Four Approaches to Alternative Media

Even within a single area of alternative media there is much heterogeneity (of styles, of contributions, of perspectives).

(Atton 2002: 8)

Introduction

In the aftermath of the student and workers’ revolt in May 1968, Libération appeared as the new ‘alternative’ newspaper of the left in France. Its first issue (18 April 1973) carried the following comment:

Since May 1968, the need for a new daily paper has been felt everywhere. A whole movement of ideas seeks to express itself, a movement that cuts across all the currents of the existing left, organised or not. Admittedly, it is confused, crossed by divisions, but nevertheless glued together around a common refusal of an authoritarian conception of life and around a common aspiration: for a democracy rejecting the exploitation of work, everyday violence in the name of profits, the violence of men against women, the repressions of sexuality, racism, a spoilt environment.

(cited in Mattelart 1983: 63)

This quote illustrates a number of issues that are of importance for this book. First, by referring to sexuality, racism, women rights, and the environment, it signals a widening of what constitutes the political. Second, it explicitly places the political within an open democratic project. Third, in refusing an authoritarian conception of life and politics, it touches upon the notion of power. Fourth, it talks about a movement of ideas, which can be attributed to a perceived need and struggle for change, as well as to
the need for a medium to string together the different currents within the movement. Finally, *Libération*’s troublesome history also illustrates how difficult it is for alternative media to survive in a market economy.¹

The above example shows that media do not operate or function in a vacuum, but are embedded in economic, political and cultural settings, be they local, national, regional or international. That is why, to understand (the importance of) alternative media we need to situate them in the political and democratic theories that have provided theoretical and intellectual support for their identities and practices. The participatory models of democracy and the related broadening of the definition of the political especially have influenced and cross-fertilized alternative media.

Participatory models of democracy emphasize the importance of ‘real’ citizens’ participation and their more active involvement in democracy (Barber 1984). As such, they criticize the radical separation of citizens from power, the elites and democratic institutions through representation, as argued for by more elitist democratic theorists such as Schumpeter (1942). As Pateman (1970: 42) explains:

> The existence of representative institutions at national level is not sufficient for democracy; for maximum participation by all the people at that level socialisation, or ‘social training’, for democracy must take place in other spheres in order that the necessary individual attitudes and psychological qualities can be developed. This development takes place through the process of participation itself.

While the extreme position of participatory democracy falls back on an idealized vision of Athenian direct democracy (Blackwell 2003; Gore 1994; White 1997), other conceptualizations try to reconcile the representative character of current liberal-democratic systems with various degrees of inclusive participatory instruments. These instruments range from public consultations, citizens’ juries and so-called multi-stakeholderism (Hemmati 2002), to voluntary organizations. Contrary to the more deliberative models, direct democracy is a much more individualized form of participatory democracy in which decision-making is based on the aggregate of individual opinions, for example, referenda.

The New Left conceptualizations of participatory democracy – developed by Pateman (1970, 1985) and MacPherson (1966, 1973, 1977) – focus on the combination of the principles and practices of direct and representative democracy. The problems of coordination in large-scale communities bring them to accept representation as a necessary tool at the level of national decision-making. At the same time they plead for the (partial) introduction of direct democracy in more localized and organizational spheres such as the political party system, the workplace and the local community. Although media do not feature prominently in their work, it is self-evident that they could (and should) be included in this list of organizational spheres.

Finally, the political is approached here in a broad sense and not restricted to a specific sphere or system. The political is seen as a dimension that is ‘inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition’ (Mouffe 1997: 3).
From this it follows that the political cannot be reduced to the formal political system, to institutions or to political procedures. Such a perspective on the political sees the whole of society in its different aspects – the school, the family, the workplace, the community and (alternative) media, as equally valid spheres for political-democratic activities. At the same time, this widening of what constitutes the political allows for the accommodation of sexual, gendered and cultural identities and struggles within the democratic project.

Defining the identity of alternative media

However relevant the above contextualization of alternative media is, these media are at the same time characterized by diversity and contingency. Even the concepts of ‘alternative media’, ‘community media’, ‘civil society media’ and ‘rhizomatic media’, which will be discussed in this chapter, have proven, in the long theoretical and empirical tradition of media research, to be highly elusive. The multiplicity of media organizations that carry these names have caused most mono-theoretical approaches to focus on only certain characteristics, ignoring other aspects of the identity of alternative media. This theoretical problem necessitates the use of different approaches to defining alternative media that allow for complementary emphasis on different aspects of alternative media.

This chapter aims to combine four theoretical approaches in order to capture the diversity and specificity of alternative media, to demonstrate their importance and to show the problems they face. The next chapter illustrates these four approaches by analysing the Brazilian film Radio Favela. This very convoluted film narrates the struggles surrounding a slum radio station in Belo Horizonte.

In the multi-theoretical combination of approaches, Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) political identity theory is used as an overarching theoretical framework. Their critique on essentialism that ‘There is no single underlying principle fixing – and hence constituting – the whole field of differences’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 111) is used to structure the theoretical approaches to alternative media. Their position allows us to distinguish between more essentialist and more relationist approaches to provide an overview of the components that construct the identity of alternative media. The more essentialist approaches tend to see identities as stable, independent and possessing a ‘true’ essence. The more relationist approaches incorporate notions of fluidity and contingency, see identities as mutually dependent and ignore the existence of ‘true’ essences.

Despite the incorporation of these essentialist approaches in this chapter (because of their importance in alternative media theory), identities are still – following Laclau and Mouffe – basically seen as relational, contingent and the result of articulatory practices within a discursive framework. Special attention is given to the concept of antagonism, which is seen by Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 125) as ‘the limits of every
objectivity’ or ‘the impossibility of fully constituting [society]’. While social antagonisms are traditionally seen as confrontations between actors with fully constituted identities, Laclau and Mouffe argue that social antagonisms both threaten and constitute identities. In the case of antagonism ‘the presence of the “Other” prevents me from being totally myself’, which means that within an antagonistic situation ‘I cannot be a full presence for myself’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 125). At the same time antagonism has a constitutive effect on identity (and society), as the ‘other’ becomes a purely negative point of identification or a constitutive outside. Howarth (2000: 106), for instance, writes that the role of antagonisms ‘is thus constitutive of social objectivity, as social formations depend upon the construction of antagonistic relations between social agents “inside” and “outside” a social formation’. In this chapter we contend that these antagonisms play an important role in defining the identity of alternative media, even in traditional media-centred models.

Although the first approach to alternative media (focusing on serving the community) uses a more essentialist theoretical framework that stresses the importance of the community, others explicitly focus on the relationship between alternative and mainstream media. This approach thus puts more emphasis on the relation of interdependency between two antagonistic sets of identities (alternative and mainstream). These traditional models for theorizing the identity of alternative media are complemented by two society-centred approaches. The first of these society-centred approaches defines alternative media as part of civil society. Despite the basic assumption that these civil organizations differ fundamentally from market and state organizations, some emphasis is still put on the interdependency of these identities. In this approach the autonomy of the identity of civil society organizations nevertheless remains an important theoretical assumption. In order to incorporate the more relationist aspects of civil society theory – articulated, for instance, by Walzer (1998) – these identities are combined with the critiques of Downing et al. (2001), Rodriguez (2001) and Caldwell (2003) on alternative media, and radicalized and unified in a fourth approach, which builds on the Deleuzian metaphor of the rhizome. This approach allows the incorporation (even more) of aspects of contingency, fluidity and elusiveness in the analysis of alternative media.

The four approaches are depicted in Figure 1.1.

