been coined as a way of expressing a position outside of both mainstream and alternative media, or, as David Garcia calls it,

... a no-man’s land on the border of experimental media – art, journalism and political activism – a zone that was, in part, made possible by the mass availability of a powerful and flexible new generation of media tools (2007: 6).

As such, the recent developments of tactical media have been inextricably linked to the expansion of new ICTs. The growth of tactical media should, however, not be understood as a simple adaptation of movement strategies into the “information age”. Instead, their positioning is one of refutation in relation to not only the presumed objectivity of journalist practices and the elitism and personality cults of the art world, but also of the disciplinary and instrumentalist strategies of traditional social movements (Garcia 2007: 6). Importantly, the term *tactical* alludes to Michel de Certeau’s distinction between strategy and tactics, the latter referring to the art of the subordinated, as opposed to strategies being implemented from a locus of domination. Tactics, in this sense, consists of parasitic appropriations, subverting the meaning of signifiers, which makes techniques such as “subvertising” – the practice of parodying commercial or political advertisements by for example altering their texts or images – prime examples of tactical media.

Exemplary of feminist tactical media would be the work of Princess Hijab, whose provocative street art includes “hijabising” adverts – painting black hijabs on commercial adverts for products such as jewellery and make-up. In her manifesto she states, albeit obliquely, what could be interpreted as a feminist statement:

Princess Hijab knows that *L’Oréal* and *Dark&Lovely* have been killing her little by little. She feels that the veil is no longer that white. She feels contaminated. (Princesshijab.org, quote no longer accessible online, archived at “Princess Hijab: Hijabizing Advertising”, Grassroots feminism)

She declares her influence by “movements such as Adbusters”, but argues also that “since 9/11, things have changed” and that she therefore has chosen to subvert images in a non-American way. She claims to “know all about *visual* terrorism” (emphasis added), and rearticulates thereby the dominant cultural stereotypes of the Muslim terrorist, as well as the hijab, which so often in Western contexts has served as the signified of women’s oppression per se. Her street art manifesto subverts the meaning of the capitalist beauty industry by pointing its messages out as “lethal”, as a threat to her life in a symbolic sense (“killing her little by little”), as well as the epithet used by dominant culture to demonise the Muslim Other. Despite these strong political statements, Princess Hijab does not position herself within any political or religious movement, but states quite clearly her independence and dedication to art only.

And don’t forget, she acts upon her own free will. She is not involved in any lobby or movement be it political, religious or to do with advertising. In fact, the Princess is an insomniac-punk. She is the leader of an artistic fight, nothing else. (Princesshijab.org, quote no longer accessible online, archived at “Princess Hijab: Hijabizing Advertising”, Grassroots feminism)

The brief example of “hijabising” makes a strong case for the rhizomatic approach to tactical media, particularly with its use of the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of *deterritorialisation*, shedding light on the process of undermining the authority of corporate advertising by tactically turning its own

rhetorical tropes and imagery against it, and thereby destabilising their meaning.

Cultural and political jamming, however, should not be understood as inherently radical modes of operating.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, what is used as tactics of subordinated groups and oppositional movements can also be used as “strategies” of the dominant. Processes of deterritorialisation, in this sense, are always inextricably tied to *reterritorialisation*, a process demonstrated by Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier’s discussion of the ways in which corporate companies deploy jamming techniques for marketing purposes, and political parties appropriate techniques of jamming in their election campaigns as a way of mocking their political competition – in a way that presumably functions as an effective strategy in appealing to younger and “trendier” sections of the electorate (2008: 143–147).<sup>5</sup> In a feminist context, the conceptualisation of de- and reterritorialisation would be particularly useful in understanding the reciprocity between would-be “alternative” and “mainstream” socio-political messages. To give some brief examples: the ways in which the Riot Grrrl slogan “Girl Power!” has been reterritorialised by postfeminist commercial products such as women’s magazines and popular music (e.g. the Spice Girls) and feminist jamming tactics such as “Revolution. Because you’re worth it!” (an adaptation of the cosmetics company *L’Oréal’s* slogan employed by Swedish zine *Radarka*).

I argue that a rhizomatic approach to alternative media shows a flexibility in its theoretical apparatus that is otherwise lacking in much of the literature that comprises the field of alternative media studies. The perspective offers a compelling framework for the study of the tactics, processes and connections within and between feminist media production. However, this is not to say that the approach is without its limitations. Its strength resides in its understanding of the processual dimension of media production – and an understanding that furthermore does not reduce the complexity of such processes. It is therefore particularly informative in obviating the “how” of these connections. What it does *not* offer is an explanatory purchase on the “whys” of these connections and processes.

