Alternative and Mainstream Media

The Converging Spectrum

Linda Jean Kenix

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Linda Jean Kenix

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1

Introduction

Diverse media are central to a healthy democracy. The media re-present our politics, our social institutions, our governments and ourselves. A plurality of perspectives has been said to be essential in developing an engaged, mutual understanding of the differences and similarities that exist between us as human beings. Media construct our reality and help to define who we are and even who we wish to become. Communication is 'the creative making of a social order' (Hamilton 2000a: 361) that is confirmed and exercised within communication processes. Relationships are shaped and societal boundaries are formed through this expansive exchange of information. Research has argued that these communication channels should reflect the diversity that exists within society. Such interconnected diversity has been said to be absolutely central to a thriving democracy. To put it plainly, the importance of a diverse media to the enrichment of our daily lives simply cannot be understated (Carey 1989).

Alternative media, in particular, have been seen to be fundamental in providing diverse content to democratic societies. Alternative media, which are situated outside of the mainstream, have been said to articulate a 'social order different from and often opposed to the dominant' (Hamilton 2000a: 362). This point of distinction aims to celebrate diversity within society and increase our shared understanding of one another. If scholars and practitioners shift their focus away from media, and towards communication in general (Sparks 1993), then the potential strengths of what is commonly known as alternative media become even more obvious. Alternative media have been seen as distinctively different from the mainstream and have been said to have the capacity for 'transforming spectators into active participants of everyday dealings and events affecting their lives' (Tracy 2007: 272). This unique capacity of alternative media to influence social change has been found by other researchers (i.e. Atton 2002a; Downing 2001) to be generally absent elsewhere in the media spectrum.

Historical examinations of media have found differences between the alternative and mainstream to be quite prominent within what has historically been a polarized media system. This book agrees that very important differences remain between generalized conceptions of alternative and mainstream media; however, this book aims to question and investigate the complexities that now exist in categorizing and understanding our present media system. The convergence of communicative technologies, coupled with changing economic

mandates and a rising consumer culture, as well as a raft of other factors to be discussed throughout this book, has made the task of differentiating much of mainstream and alternative media difficult.

Modern mainstream media are increasingly using communication models that attempt to transport spectators into active participants – a feature commonly associated with alternative media. Conversely, many commercially minded alternative media outlets are borrowing economic models from their mainstream counterparts. Previous academic scholarship has focused on the hierarchy of influences (Shoemaker & Reese 1990b) to help explain the resulting content of particular media institutions. This hierarchy is traditionally viewed visually as concentric circles, which first begin with individual motivations and gradually move 'outwards' through organizational practices, ownership models and finally ideology. All of these influences except for ideology, which is embedded in all of the other levels of influence, are largely at the level of production. This range of production processes, in varying degrees of strength and purpose, has been said to have a direct impact on what constitutes resulting media content. But what if the content of alternative media is not as different from the mainstream as was once thought? Certainly, important points of demarcation continue to exist, but how would such signs of convergence complicate previous theories of a unique hierarchy of influences that has historically helped to describe mainstream media in counterpoint to the alternative press? Or are the hierarchies themselves conflated in today's technologically infused, commercial society? A broader, yet related, question is what does it mean to be alternative within a media spectrum that at least appears to include every taste, interest and political perspective possible?

Alternative media have traditionally been considered to be quite distinct from their mainstream counterparts. A rather reductive argument that is frequently drawn upon in general discourse is that alternative media publish information generally not seen in the mainstream media, from a perspective generally not accepted within the mainstream press, in a way generally not found in mainstream content. This argument would suggest that alternative media are not interested in maximizing audiences like their mainstream opposition and therefore don't succumb to the often conventional and formulaic reporting techniques of mainstream pack journalists. This position argues that alternative media generally seek to critique capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy and the nature of corporations. Conversely, a pervasive critique of the mainstream press is that they are so entangled in the perpetual cycle of mergers and corporate acquisitions that they are locked within a hegemonic world view that does not allow for investigative enquiry. This argument would suggest that mainstream media are trapped within entrenched norms and values that predispose a certain perspective of the world, whereas alternative media, free from such ideological and structural constraints, report issues in a manifestly different manner than their mainstream opposition.

These perspectives are obviously simplistic but help to serve as a benchmark for the widely accepted chasm between these two divergent silos of media. There are no clearly delineated and agreed-upon definitions for what constitutes alternative and mainstream media. However, for the purposes of this text, it is worthwhile to state that alternative media have historically been defined by their ideological difference from the mainstream, their relatively limited scale of influence in society, their reliance on citizen reporting and their connections with social movements. Mainstream media have been defined in contrast to these points of demarcation: they are situated completely within (and concomitantly co-creating) the ideological norms of society, enjoy a widespread scale of influence, rely on professionalized reporters and are heavily connected with other corporate and governmental entities.

Some recent research (most notably Atton 2002a; Downing 2001; Hamilton 2006) has suggested that scholarship should be wary of viewing alternative and mainstream media as mutually exclusive binaries. This text agrees with those sentiments and goes further to argue that any conclusive distinctions between commercially minded alternative and mainstream media may even be disappearing. This is not to say that differences between these two previously envisioned encampments of media do not still exist on a fundamental, political level. There is something tangibly different between how the socialist magazine and website *The Monthly Review* and Rupert Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* report fiscal issues. But there is also something materially different between how traditional mainstream outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* report those same fiscal issues. In addition, it can be said that there are very few similarities that can be logically drawn between the alternative conservative blog, PowerLine, and the alternative Jewish magazine and interfaith movement, *Tikkun*. Although both PowerLine and *Tikkun* are what are commonly referred to as alternative outlets, they simply share very little in common. Indeed PowerLine and *The Wall Street Journal* draw many parallels with each other. It is important to state that these differences and similarities are not simply about political persuasion. They are fundamental differences in the models of communication used, which are the result of a complex, interwoven mix of factors that combine to create media content. What defines all of these media outlets is far more nuanced in today's technologically infused media market than was even considered possible when most of these academic and professional definitions and distinctions were first created.

It is also worthwhile to reflect upon the reality that while many alternative (and mainstream) media offer ideologically challenging positions, no media are situated completely outside of the ideological mainstream, carrying distinctive identities completely excluded from entrenched, elite systems of power. All media, particularly commercially minded media, exist within the same capitalistic framework that drives much of the decisions, practices and resulting content found across the media spectrum. This book argues that alternative

media can – and do – construct distinct 'alternative communications' but perhaps along a different continuum (or continuums) than envisioned earlier. The text aims to tease out the differences and similarities as well as the strengths and weaknesses across media, which combine to form resulting media content.

In a 2010 plenary presentation to the International Association for Media and Communication Research, the prominent media scholar Barbie Zelizer stated that 'media cultures can be defined as environments in which beliefs, actions, behaviours, values, mindsets and notions of authority, power and community come together with people, organizations and resources involved in some capacity with the media' (Zelizer 2010). This accurate and exhaustively inclusive definition of media problematizes any attempt to categorize media into coherent, contingent semantic divisions. Media extend into every facet of modern life, and information now duplicates in confounding multitudes. This struggle to capture the constitution of media itself is highlighted by the myriad of attempts at defining alternative media in academic scholarship. This is not to say that such attempts should not be undertaken. There is much to be learned from how media can be categorized along indices of industry, content, professions and approaches. However, there is also much to be gained from a better understanding of the areas where such distinctions are blurred and categorizations are problematized.

This book argues that traditionally conceptualized mainstream and alternative media now draw so heavily from practices historically thought to be the purview of the other that it is increasingly difficult to ascertain any clear demarcations of difference. Most individual media can no longer be compartmentalized within each categorical nuance of what has traditionally been conceived as alternative or as mainstream. This relatively recent shift in media is not only a change in the linguistic assessment of a category for organizational purposes. This shift represents a convergence in the media spectrum, which has traditionally been conceptualized as sections of mutually exclusive domains for alternative and mainstream media to occupy separately. This book will explore examples from across these traditional encampments to better understand how individual motivations, organizational practices, media ownership and ideological influences may be conflating to produce a converged, re-mediated, media spectrum.

The arguments within this text will principally be based on online and offline newspapers and magazines as well as blogs and social networking tools of communication, although ancillary examples will also come from other forms of media. Alternative media include limitless genres and modalities, such as film, gaming, art, protest, music and graffiti (Downing 2001). However, examples drawn for this text will principally be from commercially minded media with at least an ancillary goal for economic sustainability, coupled with an interest in current news events. Being commercially minded does not mean that these media were created with the specific aim to make a profit. Rather,

commercially minded alternative media are cognizant of economic pressures and fiscally plan their operations in such a way to (hopefully) ensure their own continued existence – even if the chance of economic sustainability is quite small. Evidence of an economic mandate within media organizations, albeit even if it is quite secondary, can be detected simply by asking media representatives, but also by the presence of advertising, subscription fees or donation requests. This prerequisite for inclusion into this text would exclude media that exist for their own sake, such as media created explicitly for artistic purposes or media with a strictly altruistic intent. The reason for limiting examples in this text to commercially minded, current events media is that any comparisons made between the communicative models of alternative and mainstream media might then highlight differences that are due to purposefully unique characteristics and not a difference in subject or intent. For example, contrasting a subversive performance art piece with a mainstream article from *The Age* would most likely reveal striking differences in content, but such differences lose their meaning in a comparative context. One would expect a performance art piece to be different from a mainstream news article, given the widely different modes of expression and the creator's intent as either art or as commerce. Commercially minded operations share a fundamental perspective on self-sustainability that necessitates a certain level of audience awareness. This may be where the resemblance ends, but it is a point of similarity from which it might be possible to draw more evocative conclusions about the nature of an organization.

It should be noted, however, that the capitalistic intent of the *Guardian*, for example, would undoubtedly be quite different from the liberal arts 2.0 blog, kottke.org. Even Jason Kottke, the blog's creator, states plainly that he created the site 'for fun *and income*' (Kottke 2010, italics added). He creates the site for his own pleasure but also hopes to provide a sustainable income for himself. In aiming for an economic return, Kottke must gain a sense of what his readers expect from his blog in the hopes that he can fill that need and potentially earn an income. This interest in the audience is manifestly part of any economic equation. It is also this interest in the audience that gives the alternative and mainstream media in this book an originating commonality – no matter how slight. It should go without saying that commercially minded media may share this important facet of operations but then can still operate in strikingly different ways. It is that point of difference (or potential similarity) that is the focus of this book. By limiting this analysis to commercially minded media focused on current events, this book will hopefully be better able to make meaningful and cogent comparisons between the alternative and mainstream press, while still directly addressing what it still means to be alternative and mainstream in contemporary society.

In taking such an approach, this book aims to examine how traditional and non-traditional notions of power are implicated in the operations of both

alternative and mainstream media systems and institutions. Examples will be drawn principally from the United States, New Zealand, Australia and England in attempt to gage, on some level, the state of English-speaking alternative and mainstream media. Obviously, this is not a conclusive or exhaustive examination of all alternative and mainstream media throughout the English-speaking world. Yet examples in this book were purposefully selected as potential illustrations of other global media. Although these examples are largely drawn from four specific countries, the analyses made will be applicable to a much larger audience.

Historically, alternative media have been a central force in social change. Gitlin (1980) was among one of the first scholars to chronicle the impact that negative mainstream coverage, and positive attention from the alternative press, could provide for a social change organization. He examined the Students for a Democratic Society in America during the politically turbulent 1970s and found obvious differences in the sources used, the opportunities for activism within each media institution, the levels of transparency in coverage, the personal characteristics of reporters, the organizational structure of each media organization and the representations of power found in what was then a widely divergent press system. Thirty years after his groundbreaking work, it still must be recognized that many alternative media maintain the same differences from the mainstream press that Gitlin first highlighted. However, many contemporary alternative media outlets clearly do not uniformly subvert the hierarchies of access that Gitlin (1980) found to be so fundamental in the division between the alternative and mainstream press. For example, the most popular blog in New Zealand, Kiwiblog, is the work of David Farrar, a former advisor to New Zealand's Ministerial Services and previously employed by the Prime Minister's Office. He is heavily involved with the National Party, which is the country's largest centre-right political party. His résumé reflects a person who situates himself squarely within traditional processes of political power and not as a radical outsider aggravating for structural change. Farrar's blog follows a format similar to other contributors in the blogosphere, whereby he generally selects a news story from 'mainstream media' and then offers his own perspective, which in this case generally supports the traditional centre-right position. When he has had original interview material to share on his blog, it has been exclusively from what could quite confidently be labelled as entrenched, institutional sources of power: government representatives, political leaders and business owners. Does this then mean that Kiwiblog is not alternative? The independent blog operates far outside of what one would consider being corporate mainstream media. However, the content of Kiwiblog, like most political current events blogs, is largely from the same hierarchies of access used by those in the mainstream. It is not Kiwiblog's ideological affiliation that necessarily complicates its placement as an alternative media outlet. Rather, it is the process of investigative newsgathering, the kinds of stories that

are emphasized and the manner that these stories are told that all resemble mainstream news practices. Of course, journalistic norms and routines are not unique to the mainstream press, but the extent to which alternative media now draw from these professional standards will be explored further to help coalesce this relatively fractured field of study.

While arguing that there are new converged areas of overlap along the media spectrum, this book does not argue that all alternative media share the same individual motivations, organizational practices, media ownership and ideological influences of the mainstream press. One can look rather quickly to examples such as *Green Left Weekly*, a progressive Australian on- and offline publication, to see that it covers climate change quite differently than *The Age*, for example. More specifically, *Green Left Weekly* recently focused their discussion of climate change principally on the projected 40 to 50 per cent of all food wasted in the United States, while *The Age* remained fixated on the possibility of increased carbon taxes for local businesses. This is an obvious ideological and practical difference in approach that cannot be ignored. The frames used in these instances indicate who the newspaper thinks is the cause of climate change, who is affected and who is responsible. This difference in coverage is the result of starkly different motivations, organizational practices, ownership models and ideological influences. Yet there are also many more similarities between commercially minded media that go largely unnoticed. These similarities are in the process of gathering, collating and disseminating information across the media spectrum that results not only in converged practices but also in an increasingly homogenized range of content as well.

The following is a brief review of the eight chapters that constitute the remainder of this book:

Chapter 2: The modern media continuum

This chapter will begin by exploring the many complex, and at times contradictory, definitions of alternative media that now exist. Some scholars have argued that, in essence, those who say they are alternative media, simply are alternative media. This definition works as an individual label and helps to clarify processes of identity formation, but it does little to advance an understanding of media as an institution. Other research has tried to distance the field away from the term 'alternative' but for reasons outside of a converged media spectrum. Some find the word alternative places too much legitimacy on the mainstream press by denoting somewhat of a secondary status to a far more central – and therefore more important – mainstream press. Downing (2001) has problematized the word alternative in his rational argument that everything is an alternative to something else. Following this logic, he

argues that the label itself is somewhat oxymoronic. Others suggest labels to identify media not within the mainstream: independent, radical, activist, participatory, citizen, tactical, community and autonomous media. Each of these conceptualizations attempts to capture something unique about a specific media that exist outside of corporate entities. All of these categorizations share a foregrounding in social critique, which has historically placed alternative media in diametric opposition to the mainstream press. It is perhaps because of this shared perspective that potential commonalities in individual motivations and identities, organizational practices, media ownership and ideological influences have not as easily been detected.

The chapter transitions from previous definitions of alternative and mainstream media to an examination of particular examples of media convergence ranging from online newspapers, magazines and blogs to social networking. First, a brief historical examination of newspapers reveals how they were initially viewed as a 'means of instruction' to 'prepare the minds of people' for civic action. The chapter explores how this populist envisionment moved almost exclusively to the alternative realm of newspaper production while mainstream media subsumed a much more economically focused mandate. Today, fiscal goals have gained primacy across the media spectrum, as the organizational structure and internal policies of almost all media are largely oriented towards revenue building. However, this text will argue that many media across the spectrum have begun to re-embrace their earlier dictums to 'prepare the minds of people' for civic action, albeit on a somewhat limited scale pertaining to information exchange and interconnectivity. But this shift is reflective of an overall emphasis across the media spectrum on social networking and individual empowerment – an approach that did not exist 10 years prior. This chapter will examine recent moves by the mainstream media to incorporate traditionally alternative media practices into their standard operating procedures and also look at some innovative examples of interconnectivity from alternative media.

Chapter 3: Media frames

Media as an institution exist within a much larger network of interpersonal and societal influences. So it is important to remember that any examination of media frames cannot divorce the frames themselves from the social and cultural scripts from which they are drawn. On the one hand, media construct powerful images of reality for the public, but on the other hand, the public draws upon these frames and contextualizes them against pre-existing schemas. The term 'frame' has been problematized by a history of multiple uses. This chapter reviews the many conceptualizations of frames as well as

varying definitions of narrative analysis and ideology to arrive at a purposeful framework used throughout the remainder of this book. Understanding frames is central to understanding how alternative and mainstream media construct their messages. An examination of the differences and similarities between mainstream and alternative media can't exist without a thorough review of media framing. Media frames are the structure of information. They provide meaning, emphasize areas of importance and organize the narrative of each story. Media frames signal to the reader what is important and also, by default, what is not. While media frames help content creators make sense of the often complicated information, they also allow readers to detect similarities and differences between media outlets. One can't make statements of comparison between media outlets without a comprehensive examination of the frames within that content. This alludes to the strength of examining frames as an analytical method as it can disentangle the 'taken for granted' assumptions which can potentially have a profound impact on society.

The chapter will examine this potential impact through an examination of how several contemporary social issues and marginalized people have been framed in the mainstream and alternative press. First, the chapter explores how mainstream and alternative media have historically covered social movements. This is a particularly important group to examine as most social movements exist to oppose the status quo and are usually in direct opposition to hegemonic social and political structures. Any differences between representations would signal a wide variance between mainstream and alternative media outlets, while similarities would suggest just the opposite. The chapter then moves to examine how representations of power have been framed within the mainstream and alternative press. Again, this is a purposeful exemplar in this context, given that many alternative media outlets exist specifically in contradiction to conventional notions of hierarchical power. The chapter then continues to explore how other marginalized groups have been framed within the mainstream and alternative press. While certainly not an exhaustive review of all alternative and mainstream media available, this chapter comments on some surprising similarities found between media that are often suggested to be diametrically opposed.

The chapter then specifically examines how climate change, as a once marginalized topic, has been addressed in New Zealand's mainstream online newspapers and the country's major alternative online information portal, Scoop. New Zealand is particularly interesting in this context given the country's historical roots in progressive social change and its international image as 'clean and green'. This study explores whether climate change has been framed within the alternative media, not as a sacrifice or a penalty but as an opportunity to benefit the future (O'Riordan 2007). Researchers (Nisbet & Mooney 2007) have argued that scientific reporting must move towards moralistic frames if society is to begin making fundamental changes. O'Riordan (2007), a previous

British Sustainability Commissioner and advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair, has speculated aloud that such a phenomenon might be already occurring in the New Zealand press – particularly within alternative media. If alternative media do frame issues and peoples in ways strikingly different than the mainstream press, and if they serve as a harbinger in the continual process of social change, one would expect to see these differences across New Zealand media in relation to climate change. This chapter concludes by testing this assumption.

Chapter 4: The power of representation

In moving through a discussion of framing, the text implicitly recognizes the constitutive power of media. Chapter 4 will examine how different media, across a broad spectrum of outlets, have framed issues and people with the aim of exposing the tensions, differences and similarities that exist within society. Alternative media have traditionally offered an independent, and quite distinct, platform for groups and individuals that have been marginalized by the mainstream media. Alternative media have provided such groups with much needed context in a media environment that largely ignores their viewpoints. They have historically been seen to advocate programmes of social change through the framework of politicized and in-depth social commentary. In contrast, mainstream media have been traditionally viewed as maximizing audiences through pack journalism that is conventional and formulaic, relying on content that would appeal to the most number of readers and therefore ignoring the issues that are perhaps more important to smaller, minority groups. The result has historically been content that is often binary and reductive. These definitional frameworks remain important in conceptualizing how the ends of a media spectrum might operate. Although it is argued that they are not as useful for describing the millions of alternative and mainstream media outlets that exist along the contemporary media continuum. Yet these definitions are useful in understanding the importance of media frames in society.

This chapter examines how media coverage, with an initial emphasis on mainstream media, has worked to historically support institutional and relational hegemony within social systems. Gitlin (1980) credits Gramsci (1971) in defining hegemony as 'the systemic (but not necessarily or even usually deliberate) engineering of mass consent to the established order' (Gitlin 1980: 253). This chapter begins by questioning the role mainstream and alternative media may have in creating – and also rupturing – established hegemonic social processes. In doing so, the chapter examines oppositional as well as dominant readings of media coverage in order to have a stronger contextual understanding of the frequently problematic relationship between media framing and social change. Our public understanding of each other and

our shared social issues are built upon a continually evolving construction provided by media over the entirety of our lives. This public understanding is not the result of a one-dimensional, monolithic series of symbols but the result of media frames continually shifting their re-presentations of society. These frames construct our shared, social reality (Tuchman 1978).

Same-sex rights are examined as a comparative study of mainstream media coverage in both New Zealand and the United States and the subsequent social policy within each nation. Online newspaper articles from a range of mainstream outlets in the United States and New Zealand were examined through a content analysis to review the widely studied frames in journalism: conflict, responsibility, human interest and morality. This text, like many other analyses of how reality is socially constructed, argues that these representations could have an important impact on how social policies in these countries are formed. There are obviously several other possible contributing reasons for such differences in social policy. Certainly, the role of culture cannot be overlooked. But culture does not exist outside of media representation. Media content can play a central role in changing culture, and the reverse can also be said. This study, and the chapter as a whole, argues that there are potentially strong effects of media content on society. All media, whether mainstream or alternative, have a role in the definition and even constitution of our reality.

Chapter 5: Defining media through individual motivations and identities

This chapter, and Chapters 6 to 8, details the unique qualities that have historically defined all of the media – particularly in relation to the distinctions typically made between alternative and mainstream media outlets. These distinctions are categorized on the basis of work initially from Shoemaker and Reese (1990b) and then later Reese and Ballinger (2001), who divided the forces that shape media messages into personal views, media routines, media organizations, external pressures and ideology. These forces have been further consolidated for the purposes of this text into four categories: individual motivations and identities, organizational practices, media ownership and ideological influences. Given the widespread assumption that alternative and mainstream media differ on fundamental issues of representation, one would assume that there must be differing forces at play that help to create such content. These forces are examined in further detail to determine where specific differences may reside, if at all.