Multi-theoretical approaches

A promising starting point for the analysis is given by the working definition of community radio adopted by AMARC-Europe, the European branch of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, an organization that encompasses a wide range of radio practices in different continents. In Latin America, the AMARC constituents are popular radio, educational radio, miners’ radio, and peasants’ radio. In Africa, they refer to local rural radio, while in Europe the terms associative radio,
free radio, popular free radio, neighbourhood radio, alternative radio and community radio are used. Asians speak of radio for development and of community radio; in Oceania the terms aboriginal radio, public radio and community radio are used (Servaes 1999: 259). This semiotic diversity not only forces us to select one denominator (alternative media) as a starting point, but, more importantly, it also shows the diversity of identities and practices. In its attempt to encompass all these identities and practices, and to avoid a prescriptive definition that would include some and exclude others, AMARC-Europe (1994: 4) describes a ‘community radio station’ as ‘a “non-profit” station, currently broadcasting, which offers a service to the community in which it is located, or to which it broadcasts, while promoting the participation of this community in the radio’.

**Approach one: Serving a community**

From AMARC’s working definition it is clear that there is a strong emphasis on the concept of community. Moreover, it explicitly highlights the geographical aspect (‘in which it is located’), although other types of relationships between medium and community are mentioned (‘to which it broadcasts’).

Given the importance of the concept of community, we need to look at its definition. Within the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, the concept of community has a long history. In the nineteenth century, Tönnies (1963) theorized a distinction between community and society, in which community is defined by the presence of close and concrete human ties and by a collective identity. The prevalent feature of society is the absence of identifying group relations (Martin-Barbero 1993: 29). Morris

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<th>Autonomous identity of community media (essentialist)</th>
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<td><strong>Approach I:</strong> Serving the community</td>
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<td><strong>Approach III:</strong> Part of civil society</td>
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<td><strong>Approach II:</strong> An alternative to mainstream</td>
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<td><strong>Approach IV:</strong> Rhizome</td>
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<td>Identity of community media in relation to other identities (relationalist)</td>
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Figure 1.1 Positioning the four theoretical approaches.
and Morton (1998: 12–13) exemplify Tönnies’s distinction using the concepts of communion and association; community thus refers to the ‘notion of a big family’, while society ‘represents a colder, unattached and more fragmented way of living devoid of co-operation and social cohesion. Instead of a sense of neighbourliness, people are isolated’.

A second (and related) feature is that a community does not require a formal organizing body, although it is often linked to such a body. As Williams (1976: 76) puts it in his Keywords:

The complexity of community thus relates to the difficult interaction between the tendencies originally distinguished in the historical development: on the one hand the sense of direct common concern; on the other hand the materialization of various forms of common organization, which may or may not adequately express this.

**Beyond geography (and ethnicity)**

Leunissen (1986) argues that conceptualizations of community predominantly refer to geography and ethnicity as structuring notions of the collective identity or group relations. In an early overview of community definitions, Hillery (1955: 111) emphasized the geographical dimension when he concluded that ‘most students (of community) are in basic agreement that community consists of persons in social interaction within a geographic area and having one or more additional ties.’

These structural conceptualizations of community have been redefined in the following ways:

- by supplementing the geographical with the non-geographical, and
- by supplementing the structural/material with the cultural.

The first non-geographical definition of community is the ‘community of interest’. Although one cannot explicitly assume that a group of people has common interests (see Clark 1973: 411ff.), the communality of interest can form the conditions of possibility for the emergence or existence of a community. As Lewis (1993: 13) remarks, a community of interest can extend ‘across conurbations, nations and continents’ and thus bypasses the geographical definition. Popple (1995: 4) distinguishes between communities of ‘locality or territory’ and ‘a communality of interest or interest group such as the black community or the Jewish community’. Popple adds that people sharing a common condition or problem – such as alcohol dependency – can also be seen as a community of interest.

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger developed the related notion of ‘communities of practice’. Here, emphasis is placed on the presence of shared practice. A community of practice is a joint enterprise, with mutual engagement of the members involved and with a shared repertoire of communal resources (Wenger 1998: 45). As Wenger et al. (2002: 4) put it: communities of practice are ‘groups of people who share a concern, a
set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.

Analysis of the impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on everyday life has shown that communities are formed not only in geographically defined spaces, but also in cyberspace. These communities are termed ‘virtual’ or ‘online’ communities. As is often the case when new technologies attract (academic or other) attention, their newness is emphasized and the ‘definitory’ links with the past are severed. Howard Rheingold’s (2001) definition of ‘his’ virtual community thus includes only the following components:

- Organized around affinities, shared interests, bringing together people who did not necessarily know each other before meeting on-line.
- Many to many media . . .
- Text-based, evolving into text plus graphics-based communications . . .
- Relatively uncoupled from face to face social life in geographic communities.

Castells (1996: 352) employs a similar definition in his *Rise of the Network Society* in which he describes the virtual community as:

- a self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organized around a shared interest or purpose, although sometimes communication becomes the goal in itself. Such communities may be relatively formalized, as in the case of hosted conferences or bulletin board systems, or be spontaneously formed by social networks, which keep logging into the network to send and retrieve messages in a chosen time pattern (either delayed or in real time).

Jones (1995) shows that virtual or online communities and geographically based communities have similar characteristics, while Kitchin (1998: 86–97) argues that people within virtual or online communities can form strong, cohesive and supportive groupings, rendering these communities global. These ‘new’ communities have nevertheless altered the rather fixed ideas about space and place (Casey 1997). They have clearly shown that geographical proximity is not in all cases a necessary condition for, or quality of, community. The increased emphasis on (global) space, threatening (local) place with discursive erasure, has prompted some authors to come to the defence of place, at the same time avoiding the trap of romanticizing it (see also Escobar 2000). Hollander (2000: 372), for instance, argues that place-based communities also use ICTs. Cyberspace is, in other words, complemented by cyberplace. What nevertheless remains a defining feature of community is the direct and frequent contact between members and the feeling of belonging and sharing.

A second type of reconceptualization is based on the emphasis of the subjective construction of community, in which Fish’s (1980) and Lindlof’s (1988) concept of ‘interpretative community’, Cohen’s (1985) ‘community of meaning’ and Anderson’s (1983) ‘imagined community’ are relevant. Although Fish developed his notion of interpretative community to deal with different interpretative frameworks in literary
criticism, and Lindlof’s reconceptualization was specifically aimed at redefining the audience as a community, their concepts focus on the cultural communalities that are found when texts are interpreted. Janice Radway (1991) illustrates magnificently how a female romance reading group develops into an interpretative community with shared interpretations and meanings attributed to the popular literature they are consuming.

Cohen (1985: 70), in line with the above, pleads for ‘a shift away from the structure of community towards a symbolic construction of community’ and, in order to do so, takes culture rather than structure as the point of departure. Communities then become ‘worlds of meaning in the minds of their members’ (Cohen 1985: 20). Finally, Anderson (1983) emphasizes the imaginary nature of the political community or nation, ‘because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (Anderson 1983: 15). From this perspective, community is not something that is imposed on people from the outside. A community is actively constructed by its members and those members derive an identity from this construction. This perspective also allows defining community as fluid and contingent, where the feeling of belonging to a community does not necessarily exclude affinities towards other communities or social structures.

These conceptualizations are depicted in Figure 1.2.

**Access, participation, and the media**
Alternative media are oriented towards a community, regardless of its exact nature (defined geographically/spatially or otherwise), but the relationship between the medium and the actual community transcends ‘ordinary’ one-way communication, where ‘topics are chosen in the same way, by professional communicators, and targeted towards the apparent needs and interests of the audience’ (Berrigan 1979: 7). As is illustrated in AMARC’s working definition (especially in stating that community

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<td>geography</td>
<td>community of interest</td>
<td>interpretative community</td>
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<td>ethnicity</td>
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<td>virtual or online community</td>
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**Figure 1.2** Defining community.
media should be ‘promoting the participation of this community’), relationships between broadcaster and community are defined by the concept of two-way communication. Here, the concepts of access and participation become important.

When focusing more explicitly on alternative media’s role in facilitating participation, we need to distinguish between participation in the media and through the media, similar to the way in which Wasko and Mosco (1992: 7) distinguished between democratization in and through the media. Both participation in the media and through the media see the (mass) communicative process not as a series of practices that are often restrictively controlled by media professionals, but as a human right that cuts across entire societies.