Devoid of any notion of the subject as it is, this mode of theorisation consequently also lacks any notion of political subjectivity and the more “strategic” aspects of the building of alliances between struggles. It might even be said, then, that the gains of expunging “alternative media stud-

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4 Although tactical media is predominantly discussed as a 1990s phenomenon, the tactics of cultural and political “jamming” are not entirely new. Their genealogy can be traced back to, for example, techniques of *détournement* (Debord 1959/2006) and the radical bricolages (Hebdige 1979: 103) of the Situationist and punk movements, both of which involve re-using and re-articulating elements of the dominant culture so as to subvert their meanings, thereby rendering their contingent character visible and showing how “things could be otherwise” (see Bailey et al. 2008: 138–9).

5 Åsa Wettergren has defined culture jamming as a “symbolic form of protest located within a field of anti-corporate activism where tensions between democratic principles and the undemocratic principles of the ‘free’ market are articulated as pivotal contemporary political conflicts” (Wettergren 2009: 2).

ies” of the dichotomies implicitly or explicitly present in the more counter hegemonic approaches has carried with it the loss of explanatory value as to how these media function as crucial sites for the constitution of political identification. In the study of feminist media production, this latter aspect cannot be underestimated. On the contrary, any rigorous analysis of feminist media production needs to take seriously the ways in which gendered identities are transformed into *feminist* identities. I would now like to sketch out a further contribution to the field that at least begins to make incursions into these questions.

## **Feminist media and political identification: From citizens’ media to sites of antagonism**

Rodriguez’s starting point is the supposition that social subjects identify in multiple, contingent and heterogeneous ways, constituted by an assembly of subject positions (Mouffe 1992: 372). Social categories such as “women” are produced through complex intersections of various discourses and institutions, and the subordination of women cannot be understood to be constituted by a single cause or underlying essence. From this destabilised notion of the subject it follows that one can no longer view any member of a historically subordinated group as belonging to a certain “interest group” with predetermined interests and needs (Rodriguez 1992: 18). Media representations therefore cannot be said to represent the “true” interests of any certain groups. Rather, from this perspective, *interests do not precede political action, but are constituted in political acts*. As such, alternative media plays a crucial role in the constitution and negotiation of political interests and collective identities.

Mediated representations of “interest groups”, then, are seen as a *constitutive practice*, actually producing the very interests that they claim to represent. Instead of risking to reproduce essentialist notions of “women’s writing”, this perspective allows for feminist identities not to be revealed by feminist media production, but the latter to be part of producing them. It is telling that Rodriguez dismisses the terminology of “alternative media” altogether, arguing that it problematically predetermines these media as necessarily in opposition to the mainstream media, and thereby “limits the potential of these media to their ability to resist the alienating power of mainstream media” and claims that this “approach blinds our understanding of all other instances of change and transformation brought about by these media” (Rodriguez 1992: 20). In its place Rodriguez proposes the formulation of *citizens’ media*, an idea entailing three fundamental properties: i.) that it would be a collective enactment of citizenship through active interventions and transformations of dominant media; ii.) that these collective practices of citizenship take place through the contestation of social codes, legitimised identities and institutionalised social relations; and, iii.) that these interventions have an empowering – and, as a result of this

empowerment, transformative – effect on the community in which they are located (2001: 20). In her notion of citizens' media, Rodriguez stresses Chantal Mouffe and Kirstie McClure's extensive understanding of "the political", extending the political from the narrow definition of "juridical demands upon the state" to also include a

quotidian politics – a politics which extends the terrain of political contestation to the everyday enactment of social practices and routine reiterations of cultural representations (McClure 1992: 123).

In feminist terms, this "everydayness" of politics have been long known and articulated in the famous slogan "The personal is political!", so often reiterated in feminist political manifestations, relating to crucial feminist issues such as sexual violence, heteronormativity, reproductive rights and issues concerning body images.

Contemporary feminist media production can be said to embrace this quotidian dimension of politics, not least in relation to media forms such as zines and blogs. The value of feminist media production such as zine writing and blogs would not *necessarily* lie in its potential to affect political policy, but rather in the contestation of symbolic codes and rearticulation of everyday experiences. Many feminist zines, for example, offer personal accounts of negative feelings towards one's own body, thereby de-naturalising the beauty standards of commercial girls' and women's magazines.

why do i cry when i look in the mirror? why do i look at stupid magazine ads wish that i look like that? why is there so much fucken emphasis placed on looking "pretty" and i dont know what i want to be. just don't want to hate myself anymore for not being the delicate little flower that i am told to be. why does the media try so hard to dictate to us what is and what isnt beautiful . . . I am so sick of hating myself. i don't want to cry in the mirror anymore. (*Revolution Rising #1*, in Kearney 2006: 181, spelling in the original)

This quote demonstrates a tendency displayed by many feminist zines, namely that capitalist and patriarchal mainstream media is articulated as the constitutive outside of feminist zine culture. That is, this "outside" would not only be different from feminist media, but it would constitute its "radical other" and thereby be positioned in an *antagonistic* relationship to feminism as such.