This chapter begins by reviewing the influence of personal views on content. Personal views include individual characteristics, political bias as well as perceived roles and individual ethics. The chapter explores much of

the research surrounding individual influences on the media. For example, the potential interrelationship between personal characteristics, political identity and media content are explored. The chapter investigates several examples from the entire spectrum of media, which both contradict and support the idea of individual-level identities pervading through media content. This portion of the book questions the level of impact such personal beliefs could have within a broader ideological system that operates within any capitalistic organization. In doing so, the chapter also explores commonalities in individual ideologies and identities across the media spectrum. While differences exist, this research asks whether there are shared individual-level assessments about what it means to be a communicator, blogger, journalist or media representative.

A study of 'non-deviant' mainstream current event websites and 'deviant' alternative current event websites are examined to better understand the relationship between the stated identity of a media organization and the visual identity used for self-representation. Deviance was used in this instance as a conceptual tool for categorizing the identities of media organizations. Standards of deviance have historically been constructed on loose political grounds. Meaning the further away from moderate centrist views, such as similarity to the majority and the amount of change advocated, the more deviant the group (Shoemaker 1984). Organizations can deviate from the mainstream along almost any conceivable axis, such as occupation, sexuality, politics, philosophy, economics or violence. More deviant organizations have historically represented themselves through direct persuasive imagery that could often utilize violence (Ray & Marsh II 2001) or subversive design techniques, such as instability and fragmentation. In doing so, these groups have challenged design techniques and popular aesthetic conceptions. These challenges are part of the organization's identity. The visual aesthetic of a media organization helps to define how it views itself and how those outside of the organization view it. But what does it mean when an organization's visual identity online is not congruent with its textual messages? Or when deviant organizations rely on non-deviant visual identities? The results from this study help to better understand the convergence of represented identity along the mainstream and alternative continuum. As alternative media face the responsibility of representing themselves to potentially billions of viewers online, this research investigates whether self-imposed 'normalizing' restrictions on visual constructions of organizational identity are occurring.

Chapter 6: Defining media through organizational practices

This chapter examines how organizational practices influence content within both the alternative and mainstream press. Alternative media tend to exist

within two organizational frameworks: participatory or hierarchical. Mainstream media have operated almost exclusively within the latter category, but this text will argue that alternative media have also co-opted this professionalized format as well. The chapter will review the organizational practices involved in creating institutional norms and values, sources and routines, spaces for activism and marginalized voices to be heard, and opportunities for reader input and feedback. Examples from across the media spectrum will be examined according to these organizational practices in order to tease out how alternative and mainstream media have actually converged in their approach to creating media content in many fundamental ways.

This chapter will draw on several examples to illustrate increasing overlap between the alternative and mainstream media. For example, websites such as Ikea Hacker, an online anti-consumerist operational guide to reconfigure Ikea products, operate solely on reader input. This complete reliance on reader contributions has been a historical point of differentiation among the alternative press. However, mainstream news organizations such as CNN have also begun to emphasize reader contributions through their successful citizen-based news website, iReport, which draws as much from Indymedia as it does from CNN. Such a shift is radical within the continuum of mainstream and alternative media. This approach signals a change in what has been a growing tension between transparency and objectivity in the media as an institution. The long-held belief that mainstream media adhere to principles of objectivity while alternative media allow for ideological influence is embedded within the organizational practices that influence all of these institutional behaviours. This chapter will argue that both the mainstream and alternative press are moving away from objectivity as a guiding principle and towards transparency as information becomes more readily accessible to readers.

A study of four American and British alternative current event blogs, Crooks and Liars, Think Progress, Oliver Willis, and The Osterley Times, will be reviewed in this chapter. This study relies on both critical discourse and content analysis to examine 344 posts, 1,712 hyperlinks and 10,401 comments from four political/current events blogs. This study suggests that there is very little in this sample to support an 'alternative' blogosphere as has been defined by other scholars.

Chapter 7: Defining media through ownership

This chapter examines the higher level influence of ownership in dictating content. One of the principal points of opposition against the present media merger frenzy is the fear that a monolithic media will create content that is one dimensional. This is based on the precept that a multiplicity of outlets will offer

a multiplicity of voices. As media conglomerates continue to grow, this interest in ownership has intensified. If, indeed, the ultimate control of a business lies in its owner, some research has suggested that the only way to differentiate content is to differentiate owners. Ownership has been suggested to be paramount in deciding journalism norms, behaviours and routines because it is the owners who – either directly or indirectly – have the greatest influence over the final product. However, this chapter will examine contrasting research and several case studies, which complicate the idea that ownership alone dictates content. Examples from across the media spectrum will be evaluated to better understand the myriad forces influencing content at every level of ownership influence. The chapter explores whether the influence of ownership is paramount or whether a prevailing capitalistic business model throughout the entire media spectrum has had the strongest influence on overall media content.

This chapter will conclude by examining two online randomly selected community political news websites owned by News Corporation and two randomly selected online community news sites within the same geographical region that are independently owned, over the period of a constructed week. *The Brooklyn Paper*, which is owned by News Corporation, and *The Melbourne Leader*, which is one of a consortium of 33 suburban papers in Melbourne that are all owned by the media conglomerate, are examined. The independent community political newspapers used for inclusion in this study are *The Brooklyn Eagle*, owned by local publisher J. Dozier Hasty, and *The Dandenong Star*, owned by Star News Group, which is an independent family newspaper company in the Melbourne region that runs 23 community newspapers in the area. This study explores how far from mainstream practices and ideologies these outlets actually are situated. The study examines the importance of ownership online when, as Gitlin says, the whole world is watching.

Chapter 8: Defining media through ideological influences

Drawing from Chapter 7, the book then examines ideological influences on media content. The complex concept of hegemony will continue to be examined in relation to the pervasiveness of mainstream ideology in the media. It will be important to detail both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic messages and structures that can be found in both mainstream and alternative media. This chapter examines the strong influences of commercialism, political engagement and power throughout the media spectrum. These influences can be found widely in mainstream media, but also in alternative media that aim for increased revenue streams. Some examples of counter-hegemonic content within mainstream media will be reviewed to better understand how ideology can be demonstrated within media messages and the possible reason that

ideologies between institutional structures and media messages can, at times, be in conflict. The text argues that commercialism, or opposition to commercial forces, is frequently present as an ideological force in media content precisely because of the economic pressures within the modern media market. Demands to increase revenue streams exist even within smaller, alternative media, which are examined in this chapter. The pervasiveness of commercialism within the ideology of our media, and of our lives, is difficult to measure. Economic wealth has become not only a part of our media but also of our individual aspirations. Embedded within the ideology of commercialism is the drive to value profit over any notion of social responsibility or political engagement.

There are certainly exceptions to this ideological framework, and they are most likely found within alternative media, but the study included for analysis in this chapter explores the many similarities across the media spectrum. A study of vaccinations in New Zealand online newspaper content and blogs is included in this chapter as an example of the ideological influence possible in media content. One hundred independent blog entries and 100 online mainstream newspaper articles are examined through both a critical discourse and content analysis within the framework of Marxist ideology. The praxis and theory of Marxism within the production of alternative media, much like vaccination campaigns, depend upon egalitarian, community-minded ideals. However, this study explores how alternative blogs can operate, in this ideological instance, as hierarchically determined sites of one-way communication promoting individualistically, commercially opportune behaviours contrary to the community-driven model of communication typically found in alternative media. This study explores the occasional conflicting nexus between the ideology of an issue and the supposed ideology of a medium.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This book concludes by reviewing how alternative and mainstream media, in the aggregate, have coalesced to a degree. There are contemporary examples that will almost conclusively satisfy academic criteria of what it means to be alternative or mainstream, but this chapter reviews the contradictions embedded within a mainstream media that increasingly relies upon traditionally alternative modes of communication and an alternative media spectrum that increasingly depends upon professionalized norms of reporting and mainstream content in order to expand their revenue streams. This final chapter reviews the various defining aspects of media and argues that much of what has differentiated alternative media from mainstream media in the past is now, in part, disappearing. This conclusion will review the homogenization of content across media through an appraisal of individual motivations and

identities, organizational practices, media ownership and ideology. It is argued that because of the overlapping spheres now found in how we define media, academics and professionals should be wary of overarching labels used to categorize outlets. The terms 'alternative' and 'mainstream' have become problematized as useful descriptors of the modern media landscape.

The possible reasons for this convergence of mainstream and alternative media are many. Technological advancements in communication have driven many of the changes in communication models. Citizens who now have access to social networking tools demand the same from their mainstream media, who, now under increasing financial constraints, are compelled to deliver. Also because of new technologies, some of the hierarchies of influence, particularly at the organizational level, have lost their importance. All media have become more disconnected with specific geographical spaces and organizational-specific mandates. The drive for commercial viability within an overarching ideology of consumerism and commercialism is an obvious driver of contemporary media practices. The mass dissemination of information through the Internet is also considered as a contributing reason for a confluence in content. More work is needed to better understand the goals and motivations of those producing what has been called alternative and mainstream media. This is a burgeoning area of research that demands attention. This text will hopefully serve as a nascent step towards an expanded stream of enquiry into the reasons for our converged mediascape.

If media outlets continue to condense their representation of current events, it will become even more important to protect the structures and practices previously found in alternative media and locate avenues for growth of these same practices within both the alternative and mainstream press. If alternative media wish to truly differentiate themselves from their mainstream counterparts, this text concludes by suggesting that they must combine to form cohesive portals of information, integrate networking into storytelling, increase their reliance on visual material, emphasize local news and continue to remove the barriers between consumers and producers. Alternative media must continue to search out commercially viable avenues for storytelling and self-expression that situate content as a point of difference from mainstream content. Yet mainstream media outlets will undoubtedly be using these same tactics to gain readership share. The mediascape is constantly changing and unwavering attention from those across the media spectrum is needed for the continued health of any democracy that values a free press. Diversity across identity, organizational practices, ownership and ideology will result in diversity of content, but this text concludes by arguing that these distinctions need to be much more purposeful and unified if academics and professionals wish to continue categorizing media as alternative or mainstream.

2

The Modern Media Continuum

Attempts at defining alternative and mainstream media

Alternative media have been traditionally very hard to categorize (Downing 2003). Historically, this difficulty emerged because alternative media have been so widely divergent in their approach and execution of storytelling and news reporting. In response to such conceptual struggles, some have argued that, in essence, those who say they are alternative simply are alternative (Albert 2006). In defining themselves as alternative, they actually create the parameters of what alternative media eventually look like. This is a useful approach for self-identification and helps to clarify processes of identity formation, but it does little to advance an understanding of media as an institution.

What defines a media as alternative within a particular moment of culture and time might be labelled mainstream within a different cultural time and place (Dowmunt & Coyer 2007). These definitions are not fixed and are part of the inherent subjective flexibilities within contemporary culture. Downing (2001) has argued that the label alternative is itself actually 'oxymoronic' (Downing 2001: ix) given that everything is an alternative to something else in the world. This is a rational counterpoint to those who continue to label a substantial portion of the media as alternative, but his suggestion is not based on the precept that there is little difference between alternative and mainstream media. Rather, his argument is that there are so many points of difference that it is difficult to conceptually manage.

Some have argued that the word alternative places too much legitimacy on the mainstream media by denoting somewhat of a secondary stature to a far more central – and therefore more important – mainstream press (Braden 2007). The term alternative may be denoting a secondary status, but one might argue that this classification resonates within a certain population of people. As Hall (1997) argued, the meaning of a text can only be fully understood after considering the dominant and oppositional readings present in culture. Many in society would celebrate a media labelled as alternative precisely because that media outlet purposefully exists outside of the mainstream. The so-called secondary status of alternative media is the reason that some individuals specifically seek out these publications. They view the possibility of being outside of the mainstream as a strength and not as a weakness. This secondary

status imbues an importance upon an alternative press because it is decidedly different from mainstream offerings – and is needed as an alternative.

However, the point that valence is embedded within these terms is an important one. The word alternative conceptually means something quite different than the term mainstream, whether from a dominant or oppositional perspective. There is an emotive distinction between these two terms. One might cognitively connect the term alternative with a myriad of metaphors that conjure unique and expressive responses. Whereas some may see alternative as secondary, others might associate the term with marginalized groups, protests, social movements or unconventional ideas. Still others may view the alternative press as ineffective, stale, incompetent or futile. Each of these associations brings with them their own set of affective responses. These responses are important to ascertain the many reasons why audiences associate and respond to media, not the least of which may be because audiences carry perceptions of media that may or may not have any basis in fact. These perceptions guide how audiences view individual media within an ascribed category. These perceptions might also contribute to the popular belief that mainstream and alternative media are mutually exclusive entities.

There has been relatively recent research trying to discourage the use of the term alternative but, again, for reasons outside of a converged media spectrum. Distinctions in preferred terminology tend to be situated within a specific purpose of a particular medium. Some prefer labels such as independent media; others believe that radical (Downing 2001) media is a much more apt description. Still other researchers and practitioners have called for alternative media to be labelled as activist (Waltz 2005), tactical (Atkinson 2004), autonomous or citizen's (Rodriguez & El Gazi 2007) media. Other related terms that have been suggested are participatory (Pierce 2002) and community (Couldry & Dreher 2007) media. Each of these conceptualizations attempts to capture something unique about a specific media that exists outside of corporate control. Each of these categorizations also shares a foregrounding in social critique, which has historically placed alternative media in diametric opposition to the mainstream press. Perhaps these different linguistic approaches are much more appropriate than the more widely used term of alternative. However, the collective position that these labels are in diametric opposition to a mainstream press remains problematic.

Atton (2004) argues that alternative media should be fundamentally grounded in the cultural forms of an independent media outlet. Alternative media should also possess some, if not all, of the following attributes: a reliance upon modern, evolving technology; de-professionalized organizational norms and roles; horizontal communication patterns; cultural or political radical content; innovative and independent distribution practices; and a compelling aesthetic form (Atton 2002a). One could find alternative media that satisfy

such criteria, but mainstream media are also increasingly demonstrating attributes such as these, which would qualify them as alternative under this definitional framework. The converging media spectrum is conflating what once was considered to be two separate media spheres. Such convergence does not necessitate an entirely new definition for alternative media, but in the tradition of Morris and Ogan (1996), it provides a moment to 'allow scholars to rethink, rather than abandon, definitions and categories' (Morris & Ogan 1996: 42).

Distance from the mainstream

The distance from the mainstream has been fundamental to most working definitions of the alternative press. Atkinson (2006) defines alternative media as 'any media that are produced by non-commercial sources and attempt to transform existing social roles and routines by critiquing and challenging power structures' (Atkinson 2006: 252). The existing social roles and routines that alternative media seek to critique generally stem from capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy and the nature of corporations. All these forces are implicit in the creation of a mainstream, corporate press. In contrast, alternative media have been defined as allowing for an independent 'alternative communication' that constructs different social orders, traditions, values and social understandings (Hamilton 2000a).

The difference, at least in definition, is clear: mainstream media generally aim to maximize audiences through pack journalism that is conventional and formulaic, which results in content that can be binary and reductive. In contrast, alternative media often advocate programs of social change through the framework of politicized and in-depth social commentary (Armstrong 1981; Duncombe 1997) found through distinctive, independent alternative journalism. As a definitional framework, these polarized terms are helpful in operationalizing the furthest ends of a media spectrum. They are constructive in understanding where the continuum begins and ends. However, how well do these criteria define the large portion of media that have been labelled under these terms? For example, the alternative press appear to rely on pack journalism in much the same way that the mainstream media have for centuries. A cursory review of the blogosphere reveals an extremely high level of duplicity in content. Several studies support the presence of a self-limiting 'echo chamber' within independent, online content (Clark 2002; Kumar *et al.* 1999; Tateo 2005; Trammell & Keshelashvili 2005), which has historically been a central defining characteristic of the mainstream press. Conversely, it could easily be argued that thoughtful, in-depth social commentary can be found throughout mainstream publications, such as *Rolling Stone* magazine and *The Australian*, whereas reductive, episodic reporting is plentiful in many independent publications.

It has also been argued that alternative media offer an independent platform for groups and individuals that have been marginalized by corporate, mainstream media (Atton 2002a). One definition of alternative media puts that point of exclusion at the centre of its defined meaning: alternative media is best conceptualized as simply the media 'produced by the socially, culturally and politically excluded' (Dowmunt & Coyer 2007: 5). Those excluded feel generally outside of corporate media influence, but it should be noted that they also feel free of the bureaucratic processes or commercial responsibilities that often constrain mainstream media (Albert 2006). This opposition to corporate media filters into alternative content that often utilizes resistance narratives about multinational corporations (Atkinson 2003).

Other scholars urge that definitions of alternative media must stress the ideological opposition or challenge to mainstream media. Alternative media are created in 'explicit opposition' (Dowmunt & Coyer 2007: 1) to mainstream media. Atton (2004), a leading scholar in the field of alternative media research, offers an additional definition of alternative media: it is a 'range of media projects, interventions and networks that work against, or seek to develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of "doing" media' (Atton 2004: ix). Several researchers argue that alternative media should be defined by its level of subversion from the mainstream (Albert 2006; Downing 2001). Accordingly, an often-cited definition of alternative media suggests that it 'challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power' (Curran & Couldry 2003: 7). Couldry (2003) argues that these challenges are intrinsic to the purpose of alternative media given that almost all of us are actually outside of mainstream media.

This is an important point of distinction that helps to define many outlets which consider themselves as alternative. As an aggregate descriptor, however, this definition also weakens under further scrutiny. Yes, most within society are outside mainstream media as workers. Only a relative few are employed by mainstream media organizations. Yet, in today's corporatized, mega-conglomerated media environment, media power extends into almost every crevasse of a collective culture enmeshed in capitalism. It envelops social institutions as well as corporate entities that monitor, feed and support almost every conceivable subsection of society. How can one fully be in 'explicit opposition' to mainstream media when it's nearly impossible to define the extent of its expanse? The pervasiveness of mainstream media leads to practical doubts that alternative media can ever be truly autonomous, given that they are intrinsically far less powerful.

Mainstream media power is now synonymous with social power, and one might argue that challenges to such power can only come from those situated squarely outside of its purview, but when the extent of media power stretches as far as it now does, how can one ever be fully in opposition to mainstream media? Implicit in this definition is that there is a fundamental

need within a democratic society for a media that situates itself somehow outside the boundaries of media power. But consider the example of 2010 Pulitzer Prize winners, Barbara Laker and Wendy Ruderman. These two women exposed a rogue narcotics squad in Philadelphia through their investigative reporting for the *Philadelphia Daily News*. The deceit and corruption of this squad was so extensive that their discovery sparked a comprehensive FBI investigation, which then led to a review of hundreds, if not thousands, of possibly tainted criminal cases. Laker and Ruderman were successful in exposing unlawful deception within one of the most fundamental centres of power in society: the police. They did so from within a corporate concentration of media power, incidentally, which is owned by Philadelphia Media Holdings LLC, a local group led by, of all things, a wealthy advertising executive. A further point of contradictory interest is that the *Philadelphia Daily News* gives a much celebrated 'George Fencl' Award annually to a Philadelphia police officer who embodies 'compassion, fairness, and civic commitment' (Glover 2010). One would think that such an open alliance between two powerful institutions of power does not lend itself to investigative enquiry. Yet that is exactly what happened in this case. In fact, it happens repeatedly everyday throughout the world. This is not a unique example of good reporting. Powerful, investigative journalism happens routinely within the mainstream press – just as it does within what is generally labelled alternative media. There are certainly omnipresent forces, within both the alternative and mainstream press, that complicate a journalist's ability to do good reporting, but in many instances, distinguished journalism comes down 'to the decisions, and the actions, and the passion of one person' (Bennett 2010).

Scale of influence and citizen reporting

Some have argued that alternative media should be defined according to their scale in the marketplace of ideas (Dowmunt & Coyer 2007). Alternative media are smaller than mainstream media. They generally invite participation in the creation of content and reciprocal communication. Again, while useful as a categorical tool, mainstream media are increasingly relying on similar reciprocal, social networking tools to bolster readership. Editors at *The Times* blog their personal thoughts to readers who then share personal responses to the news stories of the day via Twitter or any number of social networking technologies. Citizens file stories with television stations and newspapers that quickly gain traction across the world wide web. The Internet has removed much of the sense of scale that historically dictated an individual person's or media outlet's position within the media hierarchy. Possibly nothing signalled this fundamental change in the media more than Matt Drudge's 1998 report that American President

William Jefferson Clinton was secretly having an affair with Monica Lewinsky, a 21-year-old White House intern. Mr Drudge, a lone individual, released evidence of this affair through his website, The Drudge Report, and not only scooped the mainstream media but also largely dictated their content for the entire year. His solitary reporting hearkened a shift in how mainstream media negotiate hierarchies of access and the level of reader input accepted into their publications.

One of the central goals of alternative media is to subvert the 'hierarchy of access' (Atton 2002a) which often dictates who is sourced in mainstream media content according to perceived credibility. Such practices 'emphasise first person eyewitness accounts by participants; reworking of the populist approaches of tabloid newspapers to recover a "radical popular" style of reporting; collective and anti-hierarchical forms of organization ... an inclusive, radical form of civic journalism' (Atton 2003: 267). This type of journalism has been called 'native reporting' (Atton 2002a: 112–17) and has been found to be a part of independent current event weblogs (Matheson & Allan 2003) as well as other alternative, open publishing sources online, such as Indymedia (Platon & Deuze 2003). It is also equally central to mainstream websites such as CNN's iReport, MSNBC's First Person, Fox News' UReport and Broadcast Interactive Media's YouNews.

Michael Albert from the independent and 'alternative' *Z Magazine* wrote, 'an alternative media institution sees itself as part of a project to establish new ways of organizing media and social activity and it is committed to furthering these as a whole, and not just its own preservation' (Albert 2006). This very important point of demarcation has traditionally separated how alternative media have covered important social issues differently than the mainstream press. Alternative media generally offer the space for journalists to 'become reporters of their own experiences, struggles and lives' (Atton & Wickenden 2005: 349). Proponents of alternative media argue that such personalized self-disclosure is not intended for personal gain. Its purpose is to provide relevant, meaningful news that 'is best realised through the voices of the community itself' (Atton & Wickenden 2005: 349). Such activism on the part of the 'journalist' is often more valued than any traditional mainstream reporting experience (Atton & Wickenden 2005). This approach favours bystanders to events rather than official voices, which are typically relied upon in the mainstream media (Harcup 2003).