Participation in the media deals with the participation of non-professionals in the production of media output (content-related participation) and in media decision-making (structural participation). Firstly, these forms of media participation allow citizens to be active in one of the many (micro-)spheres relevant to daily life and to put into practice their right to communicate (see below). Secondly, these forms of micro-participation are considered to be important because they allow people to learn and adopt a democratic and/or civic attitude, thus strengthening (the possible forms) of macro-participation, as well as the civic culture. Verba and Nie (1987: 3) summarize it as ‘a participatory polity [that] may rest on a participatory society’.

Participation through the media deals with the opportunities for extensive participation in public debate and for self-representation in public spaces. This immediately implies that we are now entering the realm of enabling and facilitating macro-participation, which is related to the more ritualistic approaches towards media in general (Couldry 2002). Starting from a broadly defined notion of the political, consensus-oriented models of democracy (and participation) emphasize the importance of dialogue and deliberation and focus on collective decision-making in a public sphere based on rational arguments à la Habermas. Other authors (Fraser 1990; Mouffe 1994) stress more conflict-oriented approaches and oppositional public spheres. They point to the unavoidability of political differences and struggles and see the media as crucial sites for struggles for hegemony (Kellner 1992: 57). Despite their differences, both consensus- and conflict-oriented models stress the need for citizens to participate in these processes of dialogue, debate, and deliberation.

Although mainstream media have attempted to organize forms of audience participation (Livingstone and Lunt 1994; McNair et al. 2003; Carpentier 2003), alternative media in particular have proven to be more successful in organizing deeper forms of participation in the media, whether online or offline (Girard 1992; Downing et al. 2001; Rodriguez 2001). This position is exemplified by Berrigan, who claims that access by the community and the participation of the community should be considered key defining factors for alternative media:

they are media to which members of the community have access, for information, education, entertainment, when they want access. They are media in which the
community participates, as planners, producers, performers. They are the means of expression of the community, rather than for the community.

(Berrigan 1979: 8)

Defining participation
However important, access and participation are not straightforward notions. As Pateman (1970: 1) puts it (focusing on participation): ‘the widespread use of the term . . . has tended to mean that any precise, meaningful content has almost disappeared; “participation” is used to refer to a wide variety of different situations by different people’. It is tempting to see this process of the emptying of the concept of participation as a neutral event or as an accident of history. A more critical analysis shows that this is actually an ideological process, which aims (or threatens) to remove the more radical meanings from the concept of participation (Carpentier 2007c).

Two perspectives have had a fundamental impact on these more radical meanings of access and participation: Freire’s dialogical pedagogy and the debates in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) about access, participation and self-management in the 1970s.

Despite Freire’s focus on the educational process and the struggle against illiteracy and injustice, in which minimal account is taken of the (mass) medial context, Freire’s theory has had a considerable impact within the domain of participatory communication. Thomas (1994: 51) describes this influence as follows:

Although he never really linked his analysis to the use of particular media, it is implicit in his writings that communication, in order to be effective, has to be participatory, dialogic and reciprocal. In fact, the entire enterprise of participatory communication projects, from the organization and production of community radio in Latin America, Australia, and parts of Africa and Asia, through the practices of popular theatre in countries like Brazil, Chile, Jamaica, South Africa, India, and the Philippines utilize[s] Freire’s perspective.

Freire’s (1970) ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ is aimed against the traditional educational system, which he regards paternalistic and non-participative. His argument is that the traditional system considers knowledge as something that is passed on as a ready-made package rather than being the result of a dialogic meeting between subjects. The end result is that the education system is maintaining and supporting existing power imbalances. Freire aims to transform this system, allowing students (together with their teachers) to develop valid knowledge in a process of ‘conscientization’. ‘Authentic participation would then enable the subjects involved in this dialogic encounter to unveil reality for themselves’ (Thomas 1994: 51). In other words, participation is situated in a context of reduction in power imbalances, at both the broad social, political and economic levels (the relations between oppressors and repressed), and at the level of the education system, where students and teachers strive for knowledge in a non-authoritative collaboration that fosters partnership.
A second perspective was initiated at the UNESCO debates in the 1970s about the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) with the plea for a ‘free and balanced flow of information’. Very much at the centre of these debates was the right to communicate – referred to by Jacobson (1998) as a third-generation human right. When this right was originally proposed in 1969 – by the French civil servant, Jean d’Arcy – it aimed to broaden the right to be informed, which is embedded in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1980 the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (ICSCP) produced the so-called MacBride Report, *Many Voices, One World* (see ICSCP 2004). This was the first attempt to introduce the notion of communication rights at an international level and represented the right to communicate as a fundamental human right.

This repositioning expanded the traditional Western and liberal ‘right to be informed’, and redefined communication as ‘a two way process, in which the partners – individual and collective – carry on a democratic and balanced dialogue’ (ICSCP 2004: 172; emphasis added). In practice this meant that ‘a) the individual becomes an active partner and not a mere object of communication; b) the variety of messages exchanged increases; and c) the extent and quality of social representation or participation in communication are augmented’ (ICSCP 2004: 166).

In the UNESCO debates on the NWICO clear definitions of (the distinction between) access and participation were formulated. While their definition of access stressed the availability of opportunities to choose relevant programmes and to have a means of feedback, participation implied ‘a higher level of public involvement . . . in the production process and also in the management and planning of communication systems’ (Servaes 1999: 85; see ICSCP 2004). Referring to the 1977 UNESCO meeting in Belgrade, Berrigan (1979: 18) (partially) links access to the reception of information, education, and entertainment considered relevant by/for the community: ‘[Access] may be defined in terms of the opportunities available to the public to choose varied and relevant programs, and to have a means of feedback to transmit its reactions and demands to production organizations.’ Others limit access to mass media and see it as ‘the processes that permit users to provide relatively open and unedited input to the mass media’ (Lewis 1993: 12). Both the production and reception approaches are considered relevant and are included in Figure 1.3.

Participation, following Pateman (1970: 71), can thus be seen as a process in which the individual members (of a community) have a certain degree of power to influence or determine the outcome of that process. She defines partial participation as ‘a process in which two or more parties influence each other in the making of decisions but the final power to decide rests with one party only’ (Pateman 1970: 70; emphasis added), whereas full participation is seen as ‘a process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions’ (Pateman 1970: 71; emphasis added).

Alternative media not only allow but also facilitate the participation (in its more radical meaning) of its members (or the community) in both the produced content and
the content-producing organization. Prehn (1992: 259) describes the practical consequences of this definition of participation as follows: ‘participation implies a wider range of activities related to involving people directly in station programming, administration and policy activities’. Although power imbalances will not totally disappear, alternative media empower community members to co-decide at both the level of media content and organization.

**Access and participation of the community in alternative media**

In approach one – focused on serving the community – the relationship between the broadcaster and the community is in the foreground. By choosing a specific community as a target group, the (concept of) community itself is validated and strengthened. The audience is not defined as an aggregate of individuals with common socio-demographic or economic characteristics, but instead is defined as a collective of people incorporating a series of identifying group relations. Thus, the situatedness of the audience as part of a complex set of social structures is emphasized, deepening and bridging the traditional state–citizen and medium–audience dichotomies that still tend to articulate publics and audiences as (albeit segmented) aggregates of individuals.

Moreover, the aim of alternative media in approach one – serving the community – is often translated as enabling and facilitating access and participation by members of the community. ‘Ordinary people’\(^{10}\) are given the opportunity for their voices to be heard, and take responsibility for distributing their own ideologies and representations. Topics that are considered relevant to the community can be discussed by members of the community. This empowers its members by signifying that their statements are considered important enough to be broadcast. Societal groups that are represented one-sidedly, disadvantaged, stigmatized, or even repressed can especially benefit from using the channels of communication opened by alternative media, to strengthen their
internal identity, manifest this identity to the outside world, and thus enable social change and/or development.