I argue that this antagonistic relationship takes us back somewhat, showing us, as it were, the loss of an analytical strength of the counter hegemonic approaches surveyed in the first part of this chapter. From the post-Marxist approach of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, there is no *inherent* opposition between even the most unequal subject positions (e. g. "men", "women"). Rather, the *antagonistic* relationship *occurs* only if the subordinated group *opposes* the unequal relationship by construing it *as* a relationship of domination and subordination (Laclau 1990: 6; Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 122; Mouffe 1993: 77). With its strong anti-essentialist ontology, Laclau and Mouffe's perspective avoids any pitfalls of reproducing any metaphysical ideals of any inherent "female" way of writing, or of any

determinist idea of universal interests of “all women” (cf. Rhodes 2005: 10–23). Instead their theoretical approach makes possible theorisation of the ways in which feminist identities are actually constituted through the practice of media production, and how these identities – on both an individual and a collective level – are necessarily contextual, relational and processual. The explanatory value of this is that it offers a way to study not only the “hows” but also the “whys”, the conditions of emergence for feminist identification and the construction of “chains of equivalence” between collective identities that are articulated in opposition to one another, between a collective identity and its “oppressive other” (e.g. “sisterhood” vs. “patriarchy”) (cf. Gunnarsson Payne 2006; 2012). Understanding this process is crucial in order to understand the role that feminist media production plays in producing spaces where gendered identities and relations are transformed into sites of antagonistic struggle.

## **Concluding reflections: Current developments and future challenges**

There has been something of a blind spot in alternative media studies to date. The limited numbers of sustained engagements with the rich and variegated history of feminist media is surprising given its historical prominence over the last two centuries. The question that I wished to raise in this chapter was that given the lack of attention to feminist media production, can it be said of the conceptual tools available that there is an essential difficulty in teasing out the specificities and nuances of instances of feminist media? The intention was not necessarily to propose that there is something “different” about feminist initiatives, which set them apart from other modes of media production, as if an engagement with feminist media projects requires a specifically feminist theoretical perspective. Rather, the aim was to move away from theorisations of alternative media with too broad and formal conceptions, under which too many concrete examples can be subsumed and made identical to one another, to the detriment of paying attention to the differences between instances of alternative media as well as the tensions and inconsistencies internal to a particular media project. A more dynamic (less static) understanding of media production was sought.

An assessment of alternative media theories reveals a wide ranging set of theoretical engagements. Ultimately, each can be brought back to a common denominator wishing to give the idea of “alternative media” a conceptual and phenomenal specificity that overdraws the distinction between alternative and mainstream forms of media. The vicissitudes and complexities of actually existing feminist media are not best served by such hard-edged analytical distinctions. Examples abound within the feminist movement itself that would caution against the use of such metaphysically infused distinctions. Both Deleuze and Guattarian and the Mouffe and Laclauian insights might be better harnessed to provide a more durable, a

more empirically responsive theory, far more sensitive to the contingencies of media production. The work of Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier as well as Rodriguez was referred to as examples that have actively developed these insights into theories of media production beyond hegemonic mass media. Each departs from the attempt to define what constitutes an instance of “alternative media” (and whether or not we should even use this term) from outside of its particular manifestations, but at the same time brings to bear with it a set of theoretical tools that do not merely set out to describe a particular case of media production but seek to explain the processes by which media comes to be produced in a given socio-political situation.

What each of these scholars advance can only be just the start, however. As far as the successes of their operationalisations of certain post-structuralist presuppositions, further advances need to be made to fully meet the requirements of rigorous study of feminist media production. Importantly, I would suggest attention needs to be paid to the constitution of feminist identities, furthering particularly not only the ways in which alliances and coalitions are made, but also the role feminist media production plays in the constitution of collective feminist identities. A significant but hitherto overlooked dimension of alternative and/or feminist media production is the central role of media production for affective investments in certain feminist vocabularies, aesthetics and political prioritisations. Such explorations would need to combine theoretical insights of post-structuralist approaches to alternative media and nuanced conceptualisations of political subjectivity with thorough empirical investigation of both audiences and producers (to the extent such a distinction can at all be made) of feminist media.

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