Whereas citizen reporting in the alternative media realm has largely been celebrated, there has been criticism of its use in the mainstream press. Citizen reporters are generally not paid for their contributions to either alternative or mainstream outlets and almost exclusively lose control of how their submissions are later used. Perhaps because mainstream media follow an explicitly commercial mandate, there may be an expectation for some form

of financial compensation, which drives the critique of this practice in the mainstream press. It may be that expectations of remuneration are rooted in the perceived role of mainstream media as a revenue-building institution. However, most alternative media follow the same commercial mandate, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Alternative media often view their role as 'one of educating and mobilizing the "masses" in the service of the cause or movement' (Hamilton 2000a: 359). The frequent solicitation from alternative media outlets for feedback from viewers has been said to be purposeful so that an 'egalitarian relationship' can be formed between the media outlet and readers (Rodriguez 2001). It is impossible to ascertain the motivations that every mainstream and alternative media outlet may have for engaging citizen input. One could surmise that mainstream media may be seeking out free content from citizens only to help balance their struggling account books, but alternative media, with their own financial pressures, could be doing much the same. From a fiscal perspective, the division between mainstream and alternative media practices in relation to citizen reporting is increasingly unclear.

Connection with social movements

Most researchers agree that, at the most fundamental core, alternative media facilitate democratic participation and cultural disruption while the mainstream press avoids such social critique (Makagon 2000). Social and political movements have traditionally made great effort to forge alliances with alternative media (Atton 2002a; Santa Cruz 1995). In an examination of historical alternative media, such as *Freedom's Journal, Mattachine Review* and *RAIN*, Ostertag (2007) found that these publications played a crucial role in bringing about social change. In another related work, he examined five significant movements – woman suffrage, gay and lesbian issues, the underground Vietnam GI press, abolitionism and environmentalism – and found that social movement journals, such as *Sierra* and *Earth First!*, pushed forth social change by forcing issues on the public agenda and frequently scooping mainstream media coverage (Ostertag 2006). Examples of the powerful effect alternative media can have in fomenting social change stretch back to the American Revolution when the dissident printed press provoked a trumpet to arms for an entire nation (Armstrong 1981; Kessler 1984) and to the British *Poor Man's Guardian*, which successfully agitated for workers' rights.

Alternative media have thrived when born out of individualistic, unique political and cultural events and issues. When called upon, alternative media can serve an interdependent function with social movements in creating social change. Alternative media are 'media plus organisation' (Stoney 2005).

This places alternative media within a very specific space and time within culture. They exist within that context to the degree that each definition of alternative media, and indeed each example of alternative media, is also a unique theory of political change (Dowmunt & Coyer 2007). Alternative media have been intrinsically part of the process of social change (Albert 2006). It is this centrality that has historically seen alternative media as fundamental to the success of social movements and social change.

Yet it is also important to recognize that mainstream media have played a vital role in the success of social movements as well. Effective social movements gain acceptance and recognition through mainstream attention. At times, it is the mainstream press agitating for change and aligning with social movements. For example, in 1996, over 300,000 people gathered in Belgium to form the largest protest march that the country had ever seen. The march was in response to the arrest of serial killer Marc Dutroux and the frustration many felt towards local politicians and police. Protesters argued for stronger protection of Belgian children and an improved justice system. Yet there was a 'total absence of any mobilization machinery' (Walgrave & Manssens 2005: 113) driving this protest. The five mainstream newspapers in Belgium acted as an 'adequate alternative to intermediary organizations' (Walgrave & Manssens 2005: 113) and actually 'co-produced' the successful march through their positive, motivational framing of the upcoming protest and their negative portrayals of the justice system.

Other research has found that when alternative and mainstream media are used in tandem, social movements can bring new audiences to their own websites, which can then work as a counter-public relations service or simply a promotional arm for the organization (Owens & Palmer 2003). After building sustained relations with those in the mainstream, one prominent anarchist organization succeeded in increasing the amount of thematic coverage given to the group and improved its portrayal to be one of a 'tech-savvy and wired' (Owens & Palmer 2003: 354) contemporary social change organization. Owens and Palmer concluded that 'those active in social movements cannot afford to ignore the mainstream media' (Owens & Palmer 2003: 357). Other examples exist, and will be discussed further in Chapter 3, but as this example illustrates, the onus for social change within a media organization does not exist solely within the realm of alternative media.

Moving beyond definitional limitations

As this review demonstrates, defining what makes commercially minded alternative or mainstream media can be confounding. One of the central problems in attempting such categorizations is the continually shifting media

landscape. Just when academics and professionals finally agree on a shared understanding, the landscape changes yet again – primarily driven by technology but also influenced by circulation numbers, ideological shifts, changing media usage patterns and a myriad of other factors.

At the moment, mainstream media are paradoxically both growing and shrinking. The pervasiveness and visibility of mainstream media has exploded, 'driven primarily by the needs and pressures exerted by an ever-expanding, globally triumphant capitalist economy' (Dowmunt & Coyer 2007: 4). Large corporate entities have amassed a network of film, radio, newspaper and magazine businesses that can reach every human being in the developed world. Yet while mainstream media have grown in visibility and potential reach, they have also reduced in number and in readership. Newspaper revenue in the United States fell 19.26 per cent for the third quarter of 2008. This drop was met with a 30.85 per cent decrease in classified advertising in American newspapers (Riley 2008). In Britain, 52 publications folded in 2009 – most of which were local newspapers owned by Trinity Mirror (Greenslade 2009). Such declines have meant a constant threat of redundancy within the mainstream media industry. Very few cities across the globe can boast more than one major mainstream daily newspaper. The 150-year-old newspaper, *Rocky Mountain News*, recently was closed by the E. W. Scripps Company, who cited multimillion dollar annual losses (DeBruin 2009). The threat of replacing the relatively few remaining city newspapers with a larger regional paper remains omnipresent in mainstream media discussions. Despite these losses and declining readership, a sizable portion of democratized societies continue to be engaged with the mainstream press. An average of 1.65 million New Zealanders, or about 38 per cent of the population, read some sort of newspaper every day – roughly 38 per cent of the population (Nielsen, Inc. 2008). Each week, at least 80 per cent of New Zealanders over the age of 15 read at least one daily newspaper ('Latest Newspaper Readership Survey Results' 2004).

Within the United States, media productivity, or output per hour, increased by 21 per cent from 1997 to 2006, while the number of employees within the field of print media dropped to 615,000 from 815,000 during that same time period. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics surmised that computerization and the expanding use of the Internet have eliminated many of these media jobs (US Department of Labor 2008). As Fuchs (2009) argues, 'there is an economic interest in the substitution of living labour by technology to decrease the investment and reproduction costs of capital and its turnover time, which in the ideal case increases profit' (Fuchs 2009: 382). The present conglomeration within the media industries is itself representative of an essential component of capitalism (Knoche 2007).

This frenzied conglomeration has led several mainstream media outlets to draw heavily from what was once considered strictly alternative media, and independent media are no longer completely uncontaminated with capitalist,

corporate funding. One particularly compelling example of this change can be seen in documentary filmmaking. At a time when Hollywood receives only 15 per cent of its revenue from cinema releases (Marr 2010), radical documentaries continue to gain popularity in commercial theatres. Michael Moore, an ardent critic of mainstream capitalism, became the first feature-length documentary artist to earn more than US$100 million in box-office theatre receipts for a single film (Box Office Mojo 2009). His progressive, largely anti-corporate stance would appear to be against the capitalist ethos of Hollywood. Yet, in fact, 6 of the top 10 documentaries made since 1982 could all be labelled as progressive critiques on capitalism in some form: *Fahrenheit 9/11, Sicko, An Inconvenient Truth, Bowling for Columbine, Religulous*, and *Super Size Me*. It should be noted, however, that the interrelationships found between mainstream production houses and radical content providers remain uneasy. In 2004, a widely reported example of such tension occurred when the Walt Disney Company blocked its Miramax division from distributing *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Rutenberg 2004).

Most individuals still get their information from mainstream media. This reliance on mainstream media continues even as the format of delivery and the number of mainstream outlets are both changing. The most popular websites overall continue to be large, corporate search engines (Google, Yahoo!, Baidu in China, Windows Live) or sites dedicated to social networking, such as Facebook. BBC, CNN and *The New York Times* still remain the top news sources online (Alexa 2009). So even with more options for alternative media potentially available online, citizens largely still continue to rely on mainstream news and opinion. However, alternative media have grown exponentially over the past 30 years – particularly on the Internet. American alternative news weeklies grew from an audience of under 3 million in 1989 to nearly 8 million in 2007 because of the Internet (Annual Report on American Journalism 2008). This growth mirrors alternative media increases in audience share globally (Tsfati & Peri 2006) and has been met with a concomitant decline in mainstream news audiences (Groshek 2010). American newspaper, newsmagazine and television audiences have all decreased over the past decade (Annual Report on American Journalism 2010), and the same trends are seen around the world (Livingstone 2004). The result is a converged, yet divergent, range of media that increasingly draw from each other's model of business operations, motivations, ownership models and organizational practices. It is easier to see this media confluence by briefly tracing a selective history of the news.

Examining the news

Many now argue that print news media is dead. While citizens around the globe lament the loss of the printed word, Rupert Murdoch, managing director

of media conglomerate News Corporation, has quickly amassed about 200 newspapers in addition to his magazines, music studios, radio stations, sporting franchises, movie studios, television stations, broadcast companies, satellite television companies, cable channels, Internet companies, restaurants, mobile entertainment companies, outdoor advertising agencies and more. News Corporation continues to buy newspapers because even if the transmission of some printed words move from paper to pixels, the power of words to transform society remains perpetually strong. Yes, the printed word might be dying, but the influence of the digitally reproduced word continues to grow. Murdoch is reportedly now in the process of launching a new digital newspaper targeted to younger readers and released exclusively on digital outlets such as the iPad and mobile phones (Pilkington 2010). Content will apparently be pooled from the many newspapers owned by News Corporation but customized for the medium and for a young target market. It is far too soon to know if this venture will be successful, but such a development would begin a shift in how mainstream news content is delivered online.

Roughly 28.7 per cent of the world population, or nearly 2 billion people, were using the Internet in 2010 (Internet World Stats 2010). The growth in developing countries has been astronomical: Africa has seen a 2,357 per cent increase in usage since 2000, while that of the Middle East increased by 1,825 per cent in the same time period (Internet World Stats 2010). In terms of real numbers, Asia has, by far, the most Internet users with about 825 million online. Europe is a distant second with 465 million Internet users (Internet World Stats 2010). These numbers allude to the powerful impact that mediated, largely text-based, communication continues to have around the world. Information learned through the media can change societies, build and destroy relationships, create and demolish governments. The commonly conceived newspaper may soon become completely digitized. While this may be hard to imagine for some, most newspapers have already shifted to either a completely or partially digitized format. If they haven't shifted completely, their potential for growth is most certainly online. For example, the *Guardian* paper readership has dropped from 487,000 in 1985 to 365,562 in 2007. However, the online *Guardian Unlimited* attracts 16 million readers and 147 million page impressions each month (Franklin 2008). Mainstream and alternative newspapers are now taking advantage of the technological capabilities inherent in online communication. In doing so, mainstream newspapers might actually be moving closer to where they first began.

Early newspapers were known for their muckraking investigative journalism and their calls to action. The European Enlightenment, French Revolution and British industrialization from the 1790s to the 1840s gave birth to this radical form of journalism (Hartley 2008). Early papers used evocative language in their commentary and invited readers to take action. 'The early mass-circulation newspapers were produced by radicals among whom

were also entrepreneurs, who had the "ability to harness commercialism for the purposes of political dissent and cultural populism"' (Haywood 2004: 164 cited in Hartley 2008: 682). The first newspapers focused on a form of popular radicalism aimed for a collective, unifying audience – labelled the 'we press' by Hartley (2008). In America, ideals of the 'we press' were evident in the mainstream and prominent *Pennsylvania Gazette*. This was one of the earliest examples of a mainstream muckraking paper in the spirit of what might now be considered an alternative press. From 1728 until 1815, the *Gazette* was published as a reformist publication that argued for a new social order – one that stressed equal rights across the entire population, including women and African Americans. Moral education was the explicit purpose of these early reformist publications. Benjamin Franklin, publisher and contributor of the paper, viewed the *Gazette* as a 'means of instruction' to 'prepare the minds of the people for his civic projects' (Smith 1990: 40, 42). The 'people' had very little input in the publication and were simply meant to be educated by the wise words within the *Gazette* (Hamilton 2000a), but it most certainly took on the social causes of the day and challenged positions of power for change.

In 1861, the first daily newspaper in New Zealand, *The Otago Daily Times*, began reporting on the gold rush that had swept through Otago (Ovens & Tucker 2008: 349). *The Otago Daily Times* was first known for its active social reform campaigning, most notably against sweatshops in Dunedin throughout the 1880s. The reporting from the *Times* led to many law reforms in New Zealand (Reed 1956). This early history of New Zealand media also involved popular labour newspapers, such as *The Workingman's Gazette* (began in 1887) and *The Labour Advocate* (began in 1880). These widely read newspapers reported on news from the perspective of workers rather than business owners. The fact that such a press existed speaks to the implicit assumption that some news media had a capitalistic perspective, which benefited the elite business owners of society. However, these popular publications existed as an important counterpoint within mainstream media.

The first newspaper in Britain emerged in the 1640s and reproduced parliamentary proceedings for the public (Raymond 1996). This was a challenge to previous governmental modes of information dissemination (Conboy 2004). These newspapers not only communicated the political events of the day but they also 'served to generate a community of information, a community of political preference for an informed middle-ranking citizenship' (Conboy & Steel 2008: 651). Events in these early newspapers were re-presented from a specific political perspective (Conboy & Steel 2008). This changed when the British monarchy was restored in 1660 and implemented strict controls on newsgathering and dissemination. But the earliest newspapers aimed for a mainstream audience and distributed information from an opinionated, political perspective for the people of Britain.

In Australia, *The Age* was one of four major competing newspapers that began publishing after government censorship bans were lifted in the young country. *The Age* began in 1854, during that country's gold rush era, and quickly began serving citizens as an instigator of social change. It argued for labour reform and stated quite clearly that it was publishing from a liberal perspective. On 17 October 1854, on the first day of publication, *The Age* published the following:

> The politics of *The Age* will be liberal, aiming at a wide extension of the rights of free citizenship and a full development of representative institutions. Believing that public order is essential to the preservation of national liberties, it will in all cases uphold the inviolability of law, and urge the reform of abuses and the redress of grievances by means purely constitutional. It will advocate the removal of all restrictions upon freedom of commerce, freedom of religion, and – to the utmost extent that is compatible with public morality – upon freedom of personal action. (The Age, Inc. 2010)

The Age argued rather radical perspectives at the time, which mainly focused on labour reforms. They were ardent supporters of the Ballarat miners who agitated for the right to purchase their mining land among other rights that they felt should be theirs as workers in the mine. *The Age* also argued for an eight-hour work day and sweeping land law reforms to assist workers in Australia (Australian Government 2010). These positions were not popular with the capitalistic establishment but worked to build relationships between the paper and the citizens of Australia.

The idea of a labour paper, or a mainstream newspaper dedicated to issues concerning workers, has long faded. Over time, as mainstream media became more corporatized, calls for citizen action within the mainstream press were relegated to alternative media. Mainstream newspapers became much more of a business as early as 1900 (Cole & Maxwell Hamilton 2008). With this focused economic shift, there was an increase in episodic newsgathering. Concerns for profit influenced the ability for journalists to engage in investigative, long-format storytelling. Over time, one could argue that the relationship between a newspaper and its readers became more distanced as citizens felt less and less engaged with the content. The 'we press' approach to journalism slowly faded and was replaced by a much more commercially popular journalism or a 'they press' (Hartley 2008). Citing the transformation of *News of the World* and the *Daily Herald* (later renamed *The Sun*), Hartley (2008) argues that 'both papers were transformed from radical-popular agents of workers' self-representation to commercial popular mechanisms for turning them into a market; from "subject" to "object"' (Hartley 2008: 683). During the 1900s, news journalism moved from an inclusive, self-representative form of communication to strictly a sender–receiver model. This is largely still the model that exists today in mainstream media. However, the Internet revolution in communication may be working to change that model. Technology is allowing newspapers to build a

stronger relationship with readers, which suggests present conceptualizations of alternative media, but also draws heavily upon early mainstream newspapers – and perhaps future mainstream news as well. Mainstream media are now returning to self-representation and demand-led media through not only user-generated content but user-defined content as well.

It is not as if there was no relationship at all with readers throughout the twentieth century. There has been a continued adherence to editorial pages in the mainstream press. The opportunity for readers to send in letters to the editor provides a space of sorts for public debate (Dahmen 2010). The editorial page allows readers to develop their own ideas and consider counter-positions (Hynds & Archibald 1996). Yet this is largely where editorial engagement with citizens began and ended in the mainstream press. Indeed, this is still the extent of two-way communication for many media outlets. But, throughout the 1900s, there were far more examples of alternative media outlets inviting readers to make meaningful contributions to content that went beyond editorial pages. During the twentieth century, readers of the alternative press were exposed to a range of explicit opinion while also responding to direct calls to action. Mainstream media, however, largely kept citizen input strictly to the editorial page and muted opinions that might tarnish the ideal of an objective press. Throughout the twentieth century, readers of the news could rather easily separate their media consumption into appropriate categories of alternative and mainstream. However, contemporary mainstream media has begun to offer content that appears to specifically target readers' interests while also presenting a range of opinion to readers who are actively solicited for input. This is a return of sorts to early newspapers that reported the news from a citizen's perspective. Mainstream newspapers have now begun a return to building relationships with citizens and even going so far as to encourage their input into news content. Mainstream newspapers are adapting to media technology and how readers now wish to engage with the news – encouraging citizen journalism, blogging commentary and reader responses to 'construct a more pluralist and democratic debate about matters of public interest' (Franklin 2008: 631). By adopting tenets of public journalism, mainstream media are promoting democratic ideals and adopting alternative media practices (Haas 2004). This approach engages the public in a way that has been largely abandoned over the past 100 years in the mainstream press and harkens the sentiment of many early newspapers that aimed to speak on behalf of the citizenry.

Intertwined in this model of soliciting citizen input to the mainstream media are the changing perceptions of objectivity. Most newspaper readers – from the 1800s until today – turn to all their newspaper content, whether deemed alternative or mainstream, as the location of what they perceive to be the truth. Within a liberal pluralist model of democracy, the objective fourth estate defends the public interest by reporting an unbiased truth. Yet the idea of an absolute truth from an objective press has become much more

problematic. News is still heralded as a source of factual information, albeit not necessarily an absolute truthful and objective one. The compounding and complex influences embedded within each newspaper story has led media scholars and practitioners to argue that objectivity should be seen as an organizational goal, rather than a template for practice – at least if one equates objectivity with neutrality or an absolute truth. A more fitting principle that appears applicable to modern journalism as an institution might be to 'enable citizens to better understand their lives and their position(s) in the world' (Richardson 2007: 7). If this is taken as a guiding principle of journalism practice, one can better understand the recent rapid increase in mainstream media commentary in news content and the rise of opinion-based blogging as well as citizen journalism. It may be that modern mainstream media are returning to the rousing commentary and citizen engagement in a spirit reminiscent (but perhaps not equal to) Benjamin Franklin's communication model as a 'means of instruction' to 'prepare the minds of the people for his civic projects' (Smith 1990: 40, 42).

This change in news is by no means complete. There is much research that has shown relatively little interactive reporting, small gains in public communication and only slight attempts at building relationships with readers across many mainstream online news sites (Oblak 2005; Quandt 2008; Rosenberry 2005). Although it should be said that, in 2004, longitudinal research found definitive improvements in interactivity online over time (Greer & Mensing 2004). The relatively recent arrival of blogs, wikis and other communicative technological advancements, as well as the continued rise and potential competition of citizen journalism, may now be leading mainstream media into a new interactive form of citizen-based news (Paulussen *et al.* 2007). While the speed of this change is not what media and democracy idealists might have hoped, it is occurring and potentially further signalling a convergence of the media spectrum.

News commentary

Commentary is one of the features of news reporting that was once quite common in early newspapers and has now returned to much of mainstream media. Obvious examples come from commentary-laden mainstream news outlets such as Fox News and MSNBC. However, positioning a particular perspective or opinion can happen indirectly, through emphasizing a specific view, quoting certain sources and making inferences (Neuman, Just & Crigler 1992). This form of personal opinion or bias happens frequently in the news and helps to explain why nearly every study of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has found an imbalance in favour of the Israelis in the American press (Deprez & Raeymaeckers 2010). Contemporary news media increasingly rely upon what the BBC's former correspondent Martin Bell calls 'journalism of

attachment' (Bell 1998: 103). This form of journalism is actively not neutral and makes clear claims about who is right and who is wrong. Journalism of attachment can become much more obvious in times of global conflict, such as the news coverage of the Bosnian war, which largely supported the Bosnian Muslim government and not the Serbs (Gowing 1997). This type of coverage is not found only in editorial pages but throughout news reporting (Hammond 2000). In America, the Pew Research Center reported that 73 per cent of Fox news stories included opinions from reporters and anchors. This number far exceeds the 29 per cent of opinion from cable rival MSNBC (cited in Johnson 2005), but it is perhaps a harbinger of future mainstream reporting styles. War stories, in particular, are increasingly told through an unequivocal discourse of morality and opinion (Wasburn 2002). September 11th further brought forth opinion and commentary directly into news content. Scenes of personal emotion abounded as reporters cried on camera from Ground Zero (Tumber 2002). Journalists raced to morally interpret who were 'the "friends" and "enemies" of a state' (Ruigrok 2010: 87).

Examples of opinion in mainstream content exist outside of war coverage as well. It is now customary to see broadcast reporters end their reports with personal anecdotes, whereas the staunch broadcasting newsreader historically never shared emotion or personal perspectives. A study of 11 newspapers during the 2006 US Senate elections found that mainstream news coverage strongly favoured liberal candidates through explicit commentary and a range of other communicative tactics, such as the use of quotes and counter-assertions to stated opinions (Fico & Freedman 2008). Anecdotal evidence exists on almost every mainstream news site. For example, *The Sun* recently ran an article online titled 'Julia Fails to Keep the Faith' which is largely about Julia Robert's movie with one paragraph on her supposed repudiation of Catholicism. With such little content actually dedicated to her personal religion in the article, it is somewhat surprising then that the byline on the main photograph reads 'Convert ... Julia in Eat, Pray, Love' ('Julia Fails to Keep the Faith' 2010). Both the term 'fail' in the headline and the admonishment for her to 'convert' in the byline are discursive terms laden with value and emotion. The opinions in this entertainment news piece are clear even though this article is not labelled as commentary. On the same day that the Julia Roberts piece ran in *The Sun*, a battle for Prime Minister was occurring half a world away. On the front page of *The Sydney Morning Herald* website on 20 August, the headline read 'It's time to choose: Although the two leaders appear different, there is little to separate them on policies'. Below, in smaller text, are the words 'writes Peter Hartcher'. One might assume that this writer is an editorial columnist, but as written – and as designed – this headline appears to be fact, which would be a sweeping indictment if actually proven. It is also interesting to note that the photograph attached to this story on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* is clearly manipulated. The image shows one of the candidates for

Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, sharing a beer with the other candidate, Julia Gillard. Upon closer inspection, one can see that Mr Abbott has been placed into the frame with a tinted drop shadow behind his silhouette. There is nothing on the photograph or in the photograph caption to make this visual manipulation obvious to the viewer. This visual commentary problematizes an objective mainstream press.