On the downside, this orientation towards community also creates a situation of dependency on the community, as two-way communication requires two partners more or less equally interested in communicating. While the dominant discourse on media is based on one-way communication, raising the community’s interest to go beyond this limited form of communication does not speak for itself, due to what can be called the lack of two-way communication skills and interest. This problem is exacerbated by the diffusion of specific technologies oriented towards one-way communication and the lack of technologies facilitating two-way communication. Moreover, the concept of community has often been reduced to its geographical meaning. This reduction has trapped alternative media in the position of small-scale local media, gradually de-emphasizing their role of serving the community and eventually leading to the adoption of commercial media formats in their efforts to survive.

**Approach two: Alternative media as an alternative to mainstream media**

A second approach to defining alternative media focuses on the notion of the alternative. This concept introduces a distinction between mainstream and alternative media, in which alternative media are seen as a supplement to mainstream media, or as a counter-hegemonic critique of the mainstream.

Alternative media are inseparable from ideology, domination and the Gramscian notion of hegemony. As Atton (2002: 15) quite rightly states:

> We might consider the entire range of alternative and radical media as representing challenges to hegemony, whether on an explicitly political platform, or employing the kinds of indirect challenges through experimentation and transformation of existing roles, routines, emblems and signs . . . at the heart of counter-hegemonic subcultural style.

Along the same lines, Downing et al. (2001: v) describe alternative – or rather, radical – media as ‘generally small-scale’ and expressing ‘an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives’.

For this reason, we now turn first to the work of the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, and particularly to his ideas registered in the *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971). Gramsci’s thought focused on the process of intellectual and political changes through ideologies. It is a process in which different elements of an established ideological system are (re)articulated into a new system (Mouffe 1981). Hall (1996: 32) points out that for Gramsci ‘ideological struggles do not happen by displacing one whole, integral, class-mode of thought with another wholly-formed systems of ideas’. Ideological struggles work through a political strategy which involves a long and uneven struggle over the hegemony of the dominant group. They work not
only when people try to contest or rupture an established ideological field in favour of an entirely new one (in the case of revolutionary struggles), but also when they disrupt the existing ideologies by transforming their meanings. According to Hall (1996: 31), ‘often, ideological struggle actually consists of attempting to win some new set of meanings for an existing term or category, of disarticulating it from its place in a signifying structure’.

The concept of hegemony offers a historically contingent and negotiated view of how ideology works. Gramsci recognized the centrality of the ideological role of representation of ‘common sense’, the power of the ‘taken-for-granted’ and thus the important role of popular culture and the media in the ideological process (Turner 1992: 212). As Eagleton (1991: 115) suggests, ‘if the concept of hegemony extends and enriches the notion of ideology, it also lends this otherwise somewhat abstract term a material body and political cutting edge’.

**Hegemony and representation**

In discussing alternative media it is important to grasp the relationship between media and representation since one reason for the very existence of alternative media is to voice the ‘ideologies’ of those under- or misrepresented in the mainstream channels of communication. As Fleras and Kunz (2001: 40) remind us: ‘Mainstream media are framed as a contested site of competing agendas whose inner logic, institutional values, and commercial imperatives induce a reading of reality at odds with the aspirations of those outside a mainstream orbit’. Mainstream media are likely to construct and grant legitimacy to ‘leading’ social values through constant exposure of them to the audience. In this process mainstream media become ideological as they reproduce a constructed and preferred view of ‘reality’. In addition, they have the power to define which specific issues to bring to the public arena, and they become ideological by giving priority to the ideas of the main social actors such as the state, politicians, and private sector over the views of disfranchised minorities in civil society.

For example, most of the mainstream media coverage of the protests against the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 2000 showed protesters as misinformed people or individuals involved in the destruction of private property and engaging in acts of violence in public spaces; their views on global capitalism and social injustice were portrayed in a condescending and dismissive manner (DeLuca and Peeples 2002; Almeida and Lichbach 2003: 264). The mainstream news media mostly used official sources for information and opinion and very often denied access to the protesters to present their views. The result of this type of media representation was a demonization of the demonstrators as ultra-violent and the construction of a general consensus in favour of economic globalization; it was a missed opportunity for the media to inform the public about the issue of free trade from various perspectives (Howley 2005).

Representation in this political context becomes a ‘struggle for meaning’ and is an important source of social knowledge production – a ‘system, connected in more
intimate ways with social practices and questions of power’ (Hall 1997: 42). Reality and its meanings are constructed within language, discourse, and representation within a specific history and culture. In discursive terms this means that representation not so much distorts reality as productively provides the means by which reality is actively constructed (Hall 1997). For example, the British mainstream media have helped to reinforce a sense of national identity, of an ‘us versus them’ dichotomy, through their coverage of the alleged threat posed by immigrants to the British way of life. This in turn may reinforce old negative stereotypes of immigrants which might help to shape the audience’s perceptions of foreigners and their inclusion or exclusion in the new country (see Bailey and Harindranath 2005). This example also highlights the relationship between media representation and the material world, that is, symbolic representations are embedded in society through language and culture and they relate to the link between meaning and processes of political decision-making.

To that end, cultural scholars have drawn attention to the political significance of constructing class, ethnic, racial, gender or sexual identities through the development of images and narratives. This remark relates to a problematization of the modes of authority embedded in practices of cultural representation (Barnett 2003). As such, it draws on Foucault’s argument regarding the power of historically particular discourses, often legitimized by regulatory frameworks, to define how we should define ourselves and others, and how we understand our experience and social roles or subject-positions in different sectors of life such as sexuality, psychiatry, and crime. The distinct roles attributed to the individual within a particular discourse permits different types of identity to submerge, that is, obedient and resistant (Foucault 1980).

As Foucault (1980: 114) asserted, all power implies resistance and particular languages of power imply particular languages of resistance to that power. The language of resistance can be produced because meaning is not fixed; though inscribed in the material conditions of existence it might change over time, appropriate old signifiers and carry new connotations. This dynamic allows for meaning to be contested, challenged and changed. For example, representation of Western ethnic minority groups such as black people has been characterized by a ‘racialized regime of representation’, which could only be contested because of the unfixed and contradictory nature of meaning (Hall 1992a).

In other words, the mainstream media play a crucial role in naturalizing dominant forms of ‘common sense’. Nevertheless, subordinated groups exercise their power to contest hegemonic meanings through a discursive practice of resistance that is, to produce non-conformist and sometimes counter-hegemonic representations of the views of those marginalized, misrepresented and under-represented in the public sphere. Alternative media are one of the many available sites that provide these societal groups with the opportunity to produce these non-conformist and counter-hegemonic representations. Of course, there is no guarantee that these generated representations will necessarily be non-conformist and counter-hegemonic at all levels, simply because they originate from these societal groups. As Chapter 5 will show, hegemony plays at a
variety of societal levels, and simultaneously resisting all hegemonies has proven to be exceptionally difficult.

The contingency of the alternative
As alternative media are defined as being in a negative relationship with mainstream media, the contingency of this concept should be emphasized: what is considered ‘alternative’ at a certain point in time could be defined as mainstream at another point in time. The societal context in which alternative media function is inseparable from the concept of ‘alternative media’ and can serve as a starting point for the definition of alternative media. Present-day mainstream media are usually considered to be:

- large-scale and geared towards large, homogeneous (segments of) audiences;
- state-owned organizations or commercial companies;
- vertically (or hierarchically) structured organizations staffed by professionals;
- carriers of dominant discourses and representations.

Alternative media can take one or more opposite positions on these matters:

- small-scale and oriented towards specific communities, possibly disadvantaged groups, respecting their diversity;
- independent of state and market;
- horizontally (or non-hierarchically) structured, allowing for the facilitation of audience access and participation within the frame of democratization and multiplicity;
- carriers of non-dominant (possibly counter-hegemonic) discourses and representations, stressing the importance of self-representation.

