

Editorial

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John D.H. Downing

If we use the term media in its narrow sense, meaning mainly print and electronic media, films etc., history of the “alternative media” (a term pronounced first, and still comes much more easily to mind when non-mainstream media is the issue, at least in Turkey) goes back to the second part of the 18th century (Atton, 2002). Otherwise, used in a wider sense as in John Downing’s work (2001), referring to songs, street theaters, dances, cartoons, satires, graffiti, carnivals etc., this history could be taken farther, perhaps to ancient times, to the very first unequal societies where the ruled ones or the have-nots exercised any/some sort of “resistance” or “opposition”. But if we leave aside the contributing philosophical works of some authors such as Adorno, Enzensberger, Habermas, Guattari and Deleuze, the attempts at theorizing and researching the “alternative media” by communication scholars does not have more than a three decades long history. Although this relatively late interest in the issue is partly compensated by the growing number of the scholarly works of the mid 2000s from all around the academia, it is still possible to argue, as Chris Atton does, that alternative/radical media hardly appear in the dominant theoretical traditions of media research (2002: 7).

Moreover, although there is a live and growing global solidarity and collaboration between the social movements of counter-publics and their media initiatives, it is striking to see how the very same disinterest or little interest is still valid in the academia when it comes to determining communication conferences’ themes and the establishment of the curricula of the communication/media departments. When it comes to Turkey, the picture is far from holding much promise, for until quite recently there was almost a total silence or indifference on the issue, which is seen to be a result of “deliberate political positioning” of the mainstream academic circles by Köker and Doğanay¹. But since the reasons for the argued silence of the Faculty of Communications on alternatives to the mainstream media need a detailed analysis, we would only like to mention here that, in a country with a stubborn fear of falling apart, and where there is a long history of suppression of the opponent social movements and their alternate channels, these institutions were hardly proactive in terms of playing a pioneer role in the democratization process.

This indifference to alternative media was shaken first in 2006 by the *Istanbul International Independent Media Forum*, which was the first of its kind, and which brought independent/alternative media activists in contact with communication scholars within and outside the country. Not surprisingly, the Forum had been initiated not by an academic institution but by the co-efforts of the IPS Communication Foundation (IPS İletişim Vakfı) in Istanbul, and the Inter Press Service, together with individual contributions of a number of communication scholars and students. Then, thanks not only to the spark of the Forum, which was followed by the publication of the Forum’s proceedings, but to the liveliness of the counter-publics and their continuing struggle to have their own media, the first academic

¹ See Eser Köker and Ülkü Doğanay (2007), “Ignoring Radical Media in Communication Studies in Turkey”.
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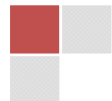
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works on “alternative media” started to come out only by the end of the first decade of the 2000s.

Now, in Turkey, where publication companies are proud of the numbers of their translated books, but not enabled yet to let their readers meet with even the very pioneer books of the field, we have *Kurgu Online International Journal of Communication Studies*, a university journal devoting its very first issue to “*Imagining the Alternative: The Strategies to Cope with Mainstream Media Practices*”. Therefore as the co-editors of the issue, we believe that the journal with its renewed identity and its “non-geographical environment” deserves much appreciation for breaking the significant silence of Turkish academia on the media of the subjugated, discriminated ones.

The issue that you are holding includes four articles in English and three in Turkish languages, contributing to different theoretical and performative aspects of the alternatives to the mainstream media. In his issue-framing-article titled *İletişimsel Olmayan Ortaklar: Toplumsal Hareket Medyası Analizi ve Radikal Eğitimciler (Uncommunicative Partners: Social Movement Media Analysis and Radical Educators)*, John Downing draws our attention to the absence of interface between educational activities and socially committed media. Thus we learn that the above mentioned disinterest of the universities regarding alternative media is not peculiar to Turkey. What Downing suggests is not only an interplay between the universities and non-mainstream media practitioners, but constructive interactions between media analysis, media activism, media arts, media industry professions and media policy-makers that forms a pentangle constituting the ‘five corners’ of the media firmament outside the academy. Drawing our attention to the current mutual depreciation and/or suspicion among these in general, and even among media studies and media production departments of the universities in particular, Downing warns us about the profile of our graduates. He argues that students often graduate with a “gorgeous mosaic in their heads of mutually insulated knowledges” and that the division of labor between thinkers and doers etched into “our” social fabric is actively throttling the real potential of media education programs which might play in fact an important role in creating a mutual dialogue among the five points of the media compass. Although he refers mainly to the Western mind/practices when he mentions “our” social fabric, his argument seems to be valid in Turkey, as far as the experiences of critical media educators there are concerned. Therefore what he points out can be considered as relevant while re-programming media education in Turkey as well. First, he writes, in media departments, educators should revise their media *praxis* so as to kit the students for mutual dialogue rather than educating them in higher cynicism. Secondly, within a span of only three or four years at most, and thanks to the technologies banging down our doors, we will not have any more excuses of not having adequate equipment for film or video, audio, news production etc. in our departments. Thus, we need to re-cast our still vertical models of instruction and use collaborative learning techniques.