Recent research supports that mainstream journalists are increasingly interested in influencing public opinion rather than strictly reporting the news (Weaver 2007). This aim to add commentary, shift public opinion and therefore influence social change through mainstream journalism draws from early newspapers and from a long history of alternative media agitating the public for action. The confusion between fact and opinion-based commentary appears in many mainstream publications online that make great claims to objectivity. Again returning to the same randomly selected day of 20 August, the *Guardian* ran a story on their home page with a headline reading 'David Mitchell: 3D is nothing more than a distracting gimmick being overused in today's visual media'. This article clearly is making an argument against 3D technology, but there is nothing attached to this story to suggest it is a commentary other than perhaps the writer's name listed in the forefront. This might suggest that the article is the opinion of a particular person, but that assumption is questionable given that there are two stories directly above this one in the same format that appear to be news reports. One headline directly above reads, 'Martin Wainwright visits Havelock academy in Grimsby as it prepares to switch to the International Baccalaureate'. Again, there is nothing suggesting that this is or is not commentary, so it is simply up to the reader to guess. If one actually clicks on the Mitchell story, there is a headline that reads 'Comment is Free', but this is not highlighted on the front page of the website. As these examples suggest, the overlap between commentary and news in the mainstream media continues to blur. Through the discourse of opinion, mainstream newspapers are engaging in a much more colloquial discussion with their readers, rather than the hierarchical communication approaches of the past. This may move mainstream papers away from tenets of objectivity, but such an approach may also engender a newspaper to readers in a way not seen in the past.

Citizen participation in the news

Mainstream media are now utilizing aspects of interactive technology to build relationships with readers and 'to promote the impression of a greater accountability to a generalised readership' (Conboy & Steel 2008: 654). In China, the *Guangzhou Daily* started a public affairs forum called Dayoo.com. The *Daily* has long been a communication tool for the Municipal Communist Party of Guangzhou and is widely read as a mainstream

publication in the Guangdong province (Zhou, Chan & Peng 2008). Similar to other newspaper-affiliated public forums, Dayoo.com was initiated to encourage citizen interaction and facilitate information exchange (Yu & Wu 2007). On Dayoo.com, there are interactive newsgroups, digital magazines, blogs and online forums (Zhou *et al.* 2008). These approaches to generate debate and build relationships also help to elevate the accountability and status of *Guangzhou Daily.* This engaged relationship with readers is a big step away from the strict writer-to-reader communication model previously seen in the mainstream press.

In the United States, newspapers like *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* have prominent sections on their websites dedicated to reader discussion and interaction with writers. The *Star Tribune* has a link on their webpage titled 'Our Voices', which lists the latest *Star Tribune* blogs. This is a comprehensive listing of blogs from people who work for Startribune.com. If one scrolls a bit further down the opening webpage, there is another link titled 'Your Voices'. This brings up a listing of community blogs that are affiliated with the newspaper. Comments are moderated and only appear after an editorial review, which does indicate a residual need for editorial control by the paper. Yet a portal such as this undoubtedly opens up discussion to citizens in ways that were not possible when the *Tribune* was only in print. There are 42 community bloggers listed who are not professional journalists but are self-described performance poets, researchers, artists, web designers, entrepreneurs, song writers, gardeners, chefs, educators and so on. Many of the posts inside the *Tribune*'s community and newspaper blogs are purposefully evocative and meant to engage discussion. For example, there is an inclusive use of pronouns throughout most posts that invite readers into the debate. One randomly selected *Star Tribune* community blog post from Rev. Peg Chemberlin titled 'I am not a Christian bomber' repeatedly uses the words 'our' and 'us' in her discussion of a possible Muslim community centre near where the World Trade Center once stood. This equates Rev. Chemberlin with those reading the post and invites those readers to join her in this discussion. She also asks readers directly to engage in civic participation and solicit others in power for social change: 'The connection in our heads between the terrorists of 9/11 and all Muslims has got to change. Let's ask our rock stars and politicians to help us do that' (Chemberlin 2010).

Civic participation has been said to require four basic criteria: '(1) individuals are included; (2) it is voluntary; (3) it refers to a specific activity, which is (4) directed towards influencing the government or authorities in general' (Brezovsek 1995 cited in Zhou *et al.* 2008). All of these criteria are readily available online. Indeed, the use of the Internet in people's daily lives has been found to be related to higher levels of citizen participation (Vromen 2007). Voluntary citizen participation through newspaper-affiliated online news groups and discussion forums, in particular, also appear to meet each

of these criteria. An important caveat, however, should be that even if one's activity might be viewed as participatory, it does not necessarily mean it is also considered integral to a deliberative democracy. In a study of the mainstream *Guangzhou Daily* discussion forum, there were infrequent follow-up posts, a lack of diversity in topics, a tendency for discussion to focus on issues outside of politics, low levels of complexity in discourse and a lack of meaningful debate online (Zhou *et al.* 2008). Therefore, even though citizens may be involved in the process of civic participation, it might not qualify as deliberative. That being said, the deliberative, democratic sphere of the *Guangzhou Daily* discussion forum may have only just begun, or there simply may not be the drive from within the participants themselves. This call for civic participation within the mainstream press – even if not pursued by readers – is a marked change from mainstream journalism of the past and is quite similar to reporting that has been seen in the alternative press over the past century.

Citizen participation in media content throughout independent outlets has a long history and has thrived since the arrival of the Internet. Citizen journalism has empowered the 'former audience' (Gillmor 2006: xxv) to become more involved in their community and their media. It can serve as kind of bridge media that links 'traditional media with forms of civic participation' (Schaffer 2007: 7). Citizen journalism is increasingly being relied upon in what was once considered strictly mainstream media. A technology correspondent from *The Economist* compared citizen journalism to the revolutionary role of religion when he argued that 'people are bypassing the sacrosanct authority of the journalist in the same way as Luther asserted that individuals could have a direct relationship with God without the intermediary of the priest' (Cukier 2006). The idea of citizen journalism is 'becoming less something that is dismissed as the amateur hour before the professionals take the stage and more [as] something that enriches the conversation' (The State of the News Media 2007).

Across alternative media, outlets such as iBrattleboro also rely upon citizen journalism. This website, based within the small town of Brattleboro in Vermont, asks readers to 'read and write your own news, interviews, reviews, and more. Pick a local Brattleboro story and tell the story yourself' ('Welcome to iBrattleboro' 2010). According to their website, there have been 26,640,740 page views to date ('Site Statistics' 2010). This invitation to readers is much like what was found on the mainstream *Minneapolis Star Tribune* website. Other instances of grassroots citizen journalism are seen in other American-based websites, such as *MyMissourian*, which appears to have at least one post each day from random Missourian citizen reporters. *The Bakersfield Voice* attempts to blend their online presence with a paper-based distribution as well. They solicit stories from citizen reporters and then select certain online submissions for printed publication, which is then distributed to 140,000 homes in metro Bakersfield. Baristanet is another leader in American citizen

journalism. It began in 2004 and now receives more than 9,000 visits each day ('About Baristanet' 2010). They claim to have inspired local citizen news sites in 'Pittsburgh, Brooklyn, New Haven, Watertown, MA and Redbank, NJ' ('About Baristanet' 2010). The organization has 17 regular contributors from different backgrounds, but most contributions are from readers. They have grown to have a thriving classified section as well as sections labelled food, real estate, pets and kids. Their 'See-Click-Fix' section is driven by a Google map where citizens can report local issues of concern based on their geographical location. The aim of these postings is to actually fix community problems, which range from litter, car racing, broken sidewalks to potholes. Comments remain open until they are fixed. The mayor and other community representatives are clearly visible on this website and post regular contributions to alleviate community concerns and put forth government solutions. These websites aim to create meaningful relationships between citizens and governmental officials. They also empower citizens to participate within their communities, both online and offline, through neighbourhood gatherings and community events.

Perhaps the most well-known website that has a stated aim to empower citizens is WikiLeaks. The opening page of the WikiLeaks website asks readers to 'get involved' by either submitting documents, contacting WikiLeaks, donating money, contributing to WikiLeaks through other means or following WikiLeaks through email subscriptions, RSS feeds, Twitter, the WikiLeaks blog, Facebook, Flattr or WikiLeaks chat. There are WikiLeaks in seven countries: Australia, France, Germany, Iceland, Kenya, the United Kingdom and the United States (WikiLeaks: Contact 2010). It represents somewhat of a leaderless resistance that is not easily situated within standard norms of journalism practice. It is a grassroots network of information that has thus far been confined to Western democracies, but one can see how profound of an impact it might have in more repressive regimes. It functions by separating traditional spokespeople who normally reveal selected governmental actions to citizens and instead inserts leaks from the workers within these institutions. It is a radical attempt at transparency that challenges governmental tactics of selective information dissemination. Those who submit information are guaranteed anonymity through a secure online submission system that is largely stateless but with central servers based in Sweden. Those who are affiliated with WikiLeaks – outside of the figurehead leader, Julian Assange – are also anonymous and largely work on a volunteer basis. Citizen submissions are posted online but only after an editorial review, which mirrors mainstream media practice. Some notable published leaks were the 570,000 pager messages between the New York City Police Department and the Pentagon on the day of September 11th and video of an air strike in Baghdad that killed 12 people, including two journalists. However, the biggest WikiLeaks story is now known as the Afghan War Diary. This series of 90,000 documents detail around 140 Afghani civilian deaths between 2004 and 2010 as well as many friendly

fire incidents. Not surprisingly, the US government is increasingly wary of the amount of information released through WikiLeaks and has attempted to block the release of this information. The US government has argued that some of the information released could be endangering the lives of informants and soldiers as well as complicating the tactical planning of the American military.

The impact of WikiLeaks on the mainstream media has been nothing less than profound and highlights how mainstream and alternative media continue to converge. In this case, mainstream media draw from documents provided by WikiLeaks and use that information in their coverage. WikiLeaks provides the information and the mainstream news provides 'the context, corroboration, analysis, and distribution' (Madrigal 2010b). WikiLeaks has reached out to mainstream publications to create an alliance between itself and the mainstream press. WikiLeaks has taken this purposeful step towards alliance with the mainstream press for reasons of publicity. 'It's counterintuitive', Assange argued in October of 2009, 'you'd think the bigger and more important the document is, the more likely it will be reported on but that's absolutely not true. It's about supply and demand. Zero supply equals high demand, it has value. As soon as we release the material, the supply goes to infinity, so the perceived value goes to zero' (Nystedt 2009). So even though WikiLeaks published the Afghan War Diary on 25 July 2010, they first released advance copies of the secret documents to *The New York Times, Guardian* and *Der Spiegel* on the condition that these mainstream publications didn't release the information until the 25th of July. The newspapers analysed the documentation for some time and then, on the 25th of July, there was a collaborative publication of this material between WikiLeaks and these mainstream goliaths. This concerted alliance signals a further convergence across the media spectrum. It is a convergence not welcomed by everyone. Some have argued that WikiLeaks has a central focus on highlighting information that is anti-American (Rosenthal 2010). WikiLeaks counters by stating that the organization has been 'victorious over every legal (and illegal) attack, including those from the Pentagon, the Chinese Public Security Bureau, the Former president of Kenya, the Premier of Bermuda, Scientology, the Catholic & Mormon Church, the largest Swiss private bank, and Russian companies. WikiLeaks has released more classified intelligence documents than the 'rest of the world press combined' (WikiLeaks: Submissions 2010).

The connections between independent and mainstream media are happening all across the media spectrum. Individual National Public Radio (NPR) stations across the United States are forging alliances with non-profits and smaller, start-up independent journalism outlets. The rationale is rather simple: 'innovative journalism startups can do great work but they have trouble attracting large audiences … public radio stations have millions of listeners, but limited budgets. Put the two types of organizations together and you have quality, well-researched journalism reaching large numbers of

people' (Madrigal 2010a). This model is already in practice between local NPR stations and *The Texas Tribune* in Austin, the *St. Louis Beacon* in Missouri and the *Watchdog Institute* in San Diego. *ProPublica* provides further evidence of alliances forged across mainstream and independent media outlets. *ProPublica* began in 2007 as an independent, non-profit news organization led by former editors of major mainstream publications, such as *The Wall Street Journal, The Oregonian*, and *The New York Times* ('About Us' 2010). *ProPublica* is funded solely through philanthropic donations and employs 32 independent, full-time investigative reporters who provide stories exclusively to mainstream news organizations at absolutely no charge. The organization provided 138 stories in 2009 that were published in 38 different mainstream news organizations, one of which won a Pulitzer Prize in 2009 ('About Us' 2010). The organization has independently investigated stories such as the ramifications of the Gulf oil spill, toxins in drywall used in home construction, abuse in the New Orleans police force, deceptive recruiting practices within for-profit schools and a lack of medical support for civilian contractors who have been injured in Iraq. The stories are purposefully thematic and packaged within a much larger series of articles that each examines different facets of the story. This holistic approach has largely not been seen in the mainstream press due to the excessive costs incurred in creating such a story; yet these articles still do make their way into mainstream media.

The fact that an independent organization has been so successful in publishing content that has not been investigated by the mainstream press should be extremely alarming to those who celebrate the traditional strengths of mainstream news. In a book titled *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in Global Media*, investigative reporter Nick Davies argues that modern mainstream journalism is now, what he calls, in a perpetual state of churnalism (Davies 2008). This model of newsgathering relies heavily on public relations agencies and official sources that can direct a certain perspective to such a degree that pseudo-events dominate coverage and propaganda seeps into modern news. Thus, the reliance on commentary or citizen journalism might not be a move towards building relationships with readers or improving connections with an independent press. Rather, this change in mainstream journalism may simply be due to a lack of funding rather than a purposeful and principled persuasive argument. Whatever the reason, these kinds of inroads from what was once considered alternative media into mainstream content suggest a new model of news journalism that is a hybrid of both forms.

It should also be said that countless newspapers have not yet adapted many of the changes highlighted in this chapter. Large factions of mainstream media remain locked in indecision. Even in the midst of an Internet revolution, which has witnessed remarkable access to open-source publishing tools, an incoming rush of advertising support and limitless distribution opportunities, many

within mainstream media have not yet displayed a meaningful communication strategy online (Bowman & Willis 2005). As of this writing, that remains a truism in much of the mainstream news media. Adherence to such bureaucratic inertia will inevitably lead to failure for the media outlets that continue to operate with such outdated communication models. However, there are many within traditional, mainstream media who are quickly adapting to new technologies and demonstrating a respected appreciation for their readers. Richard Sambrook, director of the BBC World Service and Global News division, highlights this change within the mainstream press when he says, 'any media organization only exists on the quality and depth of its relationship with the public … you've got to have a healthy and strong relationship for people to come to you' (Sambrook cited in Bowman & Willis 2005).

3

Media Frames

Disentangling what is actually meant by the word 'frame' is not as easy as one might think. The term frame has been problematized by a history of multiple uses (Tankard Jr *et al.* 1991: 163) and varying conceptualizations, ranging from schema or script to refer to audience perception and processing (Entman 1993; Severin & Tankard 1997). Gitlin (1980) has defined frames as 'persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse' (Gitlin 1980: 7). Echoing the work of Gitlin, Hertog and McLeod (1995) state that 'the frame used [for interpretation] determines what available information is relevant' (Gitlin *et al.* 1995: 4). Thus, the frames of a story determine the relevant pieces of descriptive information that attach to that concept. Reese (2001) states that 'frames are the organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world'. According to Binder (1993), this structure inevitably becomes common sense and these 'referent images' become the 'beliefs and values the larger culture takes for granted' (Binder 1993: 756).

Thus, a frame essentially 'suggests what the issue is' (Tankard Jr *et al.* 1991: 3). This understanding of an issue's relevance does not happen immediately. Research has shown that readers often forget specific elements of media stories but retain general impressions (Graber 1988) that later become integrated into their own perceptions of the world (Potter 1993). News, in particular, can function as an authoritative version of reality (Barker-Plummer 1995) but performs this function over time. Framing is not a static event but a process of meaning construction that changes gradually 'in response to the political and social climate' (Mazzarella & Pecora 2007: 10). This process evolves from overall 'interpretive packages' (Gamson & Modigliani 1989: 2) constructed through the narratives of a text. Analysing frames and the narrative within media content implicitly 'recognizes that stories have the power to link the personal and the cultural: that within the mundane, minute details of a specific event, relationship, or interaction, the reader/researcher can identify cultural beliefs, practices, and trends' (Foster 2005: 58). These repeated cultural artefacts enter into 'that precise field of the distribution of the dominant ways in which a society makes sense of what is going on around it or what is happening to it' (Hall 1984: 7–8). Through such a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) it is possible to unpack the interconnected network of shared assumptions, beliefs and myths that drive media representations.

Framing derives from the very real need to categorize news and information so that meaningful comprehension and communication can take place. News, like any other communication system, can be understood as a narrative that has implied meanings (Kensicki 2004). Otherwise stated, 'news and information has no intrinsic value unless embedded in a meaningful context which organizes and lends it coherence' (London 1993). The 'meaningful context' is the frame that shapes a news story (Entman 1993). These frames serve to construct 'the culture of an issue' (Gamson & Lasch 1983: 397) and are the result of three processes combining: cultural resonance, sponsor activity and media practice (Gamson & Modigliani 1989). Cultural resonance is built upon our shared 'referent images' (Binder 1993: 756) that society accepts as common sense. Sponsor activity refers to the attempts from those with a particular agenda, such as politicians or movement representatives, to influence news content. Media practices are the 'norms and routines of news gathering' (Mazzarella & Pecora 2007: 11). These three processes coalesce to create the media frames that re-produce current events and subsequently influence the process of social change.

Scheufele (1999) intuitively points out that framing research, characterized by 'social constructivism', is defined by both strong and limited effects. On the one hand, mass media construct powerful images of reality for the public, and on the other hand, the public draws upon these frames only to contextualize them against their own pre-existing schemas. This results in a process whereby audiences depend on 'a version of reality built from personal experience, interaction with peers, and interpreted selections from the mass media' (Neuman, Just & Crigler 1992). As journalists, editors and reporters select (or frame) the news, they are also emphasizing certain aspects of a story, which then cues corresponding specific thoughts within the audience (Iyengar 1991). The audience then applies these specific thoughts, conjured up from media frames associated with a particular story, when considering the broader issues at hand (Price & Tewksbury 1997). This process, called the 'accessibility bias' (Iyengar 1990a) or the 'availability heuristic' (Shrum & O'Guinn 1993), enables for automatic, subconscious judgments to be made and is the basis for understanding the impact media frames can have on society.

The relationship between media content and social change is aptly highlighted by Entman (1993), who states that frames increase the salience of particular aspects of a story by promoting a specific 'problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described'. The news is indeed 'a site on which various social groups, institutions, and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality' (Gurevitch & Levy 1985: 18), but some groups have historically had more power than others in that contest. As Tuchman (1978) argued years ago, journalistic routines work to generally reinforce capitalistic distributions of power rather than challenge them. This is not to say that traditionally

marginalized groups, such as social movements, never gain access to successful frame sponsorship (Gamson *et al.* 1992). However, mainstream media in particular have transcribed elite sources to such a degree that frames have been taken as common sense or as 'transparent descriptions of reality, not as interpretations' (Gamson *et al.* 1992: 382). Social movements serve as an excellent framework to examine mainstream and alternative media frames because they have been created specifically to oppose the status quo and are typically in direct opposition to hegemonic social and political structures.

Social movements and media frames

Media coverage is absolutely central to the very existence of social movements (Kielbowicz & Sherer 1986). News provides information, which then plays a fundamental structural role in each individual's decision-making (Gandy Jr 1982) and how we later think about political issues. News becomes an 'authoritative version of reality, a way of knowing associated with high levels of cultural legitimacy' (Barker-Plummer 1995: 309). Thus, news offers a type of membership of knowledge that participators engage in as we negotiate our social and political world. As audiences, we receive an edited version of events (Worth 1981) that then defines what we generally come to believe to be a reality.

The success of social movements depends in large part on their ability to access and to use political allies, media coverage, money and public awareness (Heath 1997). For the most part, social movements are, or begin as, marginal or powerless groups (Berry 1984). Certainly, there are exceptions, such as the lobbying powerhouses of the American National Rifle Association or the Sierra Club. However, the overwhelming majority of social movement organizations remain largely powerless in society (Greenwald 1977) given that they fall outside of mainstream media's norms of inclusion (Wolfsfeld 1997), and they are faced with tight budgetary constraints that hamper their ability for promotion otherwise. Social movements have traditionally been shut out of mainstream media as they 'challenge a major aspect of society, either its authorities or cultural codes, from outside the political process, often employing unconventional actions' (Lester 2006: 909). It is because of that exclusion that social movements have historically forged alliances with the alternative press.

In his seminal book examining the group Students for a Democratic Society, Gitlin (1980) wrote that 'of all the institutions of daily life, the media specialize in orchestrating everyday consciousness – by virtue of their pervasiveness, their accessibility, their centralized symbolic capacity' (Gitlin 1980: 2). Since then, media have continued to evolve into a highly skilled system of networks that distribute ideology throughout the world. Social movements must understand media structures and work within these confines if they hope to disseminate their

beliefs because without media coverage, many members of the public would be unaware of a movement's existence. The public receives its information concerning social groups primarily from the media. Relatively few in our society form their opinions of social movements through personal contact. The media image 'tends to become "the movement" for wider publics and institutions who have few alternative sources of information, or none at all, about it' (Gitlin 1980: 3).

If a movement does not attract media attention, the possibility of it remaining a viable force for change drops considerably. Gitlin (1980) states, 'media define the public significance of movement events or, by blanking them out, actively deprive them of larger significance' (Gitlin 1980: 3). Media are so essentially important to social movements because it is also where they can influence potential recruits into their movement. Favourable coverage confers legitimization upon the movement and attracts new members, while unfavourable media coverage can often discourage movement participation. Social movements are already fighting the almost insurmountable task of presenting the principles of an organization or group in an appealing way for the potential recruit (Olson 1965). Media coverage also provides psychological support to those already active in the movement (Molotch 1979). Anything difficult, which surely the process of social change would qualify as such, takes an enormous amount of tenacity and strength. This strength can be bolstered with the occasional reaffirmation that may result from positive media coverage.