A more elaborate description of these different domains is given by Lewis (1993: 12); see Table 1.1.

Being a different kind of media organization
This second approach to alternative media – as an alternative to the mainstream – defines these media as alternatives to and supplementing mainstream media on an organizational and content level. At the organizational level, the existence of alternative media shows that media can exist independent of state and market. As the pressure on large-scale mainstream media to become more market-oriented tends to be considerable, alternative media show that being the ‘third sector’ is still an option for media organizations. This argument can be applied for the (internal) structure of the media organization, as large-scale mainstream media organizations tend to have a more vertical structure. Thus, the more horizontally structured alternative media show that alternative ways of organization, and more balanced and/or horizontal structures, remain actual possibilities.

On the content level, alternative media can offer ideologies, representations and discourses that vary from those originating in the mainstream media. These differences emanate from the higher level of participation of different societal groups and
Table 1.1 Defining alternative media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Examples of the domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motive or purpose</td>
<td>• Rejection of commercial motives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assertion of human, cultural, educational, ethnic ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Oppose the power structure and its behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Building support, solidarity and networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of funding</td>
<td>• Rejection of state or municipal grants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rejection of advertising revenue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulatory dispensation</td>
<td>• Supervised by distinct institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Independent / ‘free’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Breaking somebody’s rules, though rarely all of them in every respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational structure</td>
<td>• Horizontal organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Allowing ‘full’ participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Democratization of communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticizing professional</td>
<td>• Encouraging voluntary engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practices</td>
<td>• Access and participation for non-professionans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Different criteria for news selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message content</td>
<td>• Supplementing or contradicting dominant discourses or representations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Expressing an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with audience and/or consumers</td>
<td>• Degree of user/consumer control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Allowing the needs and goals to be articulated by the audience/ consumers themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Democratization of communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition of the audience</td>
<td>• Young people, women, rural populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Diversity and multiplicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of diffusion</td>
<td>• Local rather than regional or national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of research methodology</td>
<td>• Qualitative, ethnographical and long-term research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Lewis (1993: 12). Some of the examples were added by us, others are based on Downing et al.’s (2001: v–xi) discussion of ‘radical alternative media’ characteristics.
communities and the aim to provide ‘air space to local cultural manifestations, to ethnic minority groups, to the hot political issues in the neighbourhood or locality’ (Jankowski 1994: 3). Mainstream media tend to be oriented towards different types of elites, as is the case, for instance, in mainstream news broadcasts favouring government sources, often resulting in what is called structural bias (see McNair 1998: 75ff.). The orientation of alternative media towards giving a voice to various (older and newer) social movements, minorities, and sub/counter-cultures and their emphasis on self-representation, can result in a more diverse content, signifying the multiplicity of societal voices.

At the same time, this rejection of the production values of the ‘professional’ working in mainstream media leads to a diversity of formats and genres and creates room in alternative media for experimentation with content and form. Thus, these media organizations can be rightfully seen as a breeding ground for innovation, often to be eventually adopted by mainstream media.

When alternative media are situated in an antagonistic relationship with mainstream media, alternative media may find themselves in a less advantageous position. Being small-scale, independent, and horizontally structured organizations carrying non-dominant discourses and representations hardly guarantees financial and organizational stability. This is especially the case when the antagonistic relationship between public and commercial media is placed in the context of competition, prompting these media to try to hegemonize their identities at the expense of alternative media. In such cases, alternative media are articulated as unprofessional, inefficient, limited in their capacity to reach large audiences and as marginal as some of the societal groups to whom they try to give a voice. This denies the need for an alternative, as mainstream media are deemed to cover all functions considered relevant to society. One of the main consequences of marginalizing the alternative and counter-hegemonic (or connotating it negatively, for instance, as naïve, irrelevant or superfluous) is the low political priority given to what is considered to be ‘marginal’, which in some countries has strengthened the downward spiral for these alternative media organizations (see Chapter 3).

**Approach three: Linking alternative media to civil society**

The explicit positioning of community media as independent of state and market supports the articulation of alternative media as part of civil society. Historically, civil society has produced the very ideas of citizenship, as well as the groups and pressures needed to realize these ideas and make social change happen (Janoski 1998: 17). Nevertheless, civil society is also a highly contested notion and only regained popularity as a concept after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the crucial role of civil society organizations in the demise of the old communist states (Kenney 2003). In this regard, the role of Solidarność in Poland is deemed especially relevant (see Arato 1981).
Defining civil society

From a theoretical perspective civil society can, broadly speaking, be conceived in two ways (Cohen and Arato 1992; Pérez-Díaz 1998: 211–13): as a generalist conception, drawing on the legacies of Hegel and Marx; or as a minimalist model, referring to Gramsci and Habermas (see Figure 1.4).

Hegel saw the sphere of civil society as constitutive of and constructive in integrating both perspectives, including the market as part of civil society and the state and a legal framework to safeguard the balance between private and public interests. While following Hegel in his conceptualization of civil society, which included the market, Marx passionately disagreed with the positive connotations attaching to this notion. Marx saw the state and the legal system as prime instruments under the control of the bourgeois elite. He argued that this automatically led to private interests determining public interests. Marx therefore saw civil society very much as a site where domination was organized, as the arena where a human being ‘acts as a private individual, regards other men as means, degrades himself into a means and becomes a plaything of alien powers’ (Marx 1975: 153).

Gramsci accepted that civil society is a site where domination by consent, or hegemony (to use his term), is produced and reproduced. But by analytically separating civil society from the market and the state, he pointed out that it is also a sphere where hegemony can be challenged and contested. As such, civil society is the space in which alternative conceptualizations of the political and economic system can develop and thrive. Gramsci’s dialectical understanding of civil society, seeing it as an arena of struggle over hegemony, ‘permits an analysis of contradiction and conflict . . . rather than viewing the primary contradiction as lying between state and civil society’ (Macdonald 1994: 276).

Neo-Gramscian perspectives on civil society consider this sphere to be relatively autonomous of state and market, overlapping slightly and engaging with state and market actors, but nevertheless fairly independent. It relates both to organized citizens mobilizing for social change and counter-hegemony, and to reactionary forces resisting change, reproducing hegemony. It represents ‘a sphere of social interaction between
economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and form of communication’ (Cohen and Arato 1992: ix).

Civil society should, however, not be conceived as being necessarily separate from, independent of or in opposition to the state or the market at all times. In mature democracies a complex interplay and overlap between non-institutional and institutional politics can be observed, which will be thematized as rhizomatic later. As such they cannot be construed as a dichotomy, but oscillate between convergence and contention. The state is not an entity separated from society and neither is there a clear distinction between what is called civil society, and institutional and formal politics.

Civil society itself is characterized by a high degree of differentiation and fragmentation. Civil society is by no means a single actor, although certainly in policy processes it is often presented in that way. For this reason Cox (1999: 10–11), following Gramsci, distinguishes a ‘top-down’ conception of civil society from a ‘bottom-up’ one. In the former case ‘the dominant forces penetrate and coopt elements of popular movements’, while in the latter civil society is conceived as ‘the realm in which those who are disadvantaged by globalisation of the world economy can mount their protests and seek alternatives’.

In summary, civil society is deemed important for a variety of reasons, as listed by Keane (1998: xviii):

- Civil society gives preferential treatment to individuals’ daily freedom from violence;
- the importance of enabling groups and individuals freely within the law to define and express their various social identities;
- the impossibility, especially in the era of computerised networks of communication media, of nurturing ‘freedom of communication’ without a plurality of variously sized non-state communications media;
- the superiority of politically regulated and socially constrained markets as devices for eliminating all those factors of production that fail to perform according to current standards of efficiency.

But of special interest . . . is the subject of democracy or, more precisely, the intellectual and political need to revive the democratic imagination.

