

**"Alternative" Communications:  
Proposal for an Area of Comprehensive Examination**

**Introduction**

In the last three decades, there has been an expansion in the number and scope of small locally-controlled communication media world-wide. Variouslly named (called the third channel by some commentators, community media in the north, popular communications in Latin America) they are often defined as "alternatives" to commercial and state media (Roncagliolo 1991), for their representation of a multitude of social subjects excluded by censorship and/or marginalization from the dominant media (Ambrosi 1991), and for their communications practice that challenges the traditional sender-powered transmission models.

In the 1970's this alternative communications movement was at the base of the call for a New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO) represented by the UNESCO-sponsored McBride Report (McBride, 1980). By the mid-1980's the debate was effectively curtailed by the withdrawal from UNESCO of the United States and Great Britain, and shifted to an agenda about coping strategies for globalization set by transnational media corporations, and marked by deregulation and the weakening of the state sector. However, the NWICO debate was not without its consequences, as many local media projects in both north and south -- whether directed by the logics of international capital, national governments or social movements -- began to incorporate aspects of the new communications paradigm such as access, participation, and interactive communications models (Servaes and Arnst 1993).

The readings proposed here describe this third channel (Moore 1986) and map the historical, political, economic, social and cultural space in which the alternatives survive between the logics and agendas of transnational media and their respective nation states. I will also enquire into several sets of relationships -- between these media and their constituencies, between constituencies, between alternative media and mainstream media and between alternative media and their respective nation states.

### The dominant paradigm and the first alternatives

The dominant or modernization paradigm in communications was articulated in the United States and exported after the second European-world war an essential ingredient in American foreign policy of economic and political expansion. Theorists such as Lasswell, Lerner, Rogers and Schramm -- with the financial support of the United States Agency for International Development (AID) -- promoted the idea that technological innovation, and particularly modern media would bring solutions to economic and political problems.

This transmission model rested on the notion that American-trained media makers could produce messages to change audience attitudes and thereby persuade them to take up new modern behaviours. At the top end of this vertical *hypodermic* or *bullet* diagram, the crucial communications agent was the sender. At the other end were audience members who were for the most part considered passive receivers, or in an adapted version, led by male community "opinion" leaders (Rogers 1976). There was little regard for the wider communications context of the medium, for local political, economic, social and especially cultural factors (Mowlana and Wilson 1988).

### The first critiques and the first "alternatives"

By the late 1960's development programs associated with the modernization paradigm had proven ineffectual (Rogers 1976) and its attendant communications model was under attack from many different directions (Servaes 1986, Jacobson 1989, Mowlana and Wilson 1988). Throughout the 1970's a wide-ranging debate about the nature and control of the national and international mass media circulated in a number of United Nations institutions, beginning with the UNESCO conference in Montreal in 1969 (White 1988) and culminating in the publication of the McBride Report.

Latin America, one of the US spheres of influence and the site of a number of large development communications projects, provided the most influential critique. This region had given birth to a very wide range of alternative practices and to the "dependency" school, which included critics in a number of academic disciplines. Their critique of "modernism", posited that underdevelopment in the third world was a direct result of the political and economic policies of the metropolitan countries of Europe, and especially the USA.

The media reformers included scholars such as Bolivian researcher Luis Ramiro Beltran and Paraguayan researcher Juan Diaz Bordenave who argued that the US-dominated commercial media were creating problems for national development and political democracy. They and others called for media reforms in both domestic and international fora--more national content, less economic control by US multinationals and an end to US "cultural imperialism" through the dumping of films, magazines and television programs, which accounted for more than half the content on Latin American screens (Fox 1988). They demanded the establishment of regional press networks and other services

to replace the US news content and reinforce their national cultures.

Two other Marxist critics transplanted to Allende's Chile had an impact on the growing movement for popular communications. European critic Armand Mattelart's analysis centred on the oppositional capacity of these new media (Mattelart 1979) while Brazilian educator Paolo Freire, spoke against US programming's colonial invasion of the cultural context of the oppressed (Freire 1974), and espoused a method of "conscientisation" in which small groups of poor people would reject the invaders' explanations (Freire 1974) countering the imported messages by creating their own analyses in their own languages and cultural forms.

These two orientations -- of Marxist political opposition and emancipatory education continued to shape the practice of alternative media, organized by groups economically, ethnically, politically, geographically and culturally excluded from power (Fox 1988). They used their own cultural and linguistic vernaculars and a variety of indigenous communications forms such as music and drama, within modern modes of transmission such as radio, print and video, to counter the messages of domestic repressive regimes (Fox, 1988) and those of the international networks. Experiments, such as those in Allendean Chile, challenged "the exclusive right of the information-professional to produce news" (Mattelart, 1979:24) and demonstrated new production models that could be developed with supportive journalists (Gilbert 1988).