Since social movements so desperately depend upon media, they often find themselves in a perplexing position. On the one hand, they need media to disseminate their meanings to a larger audience, but on the other hand, they have minimal control on the quality or quantity of how reporters will frame their organization and their cause. The result is somewhat of a barter arrangement (Gamson 1989), whereby protesters provide good visual imagery and action for the media and in return they receive coverage. They must face this dichotomy with a full awareness of the benefits and the shortcomings media coverage can bring. As Perlmutter and Wagner (2004) have said, groups are 'faced with the practical, political, psychological and existential quandary that might be summed up by the Hamletian paraphrase, "To be a media spectacle or not to be a media spectacle?"' (Perlmutter & Wagner 2004: 95). In the past, the answer to this question was much more obvious. However, contemporary social movements may now have a wider range of representational options across the media spectrum.

Negative mainstream coverage

Historically, there have been repeated cases of slanting, trivialization and outright omission of those who deviate from the norms of an elite media

and form a political movement to combat injustice. For example, negative mainstream media frames have been discovered in the anti-nuclear movement (Entman & Rojecki 1993), the women's movement (Barker-Plummer 1995), and the gay and lesbian movement (Jenness 1995). These frames are at times obvious and at other times strikingly subtle. Tuchman (1978) argued that quotation marks are a common method of inserting a level of commentary without breaking the journalistic code of objectivity. Quotes can be used to question what is stated as fact on the part of social movement actors without directly questioning their integrity. For example, Gitlin (1980) argued that those protesting against the Vietnam War were often described in quotation marks as participating in a 'peace march', suggesting that this protest was labelled as such only by those participating within the movement and not as seen by the wider population. The use of stance adverbs can also advance a preferred reading. Words such as obviously or allegedly direct readers to possible conclusions without specifically stating that outcome. These literary techniques 'contribute to the delegitimization of challenging groups' (McLeod & Detenber 1999: 6).

Violence within movements has often been used as framing technique. Violent frames cause protesters to be conceptualised as far more counter-social or deviant. These frames avoid 'the philosophical issues under debate' (Dardis 2006: 120) and focus on the violent spectacle. McFarlane and Hay (2003) drew heavily from the work of McLeod and Hertog (1999) to create two general media representations of violence as it pertains to social movements: general lawlessness or disruption and police confrontation. These negative frames have been seen repeatedly in coverage of protest movements around the world and effectively reduce the purpose and mission of the social movement to nothing more than a violent act.

Another often used frame in social movement coverage is marginalization. For example, protesters against the Gulf War were found to be represented as a 'marginal oddity' (Hackett & Zhao 1994: 518). Such an emphasis on protesters being categorically different from the mainstream was replicated in other studies looking at social movements. These differences can manifest themselves through both physical and emotional characteristics. Physical variations, such as long hair, body piercings or abnormal clothing, have long been emphasized in protest content (McLeod & Hertog 1999). Media can often suggest that those within a movement are also marginal in sheer numbers (McLeod & Hertog 1992) and therefore not representative of the general population. This frame is generally invoked through generalizations about the public response, an emphasis on counter-protests that might be present or a reliance on public opinion polls that negate the activity of protesters.

The immaturity of protesters, as seen through silly play and childish acts, has also been highlighted in media coverage (McLeod & Hertog 1999). In other instances, protesters have been framed purely as 'idiots at large'

(McFarlane & Hay 2003: 223), who simply have no clue as to the complexity of the social or political problem that they are protesting. A carnivalesque (McLeod & Hertog 1999) atmosphere or 'protest as performance' (McFarlane & Hay 2003: 218) is often highlighted in coverage. In each case, the media remove any serious political voice from the protesters (Dow 1999). All of these frames detract from the issue at hand, but paradoxically, fractions of these social movements often rely on these tactics to gain movement coverage.

Historical references to previous, and more likely unsuccessful (McFarlane & Hay 2003), social movements can also be a common framing technique used by the media (Hackett & Zhao 1994). This offers a context for the reader or viewer that can instantaneously be juxtaposed with a collective negative experience or a positive one. In the case of American anti-war protests, many modern social movements are compared to the historical protests against the Vietnam War (Beamish, Molotch & Flacks 1995). For many within America, these protests conjure up historical media images of violence and unpatriotic behaviour on the part of some who did not respect returning soldiers.

Research has also found that official sources are often invoked in opposition to the protesters, specifically through commentary on normative behaviour or societal rules (Smith *et al.* 2001). In some instances, protesters are almost never asked to describe events. Instead, there can be an almost exclusive reliance on official voices, such as police officers, to narrate movement activity (Reese & Buckalew 1995). The US anti-nuclear movement, which was broadly middle class and moderate in their political approach, enjoyed a majority of public support in the polls. However, elite views that were opposed to the freeze were still found on the front pages of newspapers while movement opinions which supported the freeze were buried on interior pages (Entman & Rojecki 1993). *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine continued to focus on eccentricities within the movement, and overall content suggested that 'the nuclear weapons policies of the nation should not be dictated by the anxieties of an amorphous movement, one purportedly riven by discord' (Entman & Rojecki 1993: 170). When mainstream journalists repeatedly emphasize the same specific aspects of protest events, they are concomitantly not emphasizing other salient aspects of protest events – aspects that might more likely be associated with a more positive tone in coverage.

Positive mainstream coverage

While there is an overwhelming amount of negative coverage of social movements in mainstream media, there have been examples of successful movements that have created narrative structures and visual symbols which 'activate the schemas' (Perlmutter & Wagner 2004) of mainstream audiences.

If one examines the representation of social movements in the mainstream media throughout recent history, there are important instances of positive framing that refute a binary mainstream media in opposition to social movement activity. This is not to say that many social movements don't continue to struggle in their attempts to gain positive attention from the mainstream press. However, the instances where social movements have received positive coverage warrant closer inspection to better understand the pathways of acceptance within the mainstream press and potential areas of similarities between the alternative and mainstream media.

In America, the conservative Promise Keepers received extensive positive coverage (Claussen 1998) surrounding its march in Washington DC. The group is a Christian organization that aims to introduce men to the faith through seven promises that centre on worshipping Jesus Christ. Given that the organization is conservative, one might argue that it therefore does not challenge mainstream traditions in the same way as more liberal political organizations. However, the organization itself would likely argue that society is in a critical state of crisis and that organizations, such as Promise Keepers, are challenging the very core of contemporary society. Perhaps more important to its media coverage than its ideological position, Promise Keepers had a succinct and well-connected public relations strategy that attracted mainstream journalists without positioning the organization as spokespeople for the Christian Right (Waters 1998). It is interesting to note that even though academic scholarship found an overwhelmingly positive slant on coverage of Promise Keepers, members of the group perceived mainstream media coverage as unfavourable (Allen II 1998). This reaction may be due to preconceived beliefs from those who identify as conservative, that the mainstream media are liberal (Lee 2005).

These preconceived ideas may also fuel those on the left who believe that the mainstream media covered the 1999 Seattle demonstrations in a superficial manner. Rojecki (2002) found that while this may have been the case initially, coverage quickly moved to more substantive issues concerning the protest even though the 'costumes, methods for gaining attention, or civil disobedience and mass arrests could easily have become the focus of coverage' (Rojecki 2002: 163). One of the reasons for this focus on more manifest issues concerning the protesters was the power of the Internet to counterbalance early reports and 'provide extraordinary leverage for mobilization and organization' (Rojecki 2002: 157 cited in Cottle 2008: 861). Protesters were able to provide contrasting information through horizontal communication networks that negated initial coverage and may have forced mainstream outlets to consider contradicting accounts of the events in Seattle. Whatever the reason, there was undoubtedly widespread positive coverage of those involved in the Seattle protests.

As was mentioned briefly in Chapter 2, another remarkable example of positive coverage comes from Belgium where more than 300,000 people gathered in 1996 to form the White March, which was the largest protest rally

that the country had ever seen. Protesters argued for stronger protection of Belgian children and an improved justice system to prosecute child abusers. This protest not only received almost exclusively positive coverage in the press, but the mainstream media actually acted as organizers for the march. In this case, the media 'undertook large-scale and unconcealed motivational framing efforts' (Walgrave & Manssens 2005: 132) to mobilize the public in support of the protest. There was a 'total absence of any mobilization machinery' (Walgrave & Manssens 2005: 113). The five mainstream newspapers in Belgium acted as an 'adequate alternative to intermediary organizations' (Walgrave & Manssens 2005: 113) and actually 'co-produced' the successful march through their positive, motivational framing of the upcoming protest and their negative portrayals of the justice system. While such active mobilization on the part of mainstream media are relatively rare, Walgrave and Manssens (2005) argue that media can take such an active role when there is a manifest disagreement between the general population and elites, the issues are emotional and symbolic, there is not already a movement in place, the issue is simple, the controversy does not have a political position, the media are depoliticized and commercial, the presence of a turbulent social atmosphere and society has confidence in the media.

Mainstream and alternative media around the world have challenged oppressive governmental regimes and have helped to force social change. Some researchers have gone so far to argue that many mainstream publications in Britain actually actively promote specific causes, although they argue that it is in an effort to manufacture dissent and consequently increase circulations (Milne 2005). The underlying reasons for the behaviour of anyone within the media are difficult to disentangle without honest reflection on the part of media workers. Yet it is indisputable that there have been several instances throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century where mainstream media have led the charge to overthrow oppressive governmental regimes around the world. The mainstream, independent media in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan 'played an important role in catalysing public participation in mass protests, which led to success of each of the revolutions' (Barker 2008). The information dissemination and calls to action from some of the most popular media outlets in these countries were all overtly political. In Georgia, there was 'almost non-stop' (Khudlyev 2005: 60) protest coverage that informed local citizens about protest locations. The local mainstream media, often with American financing, acted as mobilizers for citizens eager to challenge their government (Barker 2008). In Ukraine, media even participated in the protest as local stations broadcasted information on public screens during political rallies (Dyczok 2006).

Some of the factors for an activist mainstream media highlighted by Walgrave and Manssens (2005) were present in the Australian Rally for Justice protest spearheaded by Howard Sattler, a talkback radio host. In 1991, he argued

persuasively against juvenile car thieves and rallied 30,000 to protest outside of West Australia Parliament. Sattler was able to cajole a loyal following through his radio broadcasts and a successful public relations campaign that succeeded even though there was no concomitant rise in this type of crime during that period (Mickler 1998). Sattler focused his broadcasts at the time on a select few cases of juveniles driving stolen cars that were later involved in fatal accidents. Through this emphasis, he was able to mobilize protesters who later persuaded lawmakers to introduce legislation that actually curtailed international human rights legislation (Stockwell 1992), which Sattler and his followers believed to be too permissive. There was a personal reward as well for the talkback host: Sattler's ratings rose from 14.6 per cent of listeners to an impressive 19.4 per cent in the build-up to the rally (Centre for Research in Culture & Communication 1998). This individual, with the backing of mainstream media, created a successful protest that changed national legislation.

Nearly 20 years later in America, Glenn Beck utilized his own platform as a media personality to create the Restoring Honor rally, which attracted between 300,000 and 500,000 people. The event was held in 2010 on the same day and in the same location as the March on Washington, which is best known for Dr Martin Luther King Jr's 1963 'I Have a Dream' speech. While inevitably drawing reference from the original March on Washington, the Beck rally was focused on a return to God and 'traditional' American values. Beck ran frequent, and quite melodramatic, video promotion of the rally on FoxNews, his home broadcasting channel. Beck also gave exclusive interviews to FoxNews after the rally. This was not the first time that this media personality used his mediated pulpit to highlight social movements. Beck also dedicated a special broadcast of his television show that was timed to coincide with a FreedomWorks Tea Party Patriots movement march in September 2009.

While these examples suggest a level of activism on the part of mainstream media, the intersection between journalism and political engagement remains by no means commonplace or widely supported. In fact, the Restore Honor rally was marketed as explicitly apolitical on Fox, and Glenn Beck personally asked his supporters not to bring political signs to the rally (Restoring Honor Rally FAQ 2010). Yet the political overtones were hard to miss, given that one featured speaker was the previous Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, the rally was partially funded by the National Rifle Association and conservative groups held planned political events before and after the rally. The rally may have been purposefully distanced from overt political messaging and situated as apolitical after Rupert Murdoch commented that FoxNews 'shouldn't be supporting the Tea Party or any other party' (Media Matters 2010). One week after Mr Murdoch's comments, a fellow FoxNews broadcaster, Sean Hannity, was pulled from his commitment to headline a Cincinnati Tea Party rally and then broadcast his participation as part of his television show (Gold 2010). The political activism seen in these examples

from around the world highlight how mainstream media can and actually have become the instigator in social change.

Forty-seven years before Glenn Beck's Restoring Honour rally, Dr Martin Luther King sponsored the frame of civil rights struggle in America as an affront to mainstream society's understanding of Judaeo-Christian teachings on equality (Selby 2001). This frame was positively represented throughout the mainstream media, perhaps because it drew upon a shared cultural myth in America. However, other social movements, such as the anti-sweatshop activist groups, have also gained positive coverage in the mainstream media, despite what appears to be anti-capitalistic rhetoric. During the 1990s, after several sweatshop investigations in the mainstream press, the American mainstream media gave anti-sweatshop activists 'a position of definitional prominence' (Greenberg & Knight 2004: 169) over corporate interests. Greenberg and Knight (2004) argue that while this was a notable achievement for activists, coverage was also focused on individual sweatshops rather than systemic issues and placed the blame of the issue on Western consumption rather than business profiteering. However, it should be noted that much of this coverage may have been due to the tactics of the movement itself rather than an institutional response from mainstream media, and it is not known how, or if, alternative media might have covered the issue differently. The main point to be raised, however, is that positive coverage in the mainstream is certainly possible and does occur in ways that are similar to an alternative press.

The mainstream media recently bestowed positive frames to environmental protests (Allan, Adam & Carter 2000) and public demonstrations against the Iraq War (Murray *et al.* 2008). In fact, 'many specific messages about corporate abuses, sweatshop labour, genetically modified organisms, rainforest destruction, and the rise of small resistance movements, from East Timor to southern Mexico, have made it into the mass media on their own terms' (Bennett 2003: 19). The reasons for positive coverage are many. For example, a closer inspection of a case study examining the positive coverage of Deaf President Now! (DPN) illustrates how, and why, social movements can and sometimes do receive positive coverage from the mainstream media (Kensicki 2000).

In its 124-year history, Gallaudet University – the pre-eminent deaf university in the United States and quite possibly the world – had never appointed a deaf individual as president. In 1988, the presidential position became vacant and the search for a new president was undertaken. Despite growing opposition on campus, the majority of the hearing Board of Trustees for Gallaudet University selected a hearing president, Dr Elisabeth Zinser. After learning the news, DPN protesters blocked off all entrances to the campus, shut down a federally funded university, garnered support from labour and union leaders, sparked national debate on ABC's 'Nightline', organized several marches to the US Capitol, received the blessings of various powerful political figures, achieved

every goal the movement set out to meet *and* enjoyed positive portrayals in the mass media. After enjoying pronounced popularity in the media with less than a week of protest, the movement also successfully achieved all four of their demands: the removal of Zinser and the placement of a deaf president; the removal of Spilman, chairperson of the board that elected Zinser; a 51 per cent deaf majority on the board of trustees; and no reprisals against any faculty, staff or students involved in the protest.

Research examining the protest (Kensicki 2001a) argued that this long list of successes was due to the intended availability of protest sources, the lack of expedience on the part of elite sources, the peaceful means of protest organized into events by the students, the assimilation of 'elites' within the protest movement, the frame extension of the movements' causes, sponsorship from corporations, liaisons with journalists, the narrow focus of the movement and perhaps the ideological assumptions of disability in society (Kensicki 2001a). When images of disability have been introduced in mass media, it has typically been cast in terms of tragedy and charity or struggle and accomplishment (Yoshida, Wasilewski & Friedman 1990). When viewed through this lens, DPN fit the stereotypical constructions of disability representation. Thus, the media may have bestowed positive framing upon the movement, not as an example of successful political upheaval but as a story of struggle and subsequent accomplishment within the disability stereotype. Yet it is important to reiterate that DPN also had a strong understanding of how modern newsrooms operate, and they quickly adapted to meet media expectations. They were readily available for interviews, solicited corporate sponsorship, marched peacefully so as to not shift the media focus to disorder or violence, brought in 'elites' to their movement and also uniformly spoke of their complaints in terms of fundamental civil rights. All of these factors led to positive coverage in the mainstream press.

When positive representations, such as these, are replicated over time, they work to slowly shift shared perceptions. Mainstream and alternative media are constantly evolving as they gradually amalgamate frames into a broader, narrative arc. This is perhaps best exemplified by the evolutionary coverage of the restorative justice protests surrounding the murder of Stephen Lawrence in the United Kingdom. Five suspects were found but never convicted for his murder, and there were many lingering questions as to whether the murder was racially motivated. Cottle (2004) thoughtfully argues that coverage of the murdered 18-year-old black student developed over a period of 10 years in Britain, moved through five developmental phases and created a 'mediatized public crisis'. This protracted and evolutionary process led an entire country to reconsider essential questions of racism and injustice. In this case, the mainstream media actually initiated a multifaceted and introspective examination of cultural identity in England and 'performed' the case over the 10 years of coverage to bring about important social reforms

(Cottle 2004). The mainstream media instigated 'processes of institutional reflexivity including government policies targeting institutionalized racism within Britain's most powerful organizations of state and civil society' (Cottle 2005: 49). As a result, the Criminal Justice Act of 2003 was passed. This is an important illustration of how mainstream media can develop and encourage social change in ways that might not be immediately apparent but are often facilitated by the interconnected communication strategies between social movements and entrenched mainstream media institutions.

The success of certain organizations and groups to attain positive coverage is a complex, interconnected process. Rucht (2004) argues that contemporary social movements increasingly rely upon 'adaptation strategies' that align with mainstream media practices. Social movements now focus their energies on developing mainstream media alliances through professionalized public relations tactics and have moved away from 'maintaining their inwardly focused alternative media' (Barker 2007). These are the same tactics and strategies that are used by those within corporate institutions to gain media attention. Public relations techniques have enabled an increasing number of British activist groups, for example, to gain positive media coverage (Davis 2002). Activist organizations may also discover that if they highlight legal activity, rather than protest action, media often respond much more positively (Leachman 2009). It should be noted that the success of public relations tactics and legal activity could serve to homogenize organizations that might otherwise have a much more activist approach. However, 'repertoires of contention' (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 2001) have always changed in response to shifting media practices. Protesters are continually modifying their approaches based on previous mediated successes or failures (Vanderford 2003). However, these contemporary changes on the part of social movements might also be matched by recent 'variable, shifting and sometimes more progressive alignments of the news media's reporting of demonstrations and protests than in the past' (Cottle 2008: 858).

As the introduction of public relations and legal action suggests, one of the reasons for this possible shift in mainstream media's coverage of social movements may be that social protest and political marches have moved from the radical fringes of society to mainstream culture (Pippa Norris 2002; Whiteley 2003). In 2002, more than 1 million people from across the political spectrum demonstrated against the Iraq War (Tumber & Palmer 2004). Five years later, coordinated demonstrations in more than 35 counties pleaded for an end of the genocide in Darfur (Cottle 2008). It is impossible to categorize a contemporary social protester based on religious affiliation or political persuasion. Whereas protesters from previous generations might have been exclusively left of centre and relatively young, contemporary protesters come from an entire range of the human experience. This plurality in perspectives suggests that, in theory, there should be an increasing opportunity for a plurality of media responses

(Cottle 2008). Recent surveys found that 33 per cent of respondents stated that they would attend a protest rally (Citizens Audit Survey in Whiteley 2003), and 47 per cent see anti-capitalism demonstrations as justified (ICM Research in Doherty, Plows & Wall 2003).

Even though there is a widespread acceptance of protest, positive coverage might still be due to a perceived level of deviance from the mainstream. It may be that reformist movements are much more likely to be successful in the mainstream press than revolutionary organizations agitating for drastic change (Gamson 1995). Organizations that directly challenge government's foreign policies, for example, remain less likely to receive positive coverage in mainstream media (Smith *et al.* 2001). It may also be that, as social movements are adapting their policies to engage with the mainstream press, these activist groups may lose their ability to effectively agitate for more radical issues (Barker-Plummer 1995; Tuchman 1978). However, as more and more social movements engage with the mainstream press, and as more citizen journalists make important inroads into mainstream media, more social movements across the political spectrum are seeing an increasing level of positive representations in the mainstream press.

The globalized transnational media corporation has also led to the globalization of protest coverage and the internationalization of many movements (Bennett 2003; Dahlberg & Siapera 2007). Citizens of the world are increasingly interconnected in the globalized world, made possible by mediated communication on the Internet (Cottle 2008). Media users often simultaneously consider their local condition as well as that of those in distant countries. This ability to transcend locality (Robertson 1990) allows readers to 'engage in protests involving nature and morality across the whole planet' (Macnaghten & Urry 1998: 248). Contemporary social movements and political pressure groups are also utilizing media technologies in completely new ways that circumvent traditional hierarchies of access and historic paths of influence (Grant 2004). 'The fluid, non-hierarchical structure of the Internet and that of the international protest coalition prove to be a good match' (Van Aelst & Walgrave 2004: 121). As Grant (2004) argues, these new, networked approaches remove the binary 'insider/outsider' conceptualizations that have long defined who can create and influence media content. The organic, horizontal communication networks cultivated online destabilize traditional vertical flows of information.

The traditionally conceived alternative press can help facilitate this positive mainstream coverage of social movements (Brinson 2004). If there are, indeed, growing areas of convergence between the mainstream and alternative press, there might also be increased opportunities for positive coverage in the mainstream press, whether through a mutually engaged mainstream and alternative media or through activities of a movement itself. 'Wider shifts in the surrounding political culture as well as the efficacy of strategic communications

and the symbolic cachet of some protest organizations and their issues can help to win news media interest and even support through time' (Cottle 2008: 858).

Again, this should not imply that mainstream media now cover social movements with the same attention and detail as the alternative press. For example, Barker (2008) rightly points out how the people's revolution in Bolivia against the American privatization of water was almost completely ignored by the American mainstream press. That being said, however, there was not a multitude of coverage in what would be considered the alternative press either. Social movements face a constant struggle to gain coverage from mainstream media institutions. Their efforts are not made easier by the litany of influences on mainstream media: the continually expanding transnational media conglomerate environment, a declining emphasis on public service in journalism or the intensification of commercialization throughout the media (Herman & McChesney 1997). The reasons that social movements do gain access to positive media frames may be relatively infrequent and somewhat idiosyncratic, but there is a basis here to problematize a monolithic mainstream media paradigm. The complexity of re-presentations through mainstream media frames appears to negate the possibility of a reductive media model that does not allow for any reflexivity in mediated representation. This review of social movement frames attempts to highlight some of the thematic differences and similarities in coverage across the media spectrum. While there are certainly many obvious differences between the mainstream and alternative press, examinations of actual coverage is the most useful determinant of difference between these two fore-destined types of media. This initial examination of social movements was helpful to illustrate the furthest potentialities of coverage received from those on the political and social margins. However, important variances may or may not exist between alternative and mainstream media across a range of political issues that the media re-present daily. With that in mind, this chapter will now explore a specific study that compares media frames of climate change, a topic that can be viewed very differently from those on the political left and right.