To frame the diversity and multiplicity, but at the same time rather loose interconnectedness of current-day struggles, the ‘multitude’, a notion originally developed by Spinoza and reintroduced into political theory by Hardt and Negri (2004), might also be useful. According to Hardt and Negri (2004: 105) the multitude can be conceived as the ‘multiplicity of all these singular differences’. As such it allows for ‘the social multiplicity to manage to communicate and act in common while remaining internally different’ (Hardt and Negri 2004: xiv). As pointed out earlier, active, constituent power is attributed to the multitude, while the state’s power is described by Negri (1999) as constituting and reactive to the pressures of the multitude.
Also the notion of the multitude is connected to the broad approach to democracy and the political, which transcends the mere formal, institutional and procedural aspects of democracy. Democracy, from this perspective, also deals with activism, with political and cultural struggles in the process of social change that are actively performed in the sphere of civil society, and with changing political identities. Democracy is thus conceived as an open horizon without fixed content – a content that is the object of ongoing oscillations between conflict and always temporary consensus, and between inherently opposed interests within society. The democratic horizon recedes ever further, with new demands and new challenges, new political logics and new articulations of what constitutes the public interest (Laclau 1996).

**Alternative media as part of civil society**

By defining alternative media as part of civil society, these media can be considered the ‘third voice’ (Servaes 1999: 260) between state media and private commercial media. One of the clearest examples of this articulation is in the introduction to Girard’s *A Passion for Radio*, where he formulates an answer to the why of this passion:

> The answer to that question can be found in a *third type of radio* – an alternative to commercial and State radio. Often referred to as community radio, its most distinguishing characteristic is its commitment to community participation at all levels. While listeners of commercial radio are able to participate in the programming in limited ways – via open line telephone shows or by requesting a favourite song, for example – community radio listeners are the producers, managers, directors and even owners of the stations.

(Girard 1992: 2, emphasis added)

A starting point for defining alternative media as (part of) civil society can be found in Thompson’s (1995: 122) model describing the public and private domains in contemporary Western societies, and inspired by the Gramscian model described above. A series of changes can be introduced into Thompson’s model on the specificity of media organizations. Media deregulation, or, more generally, the impact of the neo-liberal discourse on media policies, has prompted public broadcasting organizations to adopt more market- and efficiency-driven approaches. This includes an increased emphasis on audience maximization (see, for example, Ang 1991), thus orienting the efforts of these companies (even) more towards the societal level, and (even) less to the community level. Alternative media still cover this terrain. Figure 1.5 depicts this reworked model and shows how this reorientation has allowed the market-driven approach to penetrate the public domain.

In his book *The Media and Democracy*, Keane (1991: 190) writes that ‘[f]reedom of communication is not something which can be realised in a definitive or perfect sense. It is an ongoing project without an ultimate solution. It is a project which constantly generates new constellations of dilemmas and contradictions’. Keane develops a
sound critique of the (neo-)liberal market-oriented conception of the media’s role and position in a democracy and their ideology of limited state regulation in that regard. Concerned by the emergence of private monopolies or oligopolies, and the increasing commodification of knowledge, Keane defends a two-way strategy to overcome this ‘market failure’, a strong and autonomous public service broadcaster and a robust regulatory regime for commercial media. We would argue, however, that a pillar is missing in Keane’s model, namely that of alternative media. It is the pillar of those watching the watchdog, and providing a complementary alternative to both public service and commercial media. Furthermore, the technological advances in terms of network-based communication tools, digital cameras and compression techniques, have provided these alternatives with new means to distribute alternative content worldwide.

Keeping alternative media embedded in civil society
The third approach defines alternative media as part of civil society, a societal segment considered crucial for the viability of democracy. Although the nature of civil society can vary extensively across nations and continents, it is argued here, following Cohen and Arato (1992: vii–viii), that this concept is relevant to most types of contemporary societies and can be seen as an important locus for the expansion or deepening of democracy by means of increasing the level of participation (see Held 1987).

Alternative media can firstly be seen as an ‘ordinary’ part of civil society, as one of the many types of organizations active in the field of civil society. The democratization of media (Wasko and Mosco 1992: 7) allows citizens to be active in one of many (micro-)spheres relevant to daily life, to organize different forms of deliberation, and to exert their rights to communicate. Secondly, as different political philosophers (from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft onwards) have
pointed out, these forms of micro-participation are to be considered important, because they allow people to learn and adopt democratic and/or civic attitudes, thus strengthening (the possible forms of) macro-participation. Verba and Nie (1987: 3) summarize this as follows: ‘a participatory polity may rest on a participatory society’. Held (1987: 280) exemplifies this in another catchy phrase: ‘we learn to participate by participating’.

When the specificity of broadcasters and their potential role as one of the major public sphere(s) are brought into focus and alternative media are not defined as just ‘ordinary’ parts of civil society, these media become important because they contribute to the democratization through media (Wasko and Mosco 1992: 13). Alternative media can overcome the absolutist interpretation of media neutrality and impartiality, and offer different societal groups and communities the opportunity for extensive participation in public debate and for self-representation in the (or a) public sphere, thus entering the realm of enabling and facilitating macro-participation.

This approach also allows a foregrounding of the struggle between alternative media (as part of civil society), the state and the market. Commercial (and public) media tend to see alternative media as ‘contenders in a Darwinistic struggle among commercially oriented media’ (Prehn 1992: 266). The rejection of advertising as a prime source of income by alternative media sometimes renders them financially insecure, causing them to limp from one financial crisis to another. Their situation is made worse when they (as part of civil society) are considered to be a threat to a repressive state. The objectives of alternative media can trigger interference from the state apparatus, placing their staff in sometimes life-threatening situations. When focusing on the internal functioning of alternative media, it should be emphasized that Making Democracy Work, to use the title of one of Putnam’s (1993) main publications, is a very difficult task that requires constant attention. Organizations that are horizontally structured and oriented towards participation have to deal with a certain degree of inefficiency, sometimes undermining their functioning and the realization of their objectives, or perverting these objectives.

**Approach four: Alternative media as rhizome**

When discussing the notion of alternative media, Downing et al. (2001: ix) critique its ‘oxymoronic’ nature: – ‘everything, at some point, is alternative to something else’ – thus legitimizing their decision to focus on ‘radical alternative media’, and thereby excluding niche trade magazines and corporate industry bulletins. However, they still emphasize the diversity that characterizes these radical alternative media, which are to be found in a ‘colossal variety of formats’ (Downing et al. 2001: xi). They nevertheless serve two main purposes: to express opposition vertically and to build networking laterally. A similar argument is developed by Rodriguez (2001: 20) who suggests the notion of alternative media be abandoned in favour of citizens’ media:
because ‘alternative media’ rests on the assumption that these media are alternative to something, this definition will easily entrap us in binary thinking: mainstream media and their alternative, that is, alternative media. Also, the label ‘alternative media’ predetermines the outcome the type of oppositional thinking that limits the potential of these media to their ability to resist the alienating power of mainstream media.

In discussion on civil society theory a number of authors have highlighted the interrelationship between civil society on the one hand, and state and market on the other. Though considered reductionist, the nineteenth-century Hegelian dichotomous model, conflating and fusing market and civil society, is ‘still used by some Marxists and particularly by neoliberals, neoconservatives, and present-day heirs of utopian socialism’ (Cohen and Arato 1992: 423). The fusion argument – proposed by Schmitt and Habermas among others – deals in a variety of ways with the totalizing or colonizing effects of state interventionism. Schmitt (1980: 96 – translated by and quoted in Cohen and Arato 1992: 239), for instance, states that ‘the pluralistic state becomes “total” not out of strength, but weakness; it intervenes in all areas of life because it must satisfy the claims of all those interested’. A less threatening relationist approach can be found in Walzer’s (1998: 138) paradoxical civil society argument: ‘the state is unlike all the other associations. It both frames civil society and occupies space within it. It fixes the boundary conditions and the basic rules of all associational activity (including political activity).’ He goes on to say, using a since much quoted and contested sentence: ‘Only a democratic state can create a democratic civil society; only a democratic society can sustain a democratic state’ (Walzer 1998: 140).