Additionally, Downing’s article makes an important contribution to the conceptual problems of scholars who see the non-mainstream media as channels for the unheard voices. As the reader may have noted, we, as the co-editors of the issue, have avoided fixing a particular name for the non-mainstream media. Among various headings such as alternative media, community media, tactical media, counter-information media, participatory media, social movement media and citizen media, we prefer the latter two. Downing names these media as *social movement media*, while Alankuş prefers to use Clemenzia Rodriguez’ term, *citizen’s media* as she discusses in detail in her article.

In the first part of his article, Downing opens a discussion on the concepts suggested by different scholars from different perspectives although he settled on the term “social

movement media” in 2008² instead of the term “radical media” that was conceptualized in his two books published in 1984 and 2001 with titles *Radical Media: The Political Organization of Alternative Communication* and *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements* respectively, which are still considered worldwide as main reference books on the topic. While discussing the terms with their pluses and minuses, including “social movement media” term, he concludes by agreeing with Alfonso Gumucio Dagron whom he criticises as representing “the iron determination among academics to produce absolute definitions”. Although all this sounds confusing, according to Downing “it is a direct reflection of these antropologically polymorphous media forms”.

In the second article titled *The Relationship between Democracy and “Other Media”*: *An Attempt to Describe the Non–Mainstream Media Environment in Turkey*, Sevda Alankuş reaches more or less the same conclusion while discussing the terminology problem within Turkey’s context. Giving a short and quite recent history of both the Western and Turkish non-mainstream media scene, the article emphasizes the importance of counter-publics and the presence of their long silenced channels—including local media—in terms of the democratization of Turkey’s media environment and the urgent need for a re-regulation of the media environment for the sake of citizen’s media. Alankuş argues that since the terms developed by different scholars are based upon varying socio-cultural experiences and since there are insufficient attempts to understand the non-mainstream media of Turkey, and thus not enough discussion to re-conceptualize the current terms that consider the particular socio-cultural context of the country, *citizen’s media* notion, with its flexibility, may explain better the hybrid and in-between forms of “the other’s media” examples in Turkey. Thus, she replaces her previously used term of “*civil society media*”³ by *citizen’s media* being aware of the criticism raised by different scholars, including Downing, who warns against the term’s explicit legal connotations⁴, but leaves the door open to new and better fitting terms.

In her conclusion, Alankuş, suggests first, the liberation of the media environment from its subjugation to those who are economically capable through the creation of public and civil funds for supporting not-for-profit broadcasts, and secondly, addresses the need for inter/intra democratization of the current citizen’s media examples, since she criticizes them for lacking in participatory and grassroots features, and creative initiatives in that regard in Turkey’s media environment.

In the third article of the Issue (in English), Marisol Sandoval (Salzburg University) proposes, following Giddens, that we divide approaches to social movement media into objectivist concepts, focused typically on structural issues, and subjectivist approaches that stress human agency. She argues that the majority of approaches, beginning from Brecht and Benjamin, are subjectivist, stressing participation and the democratization of media production. She focuses also on more recent work by Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, and Clemencia Rodríguez, which in line with Latin American traditions especially emphasizes the pivotal role of participation in social movement media.

However, for Sandoval this constitutes a major problem, for at least two reasons. One is that defining social movement media by their degree of participatory production blurs over the crucial issue of content: many ultra-rightist organizations have websites with strongly

² See John Downing (2008), “Social Movement Theories and Alternative Media”, *Communication, Culture & Critique* 1.1, pp.40-50

³ See Sevda Alankuş (2005), “Demokratik bir Medya Ortamı için Yerel/Sivil Medya ve Yeni İmkanlar”, Sevda Alankuş (ed.), *Medya ve Toplum*, İstanbul: IPS Vakfi Yay.,pp.95-130.

⁴ See Downing’s article in this volume.

participatory features. Another is that this definition blots out the contributions made by formally organized and adequately funded media that also challenge global injustice, such as France's *Le Monde Diplomatique* or the USA's *Monthly Review*. After noting some writers in the objectivist tradition, Sandoval argues in favor of a dialectical approach drawing on both, but focusing on critical media content as the pivotal question in assessing whether media are progressively alternative, rather than their organization or financing.

Kevin Howley is increasingly very well known in the USA and beyond for his contributions to alternative media research. He has recently followed up his book *Community Media* (2005) with a stimulating edited collection, *Understanding Community Media* (2009).