A study of climate change coverage in New Zealand and America

Aotearoa/New Zealand is useful as a case study of climate change coverage, given that it is considered to be more mindful of environmental issues than many other countries in the world. New Zealand is a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol; the Ministry of the Environment has advocated the settlement of a 100 per cent renewable or carbon neutral energy goal and immediately reforesting unstable lands as well as making biofuels available to all citizens

(Parker 2007). Roughly 75 per cent of New Zealand's total electricity generation comes from renewable hydro, thermal, geothermal or wind sources (Ministry of Economic Development 2010). The United States, in contrast, is the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases. The United States did not sign the Kyoto Protocol and instead set a voluntary domestic greenhouse gas intensity target that would 'allow U.S. emissions to actually increase by 12 percent by 2012, and established no mechanism for ensuring that even that target would be met' (Pew Center on Global Climate Change 2004: 3). It has only been in the past few years that the White House ceased to officially refuse any link between human activity and global warming (Elliott 2005).

In 2007, British Sustainability Commissioner Tim O'Riordan gave a public speech in New Zealand titled, 'Not Just Communicating: How to Share Hard Policy Choices about Climate Change with the Public'. O'Riordan suggested that New Zealand was poised to lead the global community regarding climate change, given its historical roots in progressive social change and its international image as clean and green. In his role as a British Sustainability Commissioner and an advisor to the previous British Prime Minister Tony Blair on environmental issues, O'Riordan has had a unique perspective on the relationship between media, government and social change in relation to global warming. He argued that climate change must be framed as an opportunity to benefit the future (O'Riordan 2007). He suggested that these 'reward' frames have already begun to be used in newspaper coverage of global warming around the world. Other researchers from *Science* magazine (Nisbet & Mooney 2007) have also argued that scientific reporting must move towards moralistic frames if society is to begin making fundamental changes.

Given New Zealand's mindfulness on environmental issues, one could assume it might be more progressive in its environmental reporting, particularly from the alternative press, than other countries. This study aimed to test that assumption by comparing climate change frames – particularly those with a moral component – across the selected media spectrum of New Zealand and the United States (Kenix 2008b): *New Zealand Herald, The New York Times*, Scoop, and AlterNet were all analysed.

New Zealand's Scoop ascribes to basic tenets that define alternative media. On their website, Scoop is defined as specializing in 'aggregating raw, unedited material from national sources and international commentators while also producing its own in-depth editorial content on important issues – often giving voice to perspectives not being addressed through "traditional media" sources' ('Scoop's Mission' 2007). It is independently owned and was started in 1999 by three individuals who had a goal of delivering unprocessed news under the banner of 'freedom, expression, ideas, information, empowerment, transformation' ('Scoop's Mission' 2007). AlterNet states that its purpose is to 'inspire citizen action and advocacy on the environment, human rights and civil liberties, social justice, media, and health care issues' ('Our Mission' 2007).

Much like Scoop, AlterNet serves as a filter for news in that the site amalgamates news from across the progressive news spectrum, helping readers 'navigate a culture of information overload and providing an alternative to the commercial media onslaught' ('Our Mission' 2007).

Although these alternative outlets have been essential in informing the public, mainstream media have actually been found to be an integral source of knowledge about climate change (Wilson 1995). The public has depended upon the mainstream media for information in relation to environmental risks (Hannigan 1995). Environmental issues, like most social issues, tend to go through a cyclical pattern of media coverage (Brossard, Shanahan & McComas 2004; Downs 1972; McComas & Shanahan 1999; Trumbo & Shanahan 2000). However, news about science has steadily increased globally over the past century (Lester 1995). Some have argued that much of this science coverage is often confusing (Bell 1994) or outright inaccurate (Reed 2002). This is not to say that all coverage fits this description as there are certainly outlets providing excellent coverage. The lack of quality in science journalism could be due to a number of factors: inadequate science education among journalists (Wilson 2000), a lack of communication between journalists and scientists (Bell 1994; Reed 2001), a presumed scientific illiteracy among the public that leads to simpler scientific reporting, a bias within corporate media against science that may be harmful to 'big business' (Nissani 1999) and the simple fact that science stories tend to be outside of standard journalistic norms dictating what makes the news (Hansen 1994).

While most science stories are episodic and focus on specific events or breakthroughs (Hansen 1994), climate change has had a steady presence in mainstream media. Yet public knowledge about climate change is often inaccurate or confused (Kempton, Boster & Hartley 1995). Adding to the confusion is the continued news reliance on sensationalism, conflict and controversy. The overwhelming majority of news reports about climate change continue to report on a supposed scientific debate surrounding the causes of climate change. One 'side' inevitably argues that climate change has been brought about by human activity, while the other 'side' maintains that this is a natural phenomenon (Helvarg 1994; Wilson 2000). This conflict frame persists in the media even though there is almost complete agreement among the scientific community that climate change is caused by humans (*Climate Change 2007* 2007; Oreskes 2004).

This research drew upon the challenges of O'Riordan, Nisbet and Mooney as a platform to examine science frames of climate change in 200 articles from the alternative New Zealand news site of Scoop and the mainstream newspaper *New Zealand Herald* as well as the American alternative outlet AlterNet and the mainstream *The New York Times*. This study found remarkable similarity between the alternative and mainstream representations of climate change and almost no deviation at all based on source of publication. This surprising overall finding suggests a strong homogenizing force across the media spectrum.

An overwhelming 87 per cent of all news articles never used morality in framing the issue of climate change. Only 2 out of 200 articles emphasized morality as the outstanding focus, and just 2.1 per cent of variance in morality was explained by publication source. The morality frame was found in reports such as the following from Ariana Emery, the Youth MP for Te Tai Hauauru, who said, 'If we love our country, why are we destroying it?' ('Climate Change – Ariana Emery Youth MP' 2007). The MP is quoted further saying that 'in the old days they did not need to be reminded, they lived it ... you cared for the land and in return the land cared for you ... showing respect today will pay generous dividends for tomorrow'. This emotional appeal is threaded throughout the entire article. She draws from the supposed actions of those in 'the old days' to illustrate how modern-day citizens of New Zealand are losing moral ground. In connecting the behaviour of our ancestors with the future for our children, Emery makes a definitive moral statement that was rarely seen in this sample.

Sensationalism was more likely to be found than any moral stance, but when the sensationalism frame was found, it was more likely in the alternative press and in New Zealand rather than in the mainstream press or in America. For example, many of the weather events were described as 'extreme'. Such an approach is sensationalistic not just in its discursive usage of the word 'extreme' but also in the absence of any historical evidence to support that statement. It is these gaps in coverage that make such dire predictions and extreme cautions have that much more impact. Without corollary information, the reader is left to surmise the situation with only limited knowledge.

Such a limited range of information inevitably leads to rash, uninformed decision-making and understanding. A Scoop article states that 'our generation is witnessing the early stirrings of extreme weather events, melting ice and other climatic manifestations' ('Global Campaign Tackling Climate Change' 2007). However, the article never states what those events are or how much ice has melted or what specific climatic manifestations are occurring. The reader is left to anxiously piece together these sensationalistic nodes of information that exponentially increase in their notoriety with each unexplained assertion. This model of reporting is replicated in an 18 September article titled 'The Death of "Green" Satellites' in AlterNet. In this article, a source is quoted as saying, 'if we want to prevent the entire world from becoming like Sumjayit we need the very kinds of data that CCSP scientists worry we can no longer get' (Newitz 2007). All the reader learns about Sumjayit in this article is that it is an 'industrial manufacturing city in Azerbaijan' that made the Blacksmith Institute's top 10 list of most polluted places on Earth. The reader does not know what that translates to in terms of quality of life, species survival or human lifespan, but the choices have been made clear. Either continue on the same path or suffer the fate of the most miserable place on earth – Sumjayit.

Generally, half of all media coverage emphasized the consequences of climate change. Consequences were relied on slightly less in the mainstream

press than in alternative outlets. This high usage of the consequence frame was relatively equal across publications. This appears counter to what would be expected from previous research. This finding suggests that the United States, the major greenhouse-gas emitter in the world, may have scaled back its use of sensationalism as the consequences of climate change become clear. Consequences, whether they be portrayed sensationalistically or not, were coupled with a lack of attention to values and moral decision-making in both the mainstream and alternative press. This lack of any cognitive connection would presumably leave readers with the uneasy fear of future consequences and little in the way of modelling for personal changes. Finding a lack of consequences across the media spectrum problematizes the notion that alternative content is situated as distinctly different from the type of frames so widely eschewed by those outside of the mainstream.

It can be argued that such tales of potential consequences are necessary to inform readers of climate change's effects. But these consequences were only rarely coupled with morality frames. This important omission could potentially leave readers frustrated, confused and afraid of the future without any perceived ability to enact change or the moral imperative to begin. There were little differences in sources across mainstream and alternative outlets. Academic, unnamed, business, industry, environmental groups, resident citizens, economists, independent/unaffiliated and government sources all were found to have a small magnitude of difference in the means between the mainstream and alternative press. Governmental sources were, by far, the most sourced group.

Both the alternative and mainstream press relied on the framework of domestic politics and new scientific evidence relatively evenly. Indeed, the difference between the two types of publications was almost non-existent. When scientific evidence or background was given, it was brief. One article read, 'aerial gridlock contributes a whopping 10% of the world's global warming, poisons the atmosphere and destroys the ozone layer' (Scoop, 1 August 2006). The reader does not know what causes the additional 90 per cent of global warming and also is left wondering what effect this global warming will have on his or her own life. Another example from Scoop states, 'transport is a major contributor to our national increase in greenhouse emissions. 40% of New Zealand's CO_2 emissions are transport related' (Scoop, 17 February 2005). What makes the remaining 60 per cent of CO_2 emissions remains unknown.

Thus, the alternative press relied on governmental sources as much as those in the mainstream, scientific debate was emphasized equally across publications and domestic and international politics was dealt with similarly between the alternative and mainstream media. One possible conclusion is that journalistic norms have become so pervasive that alternative media are quick to follow the same patterns of coverage. One of the principal points of opposition against the present media merger frenzy is the fear that a monolithic media will create

content that is one dimensional. This is based on the precept that a multiplicity of outlets will offer a multiplicity of voices (Bagdikian 2000; Shoemaker, Danielian & Brendlinger 1991). Yet this research found almost no difference between the independent media outlets and those corporately owned. In this case, media ownership and organization-specific routines and values did not dictate coverage. This suggests that diversification of media outlets could prove irrelevant unless fundamental changes occur within the journalism industry as a whole. Organizational values that previously were thought to have a purposeful force in the newsroom may not be as powerful for global issues. It may also be that universal, global issues have dictated a universal, global response in terms of journalism norms, signalling a convergence across the media spectrum.

These findings also suggest that the political position of a nation may have very little impact on newspaper coverage – at least as it pertains to climate change. It was hypothesized here that if moralistic coverage were to be found, it would be more likely in a country such as New Zealand that has a stated goal of carbon neutrality. This was not the case. The US press was more likely to emphasize business sources, as would be expected given the historical entrenchment of capitalism in the American economy. However, the United States was also more likely to use academic and independent or unaffiliated research sources than New Zealand. Therefore, this suggests that the country of origin may not play a strong role in dictating coverage of an important global issue, such as climate change.

This sample supports the notion that the content of commercially minded alternative and mainstream media are converging on some level in ways that are very meaningful for citizens as participants in social change. As Chapter 4 will show, the relationship between media coverage and social change is complex. Previous work (i.e. Pan & Kosicki 1993), which has examined media frames as independent variables, has correctly argued that no meaningful, direct connection can be made between audience frames and media representations. Yet it is important to recognize that any examination of media frames cannot divorce the frames themselves from the social and cultural scripts from which they are drawn. The direction of influence in this complex process remains perpetually unclear. Journalists depend upon shared cultural narratives to build stories (Bird & Dardenne 1997; Hanson 2001; Kitch 2002; Lule 2002); the reliance on these narratives helps readers disentangle potentially complicated issues (Kitch 2002; Tuchman 1978) and also provides the readers with a sense of comfort based on a familiarity of the topic (Bird & Dardenne 1997) from which to build their own understandings of the world. Because of this continuous and interchanging process, it is impossible to make any definitive claims as to whether media frames are based upon social and cultural narratives or whether these frames originated in the media. However, this book aims to further investigate the potential power of such representations in society throughout Chapter 4.

4

The Power of Representation

Institutional and relational hegemony

Media representations undoubtedly have some form of influence in society. However, getting a meaningful gauge on that influence is inherently problematic. The concept of hegemony has proven to be central in understanding the potential systemic influence of media in society. Gitlin (1980) credits Gramsci (1971) in defining hegemony as 'a ruling class's (or alliance's) domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology (ideas and assumptions) into their common sense and everyday practice; it is the systematic (but not necessarily or even usually deliberate) engineering of mass consent to the established order' (Gitlin 1980: 253). Thus, through the latent but yet incessant repetition of ideology, the ideas and values of the elites eventually become the ideas and values of the masses. The elites are generally the owners, managers and leaders in society. The theory of hegemony argues that since elites control mainstream media, it is their perspectives that are given prominence. Hegemony is a central component to the conceived historical divides between the alternative and mainstream press as many would argue that it is the fundamental reason that the alternative press exists.

Hegemony is not static. It is constantly changing under the perpetually shifting forces of capitalism and culture. This amorphous development process is one of the principal reasons why hegemony is so difficult to measure and describe. Hegemony is the result of an unending negotiation between the dominant and subordinate classes, which renders it perpetually unstable. This instability means that there may be brief periods where alternative ideologies are given apparent prominence within society. However, hegemonic theorists would argue that these instances are often short lived and generally do not truly expose any meaningful structural weaknesses within hegemonic institutions. In fact, in many instances, these episodes of alternative ideologies are often co-opted within a commercialized media system while major hegemonic ideologies continue unabated or usurped over time. Many would argue that any remaining presence of alternative exceptions within mainstream culture serve only to validate the 'natural' mainstream acceptance of omnipresent ideologies. It is this apparent obviousness that is the fundamental strength of cultural hegemony. Institutional systems of power and domination are never

questioned as their purpose and merit are patently clear to those who work in constant support of their continued existence.

When counter-hegemonic ideology does arise, it has historically percolated from within alternative media. Gramsci (1971) has argued that social elites, created within an inherently biased class structure, can only be forcefully challenged with a clearly conceptualized alternate version of society. If counter-hegemonic ideologies are to penetrate mainstream thinking, this alternate version of reality must be articulated through the same institutions of cultural control that have dictated the modern capitalist structure: mainly media, universities, books and churches. The media are the 'first line of defense' (Downing 1984: 14) in sustaining, cultivating and even subverting social control. It is because of this power that alternative media have become particularly instrumental during periods of political instability or social unrest, which has reached a cultural apex. A counter-hegemonic movement can be created through media that directly questions mainstream ideology and simultaneously offers a sustainable and alternative ideological framework (Downing 1984). It requires some level of organized leadership but depends upon mass involvement over time to succeed. This communication model of counter-information (Jensen 1997) can be quite effective under repressive dictatorships and extreme ideological indoctrination.

It is important to point out that counter-hegemonic political participation, in general, increases with media use across the entire spectrum (Shah, Kwak & Holbert 2001) and not only after exposure to alternative media. Mainstream print news is a strong predictor of traditional counter-hegemonic political activity (McLeod *et al.* 1996; Shah *et al.* 2001), but so is all sorts of varying online information (Shah *et al.* 2005). Research has found that alternative media, such as protest websites, positively influence political protest (Boyle & Schmierbach 2009), but such findings are heavily mitigated by the focus of the protest itself. For example, use of mainstream news appeared to be strongly associated with political protest within the Tea Party movement of the United States (Barstow 2010). This suggests that the mainstream press is not solely a conduit for hegemonic messages in opposition to an alternative press, which conversely only carry radical content. There is fluidity between the alternative and mainstream press in content and in audience (Jakob 2010). This is not to say that alternative media do not remain absolutely central to the success of progressive, political change. Rather, that success is often dependent upon the negotiation and acceptance of selected hegemonic messages within alternative media content and the assimilation of counter-hegemonic messages into some mainstream media fare. Previous research has already suggested that hegemony involves an almost constant state of tension (Habermas 1992). However, it may now be that much commercially minded alternative media and traditional mainstream media have drawn from each other to such a degree that differences are increasingly small. For example, when comparing

globalization coverage in the mainstream and alternative press, recent research found that alternative media can be more 'fragmented, non-responsive and even *more* exclusionary than mainstream media' (Groshek 2010: 1). It remains true that the further an issue is from the elite group's core interests and values, the more likely it will be overlooked by mainstream media (Gitlin 1980). Yet alternative media have been shown to soften or homogenize the messages of more deviant organizations as well (Kenix 2007a). Experienced protesters now elicit positive, counter-hegemonic representation in the mainstream press (Leung 2009), and the alternative press have made impressive inroads into mainstream audiences. Alternative media can also function as a media opinion leader, creating counter-hegemonic frames that have been selected and fully adopted by the mainstream press (Mathes & Pfetsch 1991). Repeated instances of alternative public spheres successfully challenging the dominant mainstream suggest that there may now be an 'integrative continuum from radical to mainstream' (Groshek 2010: 5).

In *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky and Herman state that American media conforms to a propaganda model whose 'societal purpose' is to 'inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state' (Herman & Chomsky 1988). This may continue to be true on some level in the aggregate, but today's multi-layered and complex media system necessitates a more nuanced perspective that accounts for individual discrepancies in a more meaningful way. Such an argument not only acknowledges that hegemony involves constant negotiation between mainstream ideology and a virulent opposition but also that the two can, and do, co-exist relatively peacefully within the same institutions of power. Hegemony might not strictly prohibit any systemic growth on the part of opposing ideologies, but rather because of the constant negotiation involved within democratic systems, more counter-hegemonic information and independent processes of communication may be flowing into mainstream media *and* more hegemonic information and institutional processes of communication might be flowing into the alternative press as well. It has been persuasively argued that alternative media are a counter-hegemonic force that helps to negate some of the propagandistic effects of mainstream media (Bagdikian 2000; Bennett 2005; McChesney 1999). However, as this book has already illustrated, mainstream media also have operated in ways that can be construed as counter-hegemonic. The boundaries are now far from clear.

Embedded within the research on hegemony is an assumption that media have strong effects on society – a notion that has been heavily debated in media scholarship. Understanding the effect that media can have on society has been at the centre of media research for nearly one hundred years. McQuail (2005) argues that academic enquiry into media effects has moved through several paradigm shifts throughout the twentieth century. The first pronounced paradigm of media research focused on the strong effects of

media on the public. In the 1920s and 1930s, the hypodermic needle model of communication argued that the media directly inject thoughts into the receiver who unwittingly accepts every disseminated message. Also called the magic-bullet model of communication, this model fell out of favour by the 1940s when Lazarsfeld and colleagues from Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research first released *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet 1944). After examining voters in Erie County, Ohio, these authors theorized that interpersonal sources played an essential role in the diffusion and acceptance of news frames. They argued that it was not the media itself that was so instrumental in influencing opinion but, rather, opinion leaders who were pivotal in dispensing information from news sources to their own personal networks (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955).

The 1970s brought a return to stronger effects with the research of Noelle-Neumann, Gerbner, McCombs and Shaw who all argued, in very distinctly different ways, that the media held far more power than Lazarsfeld and his colleagues first considered. Noelle-Neumann (1984) found evidence for a 'spiral of silence', which helped explain how perceptions of public opinion, learned from media frames, can influence one's own individual actions and beliefs. Gerbner (1969) argued that there are profound, long-term effects of media, principally television, on society. According to Gerbner and Gross (1976), mass media have a homogenization effect akin to medieval religion that produces an apathetic and fearful society after repeated messages over time. McCombs and Shaw (1972) compared polling data with media coverage of the 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and developed the groundbreaking agenda-setting theory, which argued that media, in essence, tell the public what to think about.

The current stage of effects research has been predominated by what McQuail calls 'negation models' (McQuail 2005). This stream of research focuses centrally on priming and framing but also includes further incarnations of agenda setting. This current era of research as a whole argues that the media can potentially have strong effects, but these effects rely 'heavily on predispositions, schema, and other characteristics of the audience' (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007: 11), which also have a strong influence on message processing. This stage of research acknowledges that media reception does not occur in a vacuum but that certain media messages can resonate with the public and have a strong effect. Of course, the goal of media is to create frames that tap into our predispositions, schemas and other characteristics to create a lasting impression that resonates with the public (Shoemaker & Reese 1996) at the micro- and macro-level (Scheufele 1999). At the macro-level, the media actively attempt to create frames to connect with their viewers, and at the micro-level, individuals draw from this information as they create their own world views. Over time, media frames can have a tremendous impact on how we view our selves and each other.

Constituting a reality? Dominant and oppositional readings

Research has found that we may tend to forget specific components of a media story, but the impressions we gain through media coverage of an issue, event or people have a long-lasting impact on our perceptions of the world (Potter 1993). Others have gone further to state that 'we need to go beyond representation to the recognition that *media constitute reality*' (italics in original) (Angus 1988: 339). Within framing research, this powerful effect has been called the 'reality definition function of the media' (Takeshita 1997). Our public understanding of each other and our shared social issues are built upon a continually evolving construction provided by media over the entire length of our lives (Altheide 1976; Gamson 1992; Ryan, Carragee & Schwerner 1998; Tuchman 1978). As frames make certain aspects of a story more salient, they also activate dormant but corollary thoughts on the part of the audience member (Price & Tewksbury 1997). These corollary thoughts are then applied to later evaluations of the group, event, issue or person at hand. This process has been called the 'availability heuristic' (Shrum & O'Guinn 1993) or, similarly, the 'accessibility bias' (Iyengar 1990a). Whatever the label applied, this process is an almost instantaneous cognitive task repeated incessantly over years that eventually creates a meaningful link between media messages and personal opinions.

When we read stories about a particular organization, our perceptions of that groups' legitimacy are affected (Shoemaker 1982). Unfortunately, much research has found that many media messages can encourage prejudice and public apathy (Gamson *et al.* 1992; Kensicki 2004). For example, if a story is particularly slanted against protesters, then readers are far more critical of that protest group and their social issue (McLeod 1995). If citizens are continually exposed to media that demonstrates status quo support (Campbell *et al.* 2002; Carragee 1991; Dardis 2006; Shoemaker 1984), then 'it is possible that public perceptions of protest as a form of democratic expression may become more hostile over a long period of time' (McLeod & Detenber 1999: 18). Put another way, specific cognitions may be much more accessible to readers who are consistently drawing from the same pool of descriptive frames (Shrum 1995). This is why diverse representations across the media spectrum have been seen to be so important.