**Defining the rhizome**

These relationist aspects of the civil society approach and the (critiques on the) alternative media approach are radicalized and unified in a fourth approach building on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) metaphor of the rhizome. In the late 1970s and early 1980s both authors were heavily involved in the French alternative (free) radio scene as they saw there an opportunity to realize their ‘utopie deleuzoguattarienne’ (Dalle 2006). Authors such as Sakolsky (1998) also used Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphor to refer to alternative media as rhizomatic media.

The metaphor of the rhizome is based on the juxtaposition of rhizomatic and arbolic thinking. The arbolic is a structure, which is linear, hierarchic and sedentary, and could be represented as ‘the tree-like structure of genealogy, branches that continue to subdivide into smaller and lesser categories’ (Wray 1998: 3). It is, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the philosophy of the state. The rhizomatic, on the other hand, is non-linear, anarchic and nomadic. ‘Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 19).

In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari (1987) enumerate a series of characteristics of the rhizome – the principles of connection and heterogeneity, multiplicity,
asignifying rupture, cartography and decalcomania. Connection and heterogeneity imply that any point of the network can be connected to any other point, despite the different characteristics of the components. The concept of multiplicity constructs the rhizome not on the basis of elements each operating within fixed sets of rules, but as an entity whose rules are constantly in motion because new elements are constantly included. The principle of the asignifying rupture means that ‘a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 9). Finally, the principle of the map is juxtaposed with the idea of the copy. In contrast to the copy, the map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation. Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways’.

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 12)

**Rhizomatic media**
The rhizomatic approach to alternative media thus focuses on three aspects: their role at the crossroads of civil society, their elusiveness, and their interconnections and linkages with market and state. The metaphor of the rhizome firstly highlights the role of alternative media as the crossroads of organizations and movements linked with civil society. For instance, rhizomatic connections allow thinking about organizational structures where alternative media organizations can remain grounded in local communities and become simultaneously engaged in translocal networks (see Appadurai 1995). These translocal networks are characterized by the fluid articulation of a diversity of alternative media organizations. The rhizomatic approach thus becomes instrumental in avoiding the dichotomized positioning of alternative media in relationship to the local and the global, in opening up ways to theorize how the local and global touch and strengthen each other within alternative media (see Carpentier 2007a).

The rhizomatic approach also allows the incorporation of the high level of contingency that characterizes alternative media. Both their embeddedness in a fluid civil society (as part of a larger network) and their antagonistic relationship towards the state and the market (as alternatives to mainstream public and commercial media) make the identity of alternative media highly elusive. In this approach it is argued that this elusiveness and contingency, which also apply to a rhizome, are their main defining elements. This elusiveness is partially related to specific organizations. For instance, activist radio stations and independent media centres (IMCs) pop up when an event requires their presence, and they often silently disappear or transform into another media activity. The Seattle Indymedia, which started its operations at the WTO Summit, is a good example. But the elusiveness of rhizomatic media also
characterizes alternative media as such, as their diversity makes it very difficult to regulate and control them.

Like rhizomes, alternative media tend to cut across borders and build linkages between pre-existing gaps: ‘A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 7). In the case of alternative media, these connections apply not only to the pivotal role alternative media (can) play in civil society. They also apply to the linkages alternative media (and other civil organizations) can establish with (segments of) the state and the market, without losing their proper identity and becoming incorporated and/or assimilated. These more complex and contingent positions bring them sometimes to violently critique hegemony and in other cases to playfully use and abuse the dominant order. This interplay between resistance and cooperation does legitimize the utilization of the label of transhegemonic media.

Alternative media do not operate completely outside the market and/or the state, thus softening the antagonistic relationship (as being an alternative to the mainstream) towards the market and the state. They are, in other words, not merely counter-hegemonic, but engage which the market and state. In this sense they are trans-hegemonic. Alternative media do establish different types of relationships with the market and/or the state, often for reasons of survival, and in this fashion they can still be seen as potentially destabilizing – or deterritorializing as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) put it – the rigidities and certainties of public and commercial media organizations.

The elusiveness of the rhizomatic network, and its deterritorializing potential towards the more rigid media organizations in the public and private domain are depicted in Figure 1.6. It should of course be noted that even the vertically structured market and state organizations can show a fairly high degree of fluidity. But these organizations remain in most cases still considerably more rigid in comparison to civil society organizations. The deterritorializing effects of alternative media can (at least
partially) overcome this rigidity and allow the more fluid aspects of market and state organizations to surface.

*Elusive media at the crossroads, critically connected with market and state*

The fourth approach builds on and extends the importance that is attributed to civil society and democracy. In contrast to the third civil society approach, the main emphasis in describing the importance of alternative media is not on their role as part of the public sphere, but on their catalytic role in functioning as the crossroads where people from different types of movements and struggles meet and collaborate. These could, for instance, be members of women’s, peasants’, students’, and/or anti-racist movements. In this fashion alternative media not only function as an instrument giving voice to a group of people related to a specific issue, but also become a medium for rearticulating impartiality and neutrality and grouping people and organizations already active in different types of struggle for equality (or other issues).

Especially in the field of radical democratic theory, great emphasis is put on the need to link diverse democratic struggles in order to allow, as one of the proponents (Mouffe 1997: 18) puts it, the ‘common articulation of, for example, antiracism, anti-sexism and anticapitalism’. Mouffe goes on to stress the need to establish an equivalence between these different struggles; she considers it is not sufficient to establish ‘a mere alliance’ (Mouffe 1997: 19) but that ‘the very identity of these struggles . . . in order that the defence of workers’ interests is not pursued at the cost of the rights of women, immigrants or consumers’ (Mouffe 1997: 19) should be modified. This argument runs parallel with reformulations of ‘the ways in which power is enacted and citizenship is expressed’ (Rodriguez 2001: 19), as in radical democratic theory the political subject can experience and express the subject position of citizen in a multiplicity of forms, including political action embedded in daily life, based on economic, gender or ethnic relations (McClure 1992: 123).

The approach to alternative media as rhizomatic also makes it possible to highlight the fluidity and contingency of (community) media organizations, in contrast to the more rigid ways mainstream public and commercial media often (have to) function. The elusive identity of alternative media means that they can – by their mere existence and functioning – question and destabilize the rigidities and certainties of public and commercial media organizations. At the same time, their elusiveness makes alternative media (as a whole) hard to control and to encapsulate in legislation, thus guaranteeing their independence.

This fourth – rhizomatic – approach allows us to consider additional threats to the existence and functioning of alternative media. It is possible that its potential role at the crossroads of different social movements is simply not realized when, for instance, alternative media organizations choose an isolationist position or propagate one overpowering type of social struggle. Moreover, this role can also endanger these organizations when the objectives of (one of) these movements conflict with the objectives of the broadcaster itself, and when the independence *vis-à-vis* these movements and/or
civil organizations might be threatened. Further, the complex relationships with state and market organizations create the risk of incorporation of the alternative media by these organizations and/or loss of independence, for instance financial. The approach of alternative media as rhizome uncovers a fourth potential threat to the existence of alternative media. These media signify the fluidity and contingency of media organizations, in contrast to the rigidities and certainties of public and commercial media organizations. Their very elusiveness might prevent the existence of a ‘common ground’ on which policy can act. This lack of a clear ‘common ground’ unifying and structuring alternative media complicates the functioning of the organizations representing these media (such as AMARC) and has prevented the emergence of a well-defined alternative media movement.

An overview

The four approaches and the arguments presented showing the importance and weaknesses of alternative media are summarized in Table 1.2. This overview articulates alternative media as an important but vulnerable type of media organization.

