

Chapter 4

A Dialectical Approach to Understanding the Critical Content of Alternative Media

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ABSTRACT

Various definitions of alternative media have been put forward and a number of approaches to determining “alternative” suggested. Many theorists emphasize the administrative/organizational aspects of alternative media. Critics of this approach point out that such organizational structures can also be used in media advancing repressive ideas and argue instead for a focus on content. A more radical approach argues that to be determined as alternative, the content of any media must be critical. However, little attention has been given to what constitutes “critical content.” This study stands in the tradition of Marxist criticism and applies dialectical method to analyzing and understanding the social phenomena of critical content, arguing that only such an approach can reveal the social and political role of media for it to be considered alternative. From this perspective, alternative media can be seen as a theoretical weapon in the struggle for self-emancipation, as is dialectical materialist philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

As the number of alternative media practices has increased, that is, practices that can be described as beyond mainstream media or simply as “non-mainstream media” in terms of its content, organizational structure and distribution network, so too has the number of theoretical studies in the field. However, as many researchers have pointed out, it is not easy to determine what alternative media is or how it may be considered alternative. This is demonstrated by the diversity of terms used in studies on alternative media: “grassroots,” “independent,” “community,” “participatory,” “self-managed,” “autonomous,” “tactical” (Pajnik & Downing, 2008, p. 7), “alternative journalism,” “citizen journalism,” “citizen’s media,” “community media,” “democratic media,” “emancipatory media,” “radical media” and “social movement media” (Atton, 2007, p. 18). It can be seen that alternative media has been defined with an emphasis

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on its various aspects. These definitions cover a wide range of foci, from the organizational structure of alternative media to its content. In this context, it is possible to divide the studies on alternative media into two: Those that generally emphasize the form of the media, i.e. the organizational structure of the media (horizontally organized, participatory, citizen-controlled, non-hierarchical, self-managed, non-commercial etc.) and those that emphasize its differences in content (radical, critical).

This study will focus on approaches that emphasize the differences in content, rather than the organizational differences of alternative media, in order to further our understanding of “critical content” with the aim of defining it more concretely through philosophy and the dialectical method. The basis for this discussion will be the Marxist tradition of criticism and thus Marxist philosophy. This means a class understanding of the media in general, applying it to media content and to the underlying influences that determine that content. The study is intended as a contribution to the definition of alternative media through clarifying its role within society.

The term critical content was offered by researchers such as Fuchs (2010) and Sandoval (2009) and is currently seen as one of the key features of alternative media. However, there has been little discussion and subsequently no detailed description of its “critical” status. To forward our understanding of the concept and come to a more useful definition, this study asks the fundamental question, “what is meant by the critical content of alternative media?” and seeks a philosophical and therefore methodological answer. The reason for employing philosophy to determine critical content is that the public mission of media itself is to see and inform about social things/phenomena, which is basically the subject of philosophy. As such, media content should be discussed philosophically.

The key assumption of this philosophical debate is that the fundamental element determining the content of the media is class interests. The content of mainstream media is characterized as ideological because it presents a distorted picture of social reality that favors the interests of the ruling class, employing a sympathetic worldview (basically idealism). Any critical content in alternative media must be to expose this distorted reality, i.e. that it favors the ruled/oppressed/exploited class interests, and present the really existing relations. To support this assumption, the study makes two basic claims that are dialectically linked. The first is that the ideological content in mainstream media is produced by metaphysical reasoning that breaks social reality from its own integrity and divides it into separate, isolated pieces, in order to hide its essentially economic-political essence (capitalism) behind the appearance. The second, in contrast, is that in order to expose this distortion, the critical content of alternative media needs to highlight the hidden political economic essence through the method of dialectical reasoning and by considering social reality as something integrated with the other social phenomena to which it is related. The inclusion of all categories and laws of dialectics as the basic method of reasoning of Marxist criticism and philosophy would require a much longer and more comprehensive study than is possible here, so this study will proceed through the basic definitions of dialectical and metaphysical methods in terms of seeing and understanding social things.

The “critical content” of alternative media is dialectically related to the “ideological content” of mainstream media, which itself creates the need for critical content, and its philosophical and methodological evaluation because, basically, the reason for the emergence of “critical content” is the existence of “ideological content”. Therefore, while the main subject of this study is the content of alternative media, to understand it requires understanding its opposite so the critical content of alternative media will be analyzed as distinct from the content of mainstream media.

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