Research examining the impact of media coverage surrounding social problems has repeatedly correlated false assumptions on the part of the audience with stereotypical portrayals of those affected (i.e. Fenton, Golding & Radley 1995; Martindale 1996). For example, media have disproportionately portrayed poverty as an African American problem even though they make-up less than one-third of the poor (Gilens 1996). Further, African Americans are more likely to be in unsympathetic and unpopular poverty stories (Clawson & Trice 2000). Poor people in general are often stereotypically portrayed as lazy,

sexually irresponsible and criminally deviant (Parisi 1998). Research has shown that negative media images of African Americans influence public opinion (Johnson *et al.* 1997; Mendelberg 1997). Indeed, after viewing negative media content, the public tends to overestimate the prevalence of African American poverty and subsequently voice a stronger opposition to welfare (Gilens 1995; Sotirovic 2001). A recent study by Gallup found that Tea Party members believe African Americans comprise the majority of the poor, and more than half of the Tea Party members surveyed said that their economic situation was not because of discrimination but 'because most African Americans just don't have the motivation or willpower to pull themselves up out of poverty' (Page 2010). A substantial one-third of those not affiliated with the Tea Party agreed with that statement as well.

Criminals are stereotypically represented as pathological individuals living in poverty-stricken urban areas and often suffering from alcohol and drug abuse (Gans 1995). Yet statistics reveal that 62 per cent of violent offenders in state prisons and 80 per cent of violent offenders in Federal prisons were not on alcohol or drugs when they committed the crime ('Bureau of Justice Statistics: Criminal Offenders Statistics' 2001). Another example of society's disconnect between reality and the media-constructed version of reality is found through media coverage of environmental problems. Media coverage of pollution has been framed as more relevant to upper classes (Kensicki 2001b), although those in lower socioeconomic classes suffer the most from health problems that are caused or exacerbated by environmental problems (Eckholm 1977). Coverage of pollution has also been shown to increase at times when there has been an overall reduction in pollution (Ader 1995). These kinds of inconsistencies permeate media coverage of social issues and suggest that the media help to structure a reality that does not exist. Further corollary evidence comes from research that has found rising coverage of violence at times when actual levels of violence in society were decreasing (Ghanem 1996).

When readers are exposed to environmental information that discusses consequences to the planet, there is a sharp rise in the intent of readers to participate in environmentally responsible behaviours, such as conservation and recycling (Davis 1995). In the political arena, the press has been found to have a statistically significant effect on bringing voters to the polls, especially during close elections (Brynin & Newton 2003). Media content has been found to influence 'citizens' evaluations of government, feelings of self-efficacy, and levels of participation in the political system' (Gandy Jr & Baron 1998: 524). These kind of results suggest that there are significant consequences to information learned through the media. Perhaps Angus (1988) was correct in stating that scholarship needs to 'go beyond representation to the recognition that *media constitute reality*' (Angus 1988: 339, italics in original). Harkening to the early work of Lippmann (1921), agenda-setting theory has attempted to do just that and suggests that the public salience of an issue directly

reflects the agenda put forth by media (McCombs & Shaw 1972). More recent second-level, agenda-setting research has shown that by emphasizing certain attributes of a subject, the media influence not only what to think but also how the public views an issue as well (Lopez-Escobar *et al.* 1998; McCombs 1994; Murley & Roberts 2006). Framing scholars have charged that by examining how an issue is framed, one can uncover how the qualities (Jasperson *et al.* 1998) of an issue help create the 'reality-definition function of the media' (Takeshita 1997).

It should be noted that all of this research, however, depends upon dominant readings of media frames. Social movements are an interesting example of how audiences can integrate media coverage into their own personal world view. As was discussed in Chapter 3, the overwhelming majority of studies concerning the media and social movements have centred on how the media trivializes protest in its coverage. One would assume that such damaging representations would translate into a negative image of social protesters. However, research has found that individuals who view coverage of social movements can also see these framing techniques as positive (Kenix 2008a). In that study, a majority of university students questioned through focus group interviews reported that images, which have been labelled 'immature' or 'carnival' through a dominant reading, were actually seen as positive (Kenix 2008a). By appealing to these students' sense of fun, these protest images actually engendered a certain level of empathy and support. This suggests that for some readers 'immature' and 'carnival' frames could actually be helpful to political causes by appealing to a playful sense of frivolity. Such oppositional readings of these images may be emblematic of a generational shift in media reception as readers increase their media literacy. Many now view media images, such as the 'immature' and 'carnival' protesters, as representative of citizens engaged in playful acts that are simply necessary for media coverage. Rather than demonstrating any frustration at such a sacrifice for media attention, many media-literate audience members are revelling in the fun of what has traditionally been viewed as negative immaturity. One could argue that this position may also contribute to a sense of powerlessness on the part of readers. The participants' sense of engagement with the frivolity of individual play, rather than the seriousness of mass protest, might actually be reflective of a more assimilative attitude within a mass-mediated culture. Knowing that media tend to highlight visual, eye-catching activities, and sensing that they possess relatively little political efficacy, the participants in this study (Kenix 2008a) seemed content to enjoy the process rather than strive for a determinist outcome. This enjoyment of the images of protester's costumes and antics was actually projected to the cause itself.

Based on the response of elite, political forces to immature, carnivalesque protests in the past (i.e. Hertog & McLeod 1995), it remains doubtful whether oppositional readings, such as these, could ever multiply into that of a 'minor preferred'. One would guess that if this were to happen, a 'modestly plural'

(Barthes 1972) range of expression would occur whereby dominant readings would be reinforced more vigorously with textual redundancy. Yet such a contradictory reading of a dominant frame calls into question the efficacy of using such images as demonstrative of a weak, silly or ineffectual protest movement, for example. Indeed, this demonstrates the danger of overstating the effect of dominant readings in any context. The possible 'reality' that the media might have hoped to construct could easily be negated by a media-literate audience who empathize with a particular cause, organization or group. The guaranteed reception of media messages is by no means concrete. That being said, the preponderance of research discussed in this chapter has found that media messages tend to be accepted via the dominant frames used. This ability of media to construct a reality that has the very real possibility of being accepted as truth over time suggests that it is useful to consider media messages at a larger, macro-level. In this case, we now turn to examine same-sex rights in two different countries with two very different media messages.

A study of same-sex rights

Since the 1970s, organizations in the United States such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have been actively lobbying for the equal rights of same-sex couples in the United States. These organizations have met staunch opposition from organizations such as the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family – both organizations that are openly supported by the majority of Republicans in Congress. As of this writing, 30 states have constitutional amendments defining marriage as only between two persons of the opposite sex. More than 40 states go further to restrict marriage between same-sex individuals under any name other than marriage, such as civil unions and domestic partnerships. Nineteen states explicitly state that no legal recognition will be allowed for civil unions between same-sex couples (McKinley & Goodstein 2008).

At the federal level, the then Democratic President Bill Clinton passed the Defence of Marriage Act in 1996, which defined marriage as a legal union between one man and one woman. This bill gave no federal recognition to same-sex marriages and allowed US states to disregard marriages performed in other US states. Former President George W. Bush more recently argued for the passage of a Federal Marriage Amendment, which would have explicitly banned marriages between those of the same-sex at the federal level. Throughout the long debate in the United States, there has been no movement to introduce legal civil unions for same-sex couples at the federal level.

New York, Washington, DC and Rhode Island recognize same-sex marriages from other states, although they will not perform them, which translates to a

rather awkward situation whereby these states grant same-sex divorces but not same-sex marriages. Domestic partnership rights are available in the District of Columbia, New Jersey, Colorado, Hawaii, Maryland, Washington, Wisconsin and Oregon. Partnerships are generally formed through a contractual agreement and do not allow for all of the rights given under marriage but generally provide couples with rights to legal issues such as joint property. These rights are limited in comparison to marriage but often cover areas such as inheritance, property ownership and banking account access (Silverman 2005). Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont and New Hampshire are the only six states that permit same-sex marriage. As of this writing, California has not resumed same-sex marriages that once were legal while the legal case works its way through the United States Court of Appeals. However, all of these changes in state-level legislation came through court rulings rather than popular votes. In each of the 31 states where same-sex marriage has been directly put to a popular vote, it has failed (Crary & Adams 2009).

As these examples help to illustrate, the American public appears to be decidedly divided on this issue, with most voicing opposition to gay marriage, and slightly more advocating civil unions, although as time passes more people are beginning to support the idea of same-sex marriage. In 2009, 42 per cent of Americans said that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry, and 25 per cent thought that civil unions should be permitted, while only 28 per cent argued for no legal recognition (Montopoli 2009). A poll taken by the Pew Research Center/Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life in March of 2006 found that 51 per cent opposed gay marriage. In July of 2005, the same research centre found that 36 per cent favoured gay marriage and 53 per cent opposed it ('Law and Civil Rights' 2005). Other polls found similar results. For example, a CNN/USA Today Gallup poll done from 29th April to 1st May 2005 discovered that 39 per cent of the public believed homosexual marriage should be recognized by the law, while 56 per cent said that homosexual marriage should not be legal ('Law and Civil Rights' 2005). Gallup has found that these numbers remain relatively unchanged – in May of 2009, 40 per cent felt that same-sex marriage should be recognized by the law while 57 per cent did not (Jones 2009). Finally, an ABC News/Washington Post poll taken from 21st to 24th April 2005 found that 27 per cent of the public supported same-sex marriage, 29 per cent supported civil unions and 40 per cent supported no legal recognition ('Law and Civil Rights' 2005).

In contrast, New Zealand passed the Homosexual Law Reform Act in 1986. This law decriminalized homosexuality and legalized gay sex. It was passed by parliament, 49 votes to 44 (Homosexual Law Reform Act 1986). This highly contested act laid the groundwork for what would transpire 18 years later. In December of 2004, New Zealand parliament passed the Civil Unions Bill, which came into effect the following April. Rather than take the approach of Argentina, Canada, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Iceland, Norway, Portugal,

Sweden and South Africa, which all have legalized same-sex marriage, New Zealand joined Uruguay in framing equal rights for homosexual couples in the context of a secular civil union between any two adults, whether gay or straight. In February of 2005, the accompanying Relationships (Statutory References) Act was also passed. This bill removed all discrimination based on relationship status from all New Zealand laws and gave same-sex and opposite-sex couples the same rights and responsibilities as those in a heterosexual marriage. These companion bills also officially recognized same-sex marriages from the rest of the world as civil unions in New Zealand. By December of 2009, a relatively small 1,630 civil unions had occurred in New Zealand. Of that number, 327 were opposite-sex unions and 1,299 were couples of the same sex (Statistics New Zealand 2010).

It is important to note that same-sex marriages are not allowed in New Zealand. The Marriage Act of 1955 continues to apply only to heterosexual couples. However, in 2005, United Future MP Gordon Copeland sponsored the Marriage (Gender Clarification) Bill, which sought to further clarify that marriage was strictly defined between one man and one woman. This bill was voted down in parliament by a wide margin of 47 in favour and 73 against ('Marriage (Gender Clarification) Amendment Bill' 2005). Several groups in New Zealand voiced opposition to the Civil Union Bill, namely the evangelical Destiny Church and the Catholic Church. However, there was relatively strong public opinion in favour of the bill, and key Christian groups lent their support. A block vote from Labour, the Greens and the Progressives ensured the bill's passage. Three months after its enactment, a majority of New Zealanders said they were happy with the civil union law (Berry 2005).

Certainly there are many reasons for such stark differences in the reality that exists for same-sex couples around the world. Cultures vary within families, states and nations, which can have an obvious effect on social policy. Yet how issues are discussed within the media – the framing of same-sex marriage and the overarching narratives used to describe gay and lesbian couples – could also be presumably having an impact on culture and social policy. Neither culture nor media representations exist in a vacuum. Certainly, culture can influence media, but the reverse is also equally true. It could also be extremely likely that media, and news media in particular, could have contributed to the success of New Zealand passing this social policy and the failure of the United States to do the same.

This study expands earlier work (Kenix 2008c) that examined the representation of same-sex rights through four frames. The first frame that this research explores is the conflict frame. Neuman *et al.* (1992) first argued that media emphasize the conflict frame between individuals, groups or institutions as a way of attracting audience attention. These authors found that the conflict frame was the most common frame found in political news. Articles focused on conflict tend to discuss the political affiliation of those in the news and discuss

events in terms of 'winning' or a 'contest'. This finding was replicated in election campaign news (Patterson 1993) and has been found to induce public cynicism (Capella & Jamieson 1997). Conflict is usually demonstrated through 'horse-race' reporting (Benoit, Stein & Hansen 2005), whereby one person or issue is reported as 'gaining or losing ground'. Such poll-driven content has been found to decontextualize issues (Rosenstiel 2005a) while also having strong effects on public attitudes towards the issue or person at hand (Farnsworth & Lichter 2006). Second only to the conflict frame, the human-interest frame can often be used to introduce emotion to an issue, event or problem (Neuman *et al.* 1992). This attempt to emotionalize the news is often relied upon to capture audience interest (Bennett 1995) as readers often relate to stories that have had some sort of personal impact on another human being. Through human-interest frames, the audience presumably feels a stronger emotional connection to the issue at hand.

In another attempt to personalize or bring emotion to an event, news often adopts a morality frame. This puts the event, problem or issue in the context of religious doctrine or moral resolutions, such as the use of the words, sin, special rights, religion, legal rights, civil rights, discrimination, marriage and equating marriage to a legal union. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) agree with Neuman *et al.* (1992) that these references may not be direct. Because of professional journalistic norms, reporters may often introduce morality into content via an outside interest group that mentions these issues through quotation or reference. Finally, the responsibility frame, first discussed by Iyengar (1990b), argues that news implicitly assigns responsibility for the event, issue or problem at hand. This responsibility is often passed to the individual, the government, business, the legal arena or civic-change organizations to 'solve' or correct the problem.

This research analysed alternative and mainstream news media content from 2003 to 2005 – a time period selected purposefully as it includes the debate in the United States surrounding same-sex marriage in Massachusetts and the Federal Marriage Amendment as well as the debate and passage of the Civil Union Bill in New Zealand. The newspaper article was the unit of analysis.

A grouping of 12 mainstream New Zealand newspapers, indexed by the Factiva database, was used for this comparative study. This grouping includes the major national paper, *New Zealand Herald*, as well as smaller New Zealand papers such as *The Timaru Herald, Waikato Times, The Dominion* and the *Taranaki Daily News*. The *New Zealand Herald* is read by an average of 530,000 people on a typical day (Herald Readership 2005). Alternative articles were sourced from Kiwiblog, the most popular right of centre political news blog in New Zealand, Scoop, the most prominent independent news resource in the country, and No Right Turn, the most popular left of centre political news blog in New Zealand.

In an attempt to obtain relatively comprehensive newspaper data from a country as large as the United States, a major newspaper from each of the three

geographic regions (west coast, the Midwest and east coast) was chosen for the study as well as two other major newspapers that were selected because of their reach and ideological position. The aim was to select news content that had geographical and ideological diversity given the often politically divisive issue of legal rights for same-sex couples. This resulted in the inclusion of *The New York Times, The Seattle Times, Chicago Sun-Times, USA Today* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Alternative media examined for this study came from Red State, a leading conservative blog in the United States, AlterNet, an American independent media portal, and Daily Kos, a left of centre progressive American news blog.

Overall, a team of coders found that the rights of same-sex couples were presented neutrally in American media and positively in New Zealand. The findings from this study suggest that there is at least some relationship between culture and content. Contrary to some claims of 'universal' values embedded in journalism, this study suggests that broader, cultural factors, that certainly surround each journalist, play an important role in dictating content. The findings here do not present a monolithic portrayal of American newspapers against same-sex legal rights in United States and New Zealand papers supportive of those same rights. Rather, the findings present a mix of factors that suggest opposition to the legal rights for same-sex couples in US online news outlets and relative support of legal rights for same-sex couples in New Zealand.

The primary sources in media content from both countries were found to generally support same-sex rights. There was no significant relationship between the supportiveness of the source cited and the nation of publication. That being said, American news outlets were far more likely to present the political affiliation of the primary source, and when they did, that source was more likely to be conservative. When New Zealand media outlets cited official sources, they were more likely to be liberal. However, American outlets were much more likely to state the official standing of the primary source, and those individuals tended to be lawyers and judges, government officials and businesspeople. The US media were also more likely to mention 'content' and 'winning', which suggested that there was more reliance on the conflict frame in America than in New Zealand. Given the conflation of opposition to the legal rights of same-sex couples and conservative parties in both countries, the increased reliance of New Zealand papers on liberal sources suggests that the issue of legal rights for same-sex couples was given more sympathy from the sources cited. Support for this notion comes from recent history whereby the conservative Republican Party led the proposal to introduce a federal ban on same-sex marriages in the United States and the conservative National party created the main oppositional force to the Civil Union Bill in New Zealand.

If indeed, news stories 'become a forum for framing contests in which political actors compete by sponsoring their preferred definitions of issues'

(Carragee & Roefs 2004: 216), then one has to consider why and how these sources gained access to the newsroom. Certainly, this could be the result of personal relationships with individual journalists but is more likely the result of the 'economic and cultural resources available to sponsors to promote frames' (Carragee & Roefs 2004: 219). During the period of study here, the more liberal Democrat party had lost political power in the United States, while the more liberal Labour party had retained its political power in New Zealand. This political standing in society is clearly reflected by these frame sponsors' relative political power in the press. This relationship between political power and content brings into question the separation between the press and government. However, in the end, the use of liberal sources is a decision made by the media, not by the politicians themselves. So while it may appear that liberal sources in media content are a reflection of framing *through* the media, the use of these sources is more clearly an example of framing *by* the media (Van Gorp 2007).

New Zealand tended to shy away from mention of legal proceedings in relation to same-sex rights, while the American press did not discuss governmental debates as much as did New Zealanders. New Zealand news outlets were significantly less likely to present a 'solution' to the legal rights of same-sex couples than the American media, which largely suggested a public citizen's vote referendum was responsible for 'solving' the issue. Therefore, the responsibility frame was used in this instance to highlight the role of individuals in America and governmental debate in New Zealand.

New Zealand news outlets focussed on the human-interest aspects of the story and were more likely to examine the personal impact of same-sex rights. The human-interest frame was much less likely to be used in America. Neither country relied upon the use of words like sin, special rights or religion, although New Zealand discussed discrimination more than American media. The US media also discussed the term 'marriage' much more than New Zealand news outlets. These findings suggest that American news outlets tended to overlook the humanity of same-sex rights, while New Zealand publications focused on the larger cultural theme of humanity via a multitude of frames. A constructionist approach certainly recognizes that one person may be exposed to a news story and ignore a particular media frame, while another may strongly consider the salience of that same frame. However, when cultural frames actually 'constitute the central framing idea, there is probably a stronger basis for resonance between the media text and the schema of the receivers' (Van Gorp 2007: 69). Therefore, if the representation of same-sex rights was framed within a larger theme of humanity, there may have been a stronger propensity by the audience to oppose the discrimination of these individuals. Obviously, the framing of 'humanity' in media content was often not direct. Through this analysis, several manifest frames were examined in concert with one another, and a more latent but persistent pattern in content emerged.

For example, as has already been discussed, the US media cited the official standing of their sources much more than New Zealand newspapers did. These sources tended to be lawyers, judges, government officials and businesspeople rather than the generally communal social change activists, community services representatives, religious leaders, private citizens or scientific experts. The use of US newspapers to place these elite agents into a conflict frame of contest, where one side wins and the other side loses, further distracted the reader from the issue at hand. The conflict frame was not found to be as prevalent in New Zealand papers, and again, this could have contributed to New Zealanders feeling more bonded to the humanity of same-sex couples.

So while American papers focused on elite sources, conflict and legal action (coupled with a lack of discrimination on same-sex couples), New Zealand papers were far more likely to present a neutral human-interest frame. This human-interest frame, in combination with a lack of conflict frames in New Zealand content, may have created an important connection between the audience and the issue of same-sex rights. By removing the issue out of the conflicted, institutionalized, legal courtroom and into the fundamental cultural theme of humanity, New Zealand newspapers may have had a much more resonating and direct connection with the receiver's basic schema on this issue. Therefore, conflicting counter-frames, if encountered, were most likely marginalized by the audience (Festinger 1957) or attributed to a peripheral and relatively inconsequential factor (Fiske & Taylor 1991).

Finally, it is interesting to note that each of the variables examined here showed no statistically significant difference between the alternative and mainstream publications in their respective countries. It could be that the generally conservative outlets negated the generally liberal outlets, which then resulted in a lack of statistical significance. It may also be that this relatively small sample size failed to expose differences that might exist within the general population. However, these findings certainly indicate a high degree of homogeneity within the alternative and mainstream press, at least in regards to same-sex rights. This lends further collaborative support for a lack of ideological diversity across the mainstream and alternative media spectrum.

But what is it about the American media, as a whole, in this sample that so readily overlooked the basic humanity of these individuals? Why did New Zealand journalists embrace these frames? Certainly, the role of culture cannot be overlooked. Previous claims of universal news values should be re-examined, and culture should be explored as a fundamental component in the creation of news. It is possible, in the case of same-sex rights, that strong cultural factors such as religion, education and morality may have played a role in the creation of content. After all, culture is often examined in the reception of media frames. As Van Gorp argues (2007), 'by locating frames in culture, the framing process, which is often conceptualized as a matter of individual cognition, is directed by the larger culture' (Van Gorp 2007: 73). However, relatively little content

analysis explores cultural dimensions in the creation of media frames. Further study should examine these and other important cultural factors on a global scale to better understand the role that they may play in news content.

Clearly, media do not exist in a vacuum, and this research does not suggest that social policy in each country was dictated by newspaper content. However, just as media content does not exist in a vacuum, neither does social policy. It is argued here that social policy may have been influenced by media coverage, and the reverse may have also been true – that politicians influenced the media. What is certain through this detailed framing study is that a cohesive picture emerged in the United States of newspaper content that constructed a personally disconnected contest between official elites about marriage that had only legal ramifications without any resulting discrimination. The United States has yet to pass any law that allows for legal equality between same-sex and opposite-sex couples. Conversely, New Zealand content appeared to use unofficial liberal sources in relatively neutral debates that focused on issues other than traditional 'horse-race' reporting to present a personally connected human-interest story of civil unions that equated to marriage. New Zealand recently passed the Civil Unions Bill guaranteeing equal legal rights for same-sex couples.