Conclusion

Alternative media research has a long theoretical and empirical tradition that has tried to capture their identity. Due to the complexity and elusiveness of this identity, this project has proven to be a very difficult task. For this reason a multi-theoretical approach is preferred, combining essentialist and relationist positions within the general framework of the (political) identity theory of Laclau and Mouffe. None of the four approaches discussed in this chapter can be considered as giving a sufficient overview when applied independently, as we postulate that the only way to capture the diversity that characterizes community media is the simultaneous application of these approaches.

Special attention in the theoretical discussion on alternative media should be directed to the fourth approach, which uses the metaphor of the rhizome in order to radicalize and unify the relationist aspects of the civil society approach, the alternative media approach and some of the critiques of this particular approach. The application of a rhizomatic approach to alternative media identities has a series of specific advantages. Firstly, this approach – together with the civil society approach – is situated within a more society-centred approach to media. Media studies and communication sciences as a whole have a very long tradition of media centrality, which in a way has to be valued, but at the same time must be considered to be reductionist as it leads to an artificial separation between media and society. Secondly, the rhizomatic approach also deepens the civil society approach. The complexity and elusiveness of alternative
Table 1.2 Summarizing the four theoretical approaches to alternative and community media (ACM)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Importance of Community Media</th>
<th>2 Community media as an alternative to mainstream media</th>
<th>3 Linking community media to the civil society</th>
<th>4 Community media as rhizome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Serving a community</td>
<td>Validating and strengthening the community</td>
<td>ACM show that the ‘third way’ is still open for media organizations</td>
<td>Importance of civil society (as such) for democracy, with ACM as part of civil society</td>
<td>ACM as the crossroads where people from different types of movements and struggles meet and collaborate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Treating the audience as situated in a community</td>
<td>Alternative ways of organization, and more balanced and/or horizontal structures remain an actual possibility</td>
<td>Democratization of media in relation to micro- and macro-participation</td>
<td>Deepening democracy by linking diverse democratic struggles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enabling and facilitating access and participation by members of that community</td>
<td>ACM can offer counter-hegemonic representations and discourses that vary from those originating from mainstream media</td>
<td>Democratization through media: extensive participation in public debate and opportunities for self-representation in the (or a) public sphere</td>
<td>Highlighting the fluidity and contingency of media organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Topics that are considered relevant to the community can be discussed by members of that community</td>
<td>Emphasis on self-representation, resulting in a multiplicity of societal voices</td>
<td></td>
<td>Questioning and destabilizing the rigidities and certainties of public and commercial media organizations, at the same time making room for transhegemonic collaborations and partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opening a channel of communication for misrepresented, stigmatized or repressed societal groups</td>
<td>Diversity of formats and genres – room for experiment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Elusiveness makes ACM (as a whole) hard to control and to encapsulate – guaranteeing their independence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued overleaf)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threats to ACM</th>
<th>1 Serving a community</th>
<th>2 Community media as an alternative to mainstream media</th>
<th>3 Linking community media to the civil society</th>
<th>4 Community media as rhizome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependency towards the community</td>
<td>• Lack of financial and organizational stability, being small-scale, independent and horizontally structured organizations</td>
<td>• ACM as contenders among commercially oriented media</td>
<td>• Not realizing its role as crossroads</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising the community’s interest in two-way communication when the dominant media discourse is based on one-way communication</td>
<td>• Articulated as unprofessional, inefficient, limited in their capacity to reach large audiences and as marginal as some of the societal groups they try to give voice to</td>
<td>• Rejection of advertising as a prime source of income leads to financially hazardous situations</td>
<td>• Diverging or conflicting objectives with civic organizations, threatening the medium’s independence towards these organizations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of two-way communication skills and interest</td>
<td>• Low political priority given to the ‘marginal’</td>
<td>• Dangers caused by a repressive state</td>
<td>• Incorporation by state and market organizations, loss of independence towards these organizations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of technology facilitating two-way communication</td>
<td>• Reduction of community to its geographical meaning, trapping ACM in the position of small-scale local media, gradually de-emphasizing their role towards serving the community</td>
<td>• Dealing with a certain degree of inefficiency</td>
<td>• Lack of a clear ‘common ground’ leading to lack of policy efforts, complicating the functioning of representative organizations and preventing the emergence of a well-defined ACM movement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
media thus become defining elements, in contrast to the more rigid state and market. The role of alternative media at the crossroads of social organizations and movements, ‘connecting people’ – to abuse a commercial slogan – is also brought into the picture in this fourth rhizomatic approach. Finally, this approach allows the rigid separations that are created by the antagonistic position towards mainstream media (approach two) and towards the market and the state as such (approach three) to be breached. Alternative media have attempted to resist a large number of mainstream discourses at the communicative, organizational and political level. Fighting a war of position on numerous fronts has left the alternative media movement in a rather problematic, vulnerable and isolated position. Placing the rhizomatic approach in the foreground creates more room for both the deterritorializing of mainstream identities and collaboration with state and/or market organizations. These deterritorializing effects can open (discursive) spaces for the more fluid aspects of mainstream media identities. Through different types of partnerships and strategic alliances the survival of the community media can be guaranteed (better), on the condition that their independence vis-à-vis other civil society (non-media) organizations and vis-à-vis state and market organizations is sufficiently protected. The rhizomatic approach can help to support a more agonistic relationship with mainstream media and with the market and the state, reducing the antagonism that has for years hounded these media organizations. A further increase in the density of the rhizome will help alternative media to combine their critical stance towards mainstream communicative, organizational and political discourses with strategic alliances with the mainstream. This will ensure the continued existence of these important media, the democratic discourses they carry, and their capacity to strengthen (communication) democracy.

Notes

1 It is rather ironic that in 2005, 39 per cent of Libération’s shares were purchased by the banker Édouard de Rothschild (Rimbert 2005). This did not solve Libération’s financial crisis — witness the public outcry in the newspaper in September 2006.


3 Versions of the first (theoretical) part of this chapter were published as Carpentier et al. (2003a, 2003b, 2003c).

4 The object of this chapter – alternative media – of course complicates an unequivocal society-centred approach. This type of approach should rather be interpreted as the societal contextualization of (alternative) media.

5 The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters is usually referred to by its French
acronym, AMARC, or the Association Mondiale des Radiodiffuseurs Communautaires. The AMARC website can be found at: http://www.amarc.org.

6 Félix Guattari (1978) uses this concept on his writings on alternative media.

7 In sociology, a group of people that is formed based on common interests is usually referred to as a ‘collectivity’ (Merton 1968: 353). A collectivity does not always have direct interaction, and is often only based on a common goal or interest. The people who belong to a collectivity do not need to know each other, and one cannot always identify direct interaction between them.

8 The British television and web project, ‘Video Nation’, illustrates that the obstacles can be effectively reduced when the media professionals involved adopt an open, honest, respectful, process-oriented and (micro-)participatory attitude, based on a thorough analysis of the power processes and imbalances (Carpentier 2003).


10 In other words, people who are not part of a societal elite (including politicians, academics, captains of industry, and media professionals) and those not considered to be celebrities.

11 When referring to ‘mainstream media’ we are suggesting neither that they are monolithic nor univocal, that is, mainstream media do not always have the same concerns, the same political and ideological agendas – in fact most of the time they have contradictory and competitive interests.

12 For Foucault, discourse signified a ‘group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment . . . Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language’ (Hall 1992b: 291).

13 Through Schmitt (like Heidegger) turned to Nazism, his theoretical work remains of considerable importance. As Mouffe (1999a: 52) writes: ‘Schmitt is an adversary from whom we can learn, because we can draw on his insights. Turning them against him, we should use them to formulate a better understanding of liberal democracy.’

14 Deleuze and Guattari’s work is situated within the field of epistemology. Here we focus more on organizational structures that are seen as the sedimentation of the arbolic and/or rhizomatic ways of thinking.