Most of these programs were initiated by left-wing or progressive institutions such as the trade unions (O'Connor 1989), or the popular church guided by liberation theology (Puntel 1992). Several of the trade union and left projects

were stopped during the repression of the 1970's. Many of the church-initiated programs remain.

### The Heritage of Canadian Alternatives

During the same period, Canada witnessed a variety of alternative communications experiments, developed by two distinct logics -- of the state, and of the newly emerging social movements who claimed their right to access to mass media as citizens (Salter 1976). Unlike Latin America, the most famous projects were funded by the Canadian state, whose aim was to extend access to "disadvantaged" communities (Henaut, 1991). Most famous was the National Film Board's "Challenge for Change" program, whose showcase was in the Fogo Islands in Newfoundland, where projects enabled the islanders to develop an increased sense of self-awareness and self-esteem (Don Snowden, in Riano, 1990). Middle class activists worked within governmental structures, building on the liberal pluralist heritage of John Dewey and other adult educators whose radio, television, and film work had aimed at social transformation through an active citizenship defining civic and national issues (Raboy 1990).

These projects, like some of those in Latin America were short-lived. The difference between the two regions's experience was that the Canadian projects were not shut by repression, but by government cutbacks. However, some have suggested that the government had always had very different motives about these projects than proclaimed: as the front-runners for major state-supported development projects (Salter 1980), or as part of a design to reinforce the isolation of local communities and make it difficult to widen support for local concerns across localities (Downing 1984). They were shut after they had outlived their usefulness. Regardless of intent, their simplistic equation of access as enfranchisement, and the attendant innocence

about the dangers of technicism and structural power inequities between the state, media producers and local communities now seems outmoded. They are no longer used by the state in Canada, but the idea has been successfully sold to development projects in the South.

Northern aboriginal communications practice has also contributed to new understandings of communication. Inuit spokespeople resisted the encroachment of "southern" satellite broadcasting because of its impact on their culture (Feaver 1976), and lobbied for control of their own communication media in Inuktitut (Feaver 1976, Valaskakis 1986). Through the 1970's they experimented with radio and television emphasizing local interactive uses and reinforcing indigenous languages and cultural forms (Koeberling 1988, Kidd 1990) Drawing on Harold Innis, critics noted the colonizing capacity of the mass media to reinforce local and regional marginalization (Salter 1980) and the replacement of indigenous modes of knowledge, communication and culture (Valaskakis 1986).

### **The Watershed: McBride**

The culmination of this media practice and theory was the McBride Report, convened by Sean McBride for UNESCO. The report popularized concerns about the imbalances and inequities of communications ownership and messages. It led to a strong negative reaction from western journalists, news organizations and governments who objected to their right to move and trade news and information without restriction.

The report represented a challenge to the dominant paradigm of communications. It named the structure of modern mass media as a major obstacle to the democratization of communication calling for a horizontal system based on human needs, the eradication of inequalities and the use of

appropriate technologies respecting the cultural context and "fostering the active participation of the population concerned" (McBride: 1979:39) The Report also recognized the activity of numerous grass-roots groups in "alternative communications" projects that were "bent on breaking the monopoly of centralized and vertical communications systems. (McBride, 1979:170)

#### A New Paradigm for NWICO

NWICO was effectively undermined by the exit of the US and Britain from UNESCO. Since then the focus of debate has moved from institutions of nation states to international market institutions (Mahoney 1989). The imbalance of communications resources continue, however it is no longer described simply in geo-political terms as inequity between the territories of nation states or of world regions, but also as the competition for markets. Several regional news, information and entertainment networks have been established. As well, while northern TNC's dominate, eastern and southern TNC's cater to growing demands for communications hardware and software of their domestic upper classes. The distinction between the information-poor and the information rich continues to be between nations and among nation states, and as importantly between TNC's over markets.

Within international state organizations, there has been a shift in emphasis in the practice and theory of the dominant communications paradigm (Mansell 1982) and of the "dependistas" (Blomstrom and Hettne 1984). There have been several attempts to reconcile these differences and achieve a new synthesis (Servaes 1986, Hamelink 1983, Halloran 1986, 1989, McAnany and Storey, 1989, Roncagliolo, 1986, White, 1988). However, most projects are still shaped by the agendas of international agencies and increasingly tied to neo-liberal agendas of restructuring.