In this article (in English) Howley addresses classroom teaching about media, and explores the possibilities for blending research and creative media production, encouraging students to use some of the digital technologies that are gradually becoming more available to fresh locations across the planet. He argues for a contextualized and critical media literacy, which does not mean dismissing the importance of helping students to develop their critical textual analysis skills, but seeks to add significantly to that process. He hopes to “challenge the notion [among students] that a media system dominated by commercial interests is either inevitable or irreversible.”

Howley offers examples of U.S. media productions that he has successfully used in the classroom – which is to say, to help generate constructive debate, not to hammer his personal political orthodoxy into his students' heads. While the specific examples he cites would often require students to have English-language skills, his descriptions of how he engages with these materials in his classroom will suggest other productive ways to utilize analogous materials in other teaching situations.

The fourth article in English language is co-authored by Kerem Rızvanoğlu, H. Serhat Güney and M. Emre Köksalan. The authors explore comparatively Dutch and Turkish web radio listeners' modes of using the technology, in order to ascertain whether the different national cultural patterns hypothesized by some researchers were evident in web radio use by students of either nationality. Their study used a variety of methods, and drew data from before their respondents started using web radio, while they were using it, and from the students' subsequent reflections on their experience.

They found that a number of distinctive national cultural traits were in evidence, such as a very nation-based definition of ‘culture’ by Turkish students, and a much more diffuse definition of the term by Netherlands students. However, they also discovered that these variations co-existed with an increasingly common and standardized use of the communication technology as merely a ‘customizable music box’, rather than a means of engaging with a variety of issues as citizens of a public sphere.

Last two articles of the Issue are also in Turkish. In the first Turkish article titled *Medyada Alternatif bir Hal: Ahali ve Karşıt-Kamusallık (An Alternative Example in the Media: “Ahali” and its Counter-public)*, author Çağdaş Ceyhan, analyses the monopolization of the Turkish mainstream media environment that started from the mid of 1960s, but gained a new phase by the 1980s and completing its horizontal and vertical integration with the global market by the 2000s. He also gives a brief and recent history of “alternative media,” and explains their appearances, mainly by the 1980s, with the development of hybrid forms of resistance of the counter-publics/new social movements in Turkey, drawing our attention to their globalization as well. He argues that, through the alternative media channels, counter-publics could express and represent themselves against the dominant publics. In the second part of his article Ceyhan discusses “the alternative media” theory and concludes by

emphasizing their role in the proliferation of political positions and thus the broadening and deepening of the democracies. Like the other authors, Ceyhan points out the loose nature of the alternative media theory, while emphasizing the importance of their organization models and contents for deserving to be named as “alternative” to the mainstream.

In the research part of his article, Ceyhan, analyses “Ahali” (means “Folk” in Turkish), a monthly anarchist newspaper published in Ankara, having collected his data through participant observation and in-depth interviews. He describes Ahali’s production room, gives us its brief history, and questions the anarchist group members’ self-descriptions, self-reflections on what they are doing including their comments on the term “alternative,” which the authors prefer to use for their newspaper. Ceyhan also describes how the group members narrate their news language and their anarchist news perspective, their news sources, their work organization and their financial sources. In his conclusion following these narrations of the Anarchist group, Ceyhan comments on Ahali as an example of alternative media in terms of its non-hierarchical, horizontal relation of the group members, their side efforts to make money for the survival of the news paper, and their aim to create a different news frame compared to that of the mainstream media.

The second Turkish article of the Issue, belongs to Mehmet Özçağlayan and is titled *Ücretsiz Gazeteler: Türkiye’de ve Dünyadaki Gelişimleri Üzerine Genel bir Değerlendirme (Free Newspapers: A General Evaluation on Their Development in Turkey and in the World)*. In his contribution to the Issue, Özçağlayan gives us a brief history of and detailed data on free newspapers that have come to be seen in almost all the metropolitan cities of the World in recent years. Özçağlayan questions whether their appearance as a new medium will be an alternative substitution for the traditional and paid papers and if they are becoming a new source for the advertisers to reach to the mass audience. In the research part of the article he focuses on the very first examples of the free papers *Gaste* and *20dk* that were published in Istanbul in 2008 but had to be closed in the following year. Özçağlayan gives quantitative data regarding their content, advertising venues, and some descriptive information on their news sources, news framing, reader corners, commentaries. In the content analysis part of the research, he examines competency, accuracy, neutrality and subject issues of the papers and their uses of the news language. In the conclusion, upon his findings, He compares both examples with each other and with the mainstream media in terms of their news numbers and quality and argues that they need to feed and enrich their news before they can become alternatives to the paid papers.

To conclude, the co-editors, who believe there is a real need for new research in different part of the world together with related theoretical discussions in this ignored part of the communication and media studies, hope *Kurgu Online International Journal of Communication Studies* did its part by devoting its first online Issue to “Imagining the Alternative: The Strategies to Cope with Mainstream Media Practices,” and can inspire others.