In the previous decade, the alternatives have grown in number, organization and critical understanding. There are now several networks of producers, who exchange through conferences, festivals and computer links. Some critics have called for the recognition of alternative media as the "new" NWICO (White 1988, Ambrosi 1991). They have called for the rearticulation of the "alternative" not just as "other", but as proactively oppositional (Roncagliolo 1991), identified not with international agencies, but with the self-mobilization of social movements (Downing 1982, White 1988), directed by them (O'Connor 1998, 1993) and responsive to their needs (Ambrosi 1991).

These theoretical clarifications have resulted from the deepening of analysis within the practice of the alternatives themselves. While the literature is still sparse, there has been much more attention paid to internal analysis and critique (Downing 1982, Thede and Ambrosi 1991, Girard 1992), focusing especially on audience relation and the consequences for programming. Much has centred on the relationship between media practises and audiences, incorporating both mainstream audience research and participatory research.

There has been an extension of theory about the production form that alternative media takes. The concern is to embrace a range of different formats, that are relevant to the communications practices and experiences of each local audience. This reflects a turn away from earlier production discourses, that tended to be produced in reaction to mainstream media, within the same news-based format. Latin American producers in particular, have emphasized the need to recover the historical memories of the indigenous and mestizo populations whose histories were suppressed by the European colonizers, and to represent the fullness of contemporary everyday experiences. They have variously

called for producers to use their creative imaginations, and emphasize the entertaining (Mata 1990), or the ludicrous (Lopez Vigil 1991).

### **Women and Alternative Media**

Feminist critics have pointed to the lack of access of women to all kinds of communication resources (United Nations 1982, Gallagher 1988), showing that the gap is due to the active silencing of women in the male-dominated "public discourse" (Riano 1990), rather than in women's relegation to the "private sphere" (Smart 1989) or in any incapacity for public communication. One of the consequences of this active silencing has been the lack of attention, from state and non-governmental agencies, and the universities, to women's participation in the public sphere (Rakow 1992) and to their indigenous knowledges and communicative strengths in the family and community life (Alfaro 1988, Protz 1989).

In fact, women have been significant <sup>A</sup> players in alternative media -- urban middle class feminists, poor village and urban dwellers, trade union workers and those from the informal economy, indigenous groups and national minorities (Riano 1990). Projects directed to women have been initiated and operated by national and international state agencies, non-governmental agencies or independent feminist groups (IWTC, 1984).

While few of these experiences have been fully documented (Riano 1990) there are a number of common characteristics: the idea of communication as process (Protz 1989) involving women as active communicative agents. As in the Canadian and Latin American examples mentioned above, many of these projects incorporate an educative component (Riano 1990), using media to provoke critical reflection and provide meaningful information to participants, peers and their communities (Ford-Smith 1980). Women's projects often are

based on indigenous knowledges, communication forms and cultural traditions (Alfaro 1993, Bishop 1988), emphasising the experiences of everyday life (Alfaro 1988) and celebrating all ranges of expression, from the rational to the emotive (Alfaro 1993, Ford-Smith 1980).

After two decades of experiments, critics have begun to assess the impact of these interventions and some of the problematic trends. They have noted how difficult is it to make evaluations useful to participants, if the projects are financially tied to outside donors from national and international state agencies (Riano 1990, Ford-Smith 1989). They have critiqued the didacticism of feminist media representations of the 1970's and 1980's, which reproduced a dualist notion of women in their portrayal of two limited roles: Superwoman, or Victim (Alfaro, 1992). Instead, they called for a more sophisticated treatment of the range of options that women are developing and the creation of a new communications language appropriate to this complexity, that does not reproduce the dominant discourse of upper class men (Alfaro 1992). Some have even questioned the capacity of electronic media, that use a horizontal, but linear model, to fully engage the more circular forms of some indigenous communications address (Riano 1990). They have also critiqued earlier conceptions of "participation" that did not account for power differences between women due to class, race, or national origin (Riano 1993) and tended to reinforce the traditional power dominance of white or upper class women, through lengthy bureaucratic processes (Honor Ford-Smith 1989).

### Summary

These proposed readings will begin by situating alternative media relative to the dominant communications paradigms. I will ask what impact have the alternatives had vis a vis the dominant media? I will also investigate the very different

logic that alternative media practice poses vis a vis that of the market and the nation state. Finally I will ask what relationship is there between the practice of alternative media and the social movements that they aim to serve? In particular, how does the alternative communications paradigm incorporate or reject earlier indigenous forms of communications? How can alternative media carry out a practise that is oppositional?