This book does not argue that these relationships are one to one. However, these findings do urge that the standing of social issues, such as the one of same-sex legal rights, should be contextualized against media coverage. Just as media coverage and social policy cannot exist in a vacuum, neither can media and communication scholarship. Examining media frames within the broader political and social world allows scholarship to explore the power of these frames in society. Up until this point, this book has explored the definitions of alternative and mainstream media, media framing theory and the potential effects of media in society. This book now moves to a sociologically-based examination of media through the framework of individual motivations in the media, organizational practices, ownership and ideological influences. In doing so, this book attempts to examine alternative and mainstream media within the broader political and social world and not as individual entities. It is hoped that through this process, a more nuanced understanding of the shared similarities and remaining differences can continue to evolve.

5

Defining Media through Individual Motivations and Identities

The question of who owns the media and who controls the voices of individual storytellers has become problematized with the arrival of the Internet, which has allowed for a proliferation of smaller, independent media to present individual ideologies to a truly mass audience for the first time in history. Mediated voices have now become so diffuse that arguing for a deterministic flow of a specific influential force from the media across a global, networked society appears increasingly impossible. The proliferated marketplace is exemplified by how audiences access information. For example, the Project for Excellence and Journalism found that 40 per cent of Americans used the web in some capacity for their 2008 presidential election news on a regular basis ('How Does News Media Impact Elections?' 2008). In 2010, 77 per cent of active Internet users read a variety of blogs (Technorati 2010), and one-third of voters under 40 planned to get most of their political news in 2010 from a range of sources on the Internet (Rasmussen 2010). This translates to a substantive proportion of citizens getting their information not only from online news websites but also from bloggers, viral emails, social networking sites, citizen journalists' web pages, corporate messaging and campaign websites. This means that there is much less control over informational messages from the mainstream press and many more avenues for input from what once would have been considered alternative media sources.

As has been discussed, media do not occur in a hermetically sealed environment. There are many factors that influence content, and none are particularly objective. Indeed, each piece of mediated content 'is the end-product of a complex process which begins with a systemic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories' (Hall *et al.* 1978: 53). These categories can be thought of as enveloping circles, each overlapping the other. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argued that the first influencing factor on content is the individual, then his or her media routine practices, the newspaper organization, extramedia influences and finally broader ideological forces (Shoemaker & Reese 1996). In their examination of 'classic' research studies from the 1950s, Reese and Ballinger (2001) further divide the forces that shape media messages into personal views, media routines, media organizations, external pressures and ideology. Seen as a 'hierarchy of influences', these chains of influences are highly interrelated and begin at the

most basic level of personal views. This model of examining the media has been adapted for this book's examination into the similarities and differences along the alternative and mainstream media spectrum.

Individual characteristics

If research wishes to examine the effects of media exposure or the frames used within a specific genre or medium, then it is important that scholarship attempts to unpack why storytellers adopt certain perspectives (Scheufele 1999). Simply describing the frames themselves does little to explain how the frames were created and therefore does not inform the processes behind media content. Media content is the result of a complex interplay of motivations from several frame sponsors, who are all aiming to influence the final mediated product (Carragee & Roefs 2004). Each sponsor jockeys to insert his or her own perspective into the news, and each has his or her own motivations for doing so. On a very basic level, one can be motivated simply by a sense of affirmation or empowerment gained through the act of communication. Wagg (2004) found that youths felt 'legitimated' and their work affirmed by the act of communication at their campus community radio station. They gained 'a worthy sense of self in the power derived from the vocalization of personal words, ideas, thoughts and opinions' (Wagg 2004: 275). This sense of satisfaction existed regardless of whether anyone was actually listening to his or her broadcasts. Participants responded that it was the act of creating their own content, rather than the reception of that content, which was their main motivation.

Journalists are largely motivated by their love of writing (Weaver 2005). A national survey of American journalists found that after a love of writing journalists also actually enjoy the process of news gathering and reporting (Weaver 2005). Reporters have also stated that it is important for them to 'make a difference' in society (Weaver & Wilhoit 1996). This is an important motivator into journalism, given the low salaries that often accompany a media job. Around the world, journalists do not make very strong incomes (Weaver 2005). They are more likely than the general population to hold a university degree, although the degree is generally not in journalism. Even with the degree, however, there is not a corresponding rise in salaries as one would see in other professions. Because of that, in general, journalism remains a youthful occupation, with the average global age of a journalist remaining in their 30s (Weaver 2005). Over time, the idealism of young journalists to 'make a difference' tends to be replaced with a sense of dissatisfaction in the job. Indeed, satisfaction in journalism occupations is swiftly becoming a thing of the past. In 1981, roughly 50 per cent of journalists reported being satisfied in

their jobs. Since then, the numbers have continued their slow decline to almost 30 per cent in 1992 (Weaver & Wilhoit 1996).

Political bloggers also have a love of writing, but they are further motivated by a desire to influence social values and a broader understanding of political issues (Wallsten 2005). These motivations increase over time as bloggers gain audience share. They feel an increased responsibility to inform people, influence public opinion and provide an alternative to media fare (Ekdale *et al.* 2010). It is not only bloggers who feel motivated to create media content that has an impact on the opinions of society. As has already been noted, journalists feel that it is important for them to 'make a difference' in society. However, mainstream journalists are increasingly interested in influencing public opinion as well (Weaver 2007). This desire to transform the beliefs and attitudes of the public on the part of mainstream journalists and alternative media bloggers online is perhaps why many claim that the media, in general, have become biased re-presenters of the news, rather than objective narrators of current events. What may be driving modern media practitioners in their professional roles might be the very thing that many citizens are finding increasingly distasteful in the media.

As was discussed in Chapter 2, there have long been charges of bias in mainstream media. Most of those in traditionally marginalized groups feel as if they have been misrepresented in the mainstream news. One stated reason for the misrepresentation of minority groups in mainstream media is a lack of ethnic and racial diversity in newsrooms (Barringer 1999; Heider 2000; Wu & Izard 2008). The argument is that if there are no minorities reporting the news, minority perspectives will not be integrated into news content. The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) has set a goal of reaching minority parity in newsrooms with equivalent numbers of minorities in society by 2025 (ASNE 1999, updated March 2002). While this goal seems admirable, it is important to note that this aspirational mark was redefined after failing to reach a previous benchmark of staffing parity by 2000 (Wu & Izard 2008). In 2004, ASNE remained still quite far from its goal, with only 13.4 per cent of newsrooms staffed with minorities (ASNE 2005). A broader analysis of American newsrooms found that only 9.5 per cent of journalists were minorities. The number of African Americans in the newsroom has remained relatively static at under 4 per cent ever since 1971 (Weaver *et al.* 2006). These disparities are that much more pressing in the United States when contextualized against predictions that minorities will collectively exceed half of the American population by 2050 (US Census Bureau 2006). Hispanics now comprise over 13 per cent of the American population but only just over 3 per cent of reporters and editors (Weaver *et al.* 2006).

A survey of New Zealand journalism schools in 2005 found that more than 85 per cent of students were Pakeha/European (Tully 2008). This is in contrast to 67.7 per cent of the New Zealand population identifying as European,

14.6 per cent as Maori and 9.2 per cent as Asian. As a leading journalism educator in New Zealand has said, the over-representation of Pakeha in newsrooms is problematic as 'news stories are constructed in ways that repeat traditional patterns of understanding. If the overwhelming majority of journalists are Pakeha, for example, a corresponding worldview holds dominance' (Tully 2008: 236). Like their Kiwi neighbours, Australian journalists are also more likely to be Anglo-Saxon than the general population. In 1993, a majority of 1,068 journalists interviewed said that it was more difficult for racial minorities to succeed in journalism than for people of Anglo-Saxon descent (Henningham 1993). In Canada, a nearly universal 97.3 per cent of journalists are white (Pritchard & Sauvageau 2000).

Minority journalists feel that more minorities in news management would lead to greater sensitivities towards racism, more jobs for minorities within the newspaper, increased coverage of minorities and a transformed way of thinking about minorities (Rivas-Rodriguez *et al.* 2004). Their feelings are not without support in academic research. More minorities in the newsroom have been found to result in a wider range of story ideas that had not previously been considered (Shipler 1998). The presence of minorities in the newsroom has also been shown to lead to greater questioning as to why minority issues are covered in specific ways (Gross *et al.* 2002). The presence of ethnic minorities in the newsroom can have an effect on content because of the belief systems that reporters bring to the selection of news stories and the eventual frame applied (Gandy *et al.* 1997). 'White journalists are likely to differ from their African American colleagues in the extent to which they believe individual or institutional racism is the primary influence over the outcome of some conflict' (Gandy *et al.* 1997: 164). When minorities in a newsroom achieve a 'critical mass', then the overall approach of a newspaper can shift as different frames are used more frequently (Gissler 1994).

Women comprise a larger proportion of the media workforce than ethnic minorities; however, their numbers have not grown in decades. Women remain roughly one-third of all full-time journalists (Weaver *et al.* 2006), which is about the same proportion of women in the media 20 years prior. This lack of growth is despite the increasing numbers of women as journalism majors at the university level. In each of the 19 newsrooms examined around the world by Weaver (2005), men outnumbered women; yet women far surpass men as majors in communication and journalism degrees. Only New Zealand and Finland showed some parity across gender, but on average women comprise about a third of newsroom numbers throughout the globe. The presence of the female gender in newsrooms has also been found to alter resulting content. More specifically, female editors tend to focus on the positive angles within stories more than their male counterparts (Craft & Wanta 2004). The issues appear to remain the same, but how they are framed changes depending upon gender.

One might assume that this dearth of minorities and women in mainstream media would be counterbalanced by a markedly increased representation of these groups in alternative media. Yet bloggers, for example, are overwhelmingly white, well educated and male (Lenhart & Fox 2006). An even greater percentage of those blogging about non-personal issues, which are generally news and political events, are university educated, white men (Cenite *et al.* 2009). In fact, there tends to be very few differences between online journalists and traditional newspaper reporters (Weaver *et al.* 2006). The two groups are quite similar in age, education, views on the role of journalism in society and ethical responsibilities, political attitudes and demographics.

No research could be found that measured demographic data from a wider range of commercially minded alternative media, where one might assume a broader proportion of racial and ethnic minorities and women in such a categorization. It is important to note that ethnic media, an essential portion of the alternative press that would presumably be more likely to employ or host volunteers of that particular ethnicity, has grown in recent history. The numbers of ethnic media outlets and the varying types of media transmitting ethnic media content have both generally expanded over the past two decades (Matsaganis, Katz & Ball-Rokeach 2011). This growth has not been found in all sectors of ethnic media. For example, throughout 2009, African American magazines 'took a severe battering even by the standards of the beleaguered magazine industry' (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010a). Yet, as a whole, ethnic media have grown alongside a widespread demand for heterogeneity throughout the media spectrum. In 2005, almost half of all major minority groups in America said that they preferred ethnic media to other mainstream alternatives (New California Media 2005). This far-reaching study by New California Media surveyed Arab Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics and African Americans.

The international growth of minority media may be reflective of the movement of diasporic communities around the globe (Georgiou 2005). In the Netherlands, for example, minority media have been skyrocketing, particularly since 1999 (Meulensteen 2003, cited in Deuze 2006) as minority populations continue to grow in that country. However, as Deuze points out, the rise in ethnic media has been met with a concomitant rise in all kinds of 'community, alternative, oppositional, participatory and collaborative media' (Deuze 2006: 263). There is a general drive throughout developed countries for individuals to be participating within some kind of mediated communication. As more people participate, more people of ethnic origin inevitably become part of that mix. While that rise needs to be celebrated, it is important to state clearly that even as the proportion of women and ethic minorities increases alongside the global rise of different media, the numbers of those minorities contributing to the media still do not resemble the percentage of the population that these groups hold in society. And even as the very important drive for diversity

throughout the media continues, it is equally important to remember that simply inserting minorities into the newsroom does not always result in 'better' content. Research has suggested that the level of analysis or explanation in media content does not increase with more minorities in the newsroom (Wu & Izard 2008). The power of organizational and industry norms in journalism are 'stronger forces than individual ethnicity in news judgment' (Wu & Izard 2008: 110). Minorities may provide more news of substance about minorities, but their presence does not mean that the level of analysis, regarding minority issues, rises as well.

Correlations have been found in the past between a person's personal perspectives or ethic identity and resulting content. However, many remaining questions about individual identity are mired in complex personal assumptions. For example, it has been found that media workers tend to be more liberal than the average population (Perloff 1998). However, there has been a recent decline in journalists' self-reported affiliation with the Democratic Party in the United States (Weaver *et al.* 2006). Despite this drop, which might be due to a reluctance to provide information on political affiliation but could also reflect a real drop in liberal ideologies in the media profession, there remains a widespread belief that the media, in general, are liberal (Media use and evaluation 2006). Examinations of actual media content are at best contradictory and do not appear to corroborate perceptions of a liberal media. For example, Groseclose and Milyo (2004) compared news content to Congressional statements and found that most major American news magazines were to the left of Congress. Conversely, an examination of 25 years of American news coverage found that liberalism itself has been portrayed negatively in mainstream newspapers and magazines (Kenix 2009b). In that study, liberalism was more likely to be associated with negative attributes than positive ones. This finding would counter any influence of personal ideologies on media content, given the relatively larger proportion of journalists with liberal ideologies. A conservative press, however, would help to partly explain the shift away from a liberal ideology in the mid-1970s to the denigration of liberalism in American society today.

Measuring the actual numbers of liberal reporters, Maori bloggers, Spanish videographers or gay publishers is relatively straightforward. However, the impact of one's personal opinions, which are presumably related to his or her personal identity, on media content is often very difficult to measure. First, how one feels about something personally does not always translate to performance on the job. After all, being able to distance oneself from a particularly difficult task at hand (commonly referred to as 'professionalism') is a key component to almost any successful career. But perhaps more importantly, being able to ascertain and measure personal bias is inherently fraught with difficulty. In order to measure bias, you need to have a point of comparison that is completely 'bias free'. How do we know when something contains absolutely

no bias? How do we know the truth of what actually happened? Even if you were present, how can you be absolutely sure that what you saw was the truth? The self-perpetuation of biased beliefs colours many individuals' judgements (Suen 2004). Unfortunately, because of the very essence of human perception, 'truth' is a malleable concept. Each person views events, people, places and things differently, which is why many have argued for diversity in the newsroom, whether that be based on ethnicity, race, gender, dis/ability or sexual identity, on the assumption that there will also be a resulting diversity in content. Although the goal of diversity has remained evasive throughout the commercially minded media spectrum, it has remained an extremely important goal for the entire media continuum.

The identity of corporate consumption

Even with a very important emphasis on increasing diversity throughout media, it is worthwhile to question whether there might be a larger homogenizing shift in the individual identities of those who work in commercially focused alternative and mainstream media. This book challenges whether smaller, independent media may also be usurped within this corporate model of consumption in their drive for commercial viability. Alternative media undoubtedly have a myriad of unique and disparate operating goals, but in their effort to gain revenue of some kind, the centrality of individual differences in identity might be softened under the weight of an omnipresent consumerist ideology. Consumerism as an identity is endemic to those living and working within capitalistic societies. This 'new consumerism', as Schor (2003) calls it, describes 'an upscaling of lifestyle norms; the pervasiveness of conspicuous, status goods and of competition for acquiring them; and the growing disconnect between consumer desires and incomes' (Schor 1999). This form of consumption has come to define a large part of how we think of ourselves as members of developed countries and may have a large role to play in how identity is expressed or restricted within media outlets.

The forces of globalization – mainly, technological innovation, an interconnected global economy and international migration – have led to an explosion of media across the world but have also served as a conduit to highlight consumer culture within our collective social ideology and our individual identity as well. The media explosion, like the forces that created it, has converged in such a way that individual identity based on race or gender, for example, might be much less central to resulting media content than the pervasive identity of capitalism. The art of selling and the practice of consumption have become fundamental to our identification as human beings participating within the developed world.

As Jenkins (2004) convincingly argues, we are in the midst of a convergence culture, which helps to explain some of the 'new consumerism' identity.

This converged participation culture is a mix of consumer-driven desires and corporate-driven practices. While the format of the communication exchange appears, at first, to be equally balanced, 'corporations – and even individuals within corporate media – still exert far greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers' (Jenkins 2006: 3). The use of the term 'consumers' is central to this homogenized perspective within much commercially minded media. In our new converged culture, consumers are encouraged by a wide range of media outlets to find information across a variety of media and piece these nodes of information together. These pathways for such active participation on the part of information consumers, otherwise known as citizens, are created to increase corporate revenue. The *raison d'etre* of the communication exchange among commercially minded publications, whether they be alternative or mainstream, is the capitalistic intent to sell something, whether that be website views, newspapers, jeans, advertising share or brand loyalty.

This lopsided interrelationship of power may change in the future. Jenkins (2004) speaks with admiration and fondness for the millions of teenagers actively working to create a bottom-up culture that demands media be immediately on hand and in the format that consumers' desire. While the input that particularly young consumers have in decision-making processes of the media is certainly expanding, citizen decisions remain largely within the framework of consumption. Options are generally selected through a series of consumptive choices that may benefit the individual on some level but ultimately provide corporations with hefty financial rewards. The individuals involved in this communication chain, both on the supply and demand side, form their identities around a shared culture of consumerism. There is a co-dependent interrelationship between the corporate world and the individual consuming within it: self-expression exists, but only within the confines of a consumerist prism of limited choices and restricted identities.

This relatively modern consumptive identity is reflected in the shared image of a 'citizen-consumer' (Scammell 2000) who buys certain brands that have the added benefit of purportedly benefitting society in some fashion. For example, buying a specific coffee to assist in the efforts of free trade for poorer nations or workers' rights in South America. Citizen participation has been transmuted onto purchasing decisions (Banaji & Buckingham 2009). This consumerism is not only embedded within political purchases/activity but also seeps into every facet of media coverage across a range of different media (Miller 2007). The examples of consumerism within the media are almost too omnipresent to disentangle from media content, although much scholarship has found evidence of its presence in media coverage of national holidays (Brennan 2008), broadcasting content on 24-hour news channels (Cushion & Lewis 2009), wedding media (Engstrom 2008) and television reporting of food and weather (Miller 2007). This consumptive ideology is exported to

developing countries, such as China (Paek & Pan 2004), through a global multimedia market that celebrates citizens as consumers (Beale 1999; Drucker & Gumpert 2000). This corporate model of journalism, which generates naturalized systems of constraint within a conglomerated, capitalistic media system, can now be seen as the dominant influence on individuals throughout the media (Zollmann 2009).

Consumption has become central to how individuals, within a capitalistic society, come to view themselves. Consumerist 'choices' allow individuals and groups to 'express and transform their collective identity and acquire social membership' (Lamont 2001: 31–2). This individual and group identification as a consumer is the result of an intricate interplay between the media and the audience whereby a congruence of self-understanding occurs across all actors who are implicitly participating within a consumptive society. The identity of consumption influences how collective societies view their own familial relationships (Moisio, Arnould & Price 2004) and prescribes a moralistic foundation for our collective understanding of one another (Wilk 2001).

The identity of consumption and corporate consumerism might perhaps be best 'seen' through visual communication. All media, whether alternative or mainstream, develop visual associations that display the identity of those creating the media message that they hope will resonate with an audience. The ideology of organizations, individuals and groups is directly expressed through visual imagery and design techniques in the media. The current media environment is situated within, and central to, what Lin and Yeh call 'a solid consumer culture based on visual identity consumption that articulates and interacts with each consumer's daily actions, words, and visual perceptions' (Lin and Yeh 2009: 61).

Citizens now access a wider range of political messages online than ever before, and these diverse outlets have been suggested to have very different approaches to identity, content and purpose. The following study attempts to challenge that supposition through an examination of visual identities expressed throughout the broader media spectrum. Research thus far has largely ignored the aspect of visually represented identity in media content. The related studies that do exist examine largely mainstream representations of political events and focus principally on text-based communications. The following study aims to explore if there actually are differences across alternative and mainstream media in re-presented identities along several visual indices, including consumption.

A study of visual identity online

As an area of study, visual imagery and design across a range of media have largely gone unnoticed. The limited research that does exist is focused on

effects studies of visual stimuli within a particular medium and generally does not include design. Within that stream of research, there has been a wealth of compelling findings that suggest visual messages have a profound influence on how one thinks about the content. For example, research has found that media images of political candidates in newspapers can affect how citizens evaluate a candidate and their voting intentions (Barrett & Barrington 2005). Visual metaphors have been found to increase the persuasiveness of arguments in advertising (Jeong 2008). Positive visual representations in televised media have been found to influence how individuals felt towards marginalized groups (Levina, Waldo & Fitzgerald 2006). If marginalized groups are visually portrayed negatively, then individuals feel much more negatively about that group. Users receive important information from visual communication that they do not receive from accompanying texts. In fact, visual communication has the power to actually negate or counteract textual information (Desmarais & Bruce 2010).

The strong impact that visual communication can have is due to the simultaneous and comprehensive processes of sight that synthesize multiple analyses almost instantaneously (Gattegno 1969). Visual images are absolutely central to 'how we represent, make meaning, and communicate in the world around us' (Sturken & Cartwright 2001: 1). Visual communication elicits emotions, serves as photographic proof and establishes an implicit link between the image itself and some other emotion or thing that resonates with the viewer (Messaris 1997). Visual imagery is fundamental in reproducing informational cues that individuals use to construct their perception of social reality (Graber 1990). Visual communication can transcend textual limitations and instantly convey complex emotions in addition to factual evidence (Lester 2003). Images are often the first items scanned within a mediated message (Miller 1975) and generally form the longest lasting impressions on memory (Lester 2003). While largely overlooked in mass communication research, visual images are fundamental to our ability to communicate (Messaris 1994). There are endlessly complex sociological, political and cultural cues embedded within visual messages (Huxford 2001) that all coalesce to expose the ideological constituency (Reeves & Campbell 1994) and the identity (Manovich 2001) of those who created the media message.

Those within the media frame images, like text, after a complex negotiation of contributing forces, which were discussed in Chapter 3. Recalling a commonly used definition of framing from Entman: those who create media content 'select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman 1993: 52). News, like any other system of communication, can be understood as a narrative that has implied meanings, which are transmitted through media frames. Visual framing, which is a specific type of frame, refers to the salient visual schema

used to construct meaning. Visual frames can activate certain constructs at the expense of others, thereby directly influencing how a reader thinks about the issue at hand and the mediated messenger (Gamson *et al.* 1992). Symbols have been so widely used in the media because these visual constructions effectively and succinctly communicate the ideology of an organization to the viewer (Sturken & Cartwright 2001). For example, when symbols such as a national flag are used, the meanings associated with that flag (perhaps in a developed democracy, patriotism, capitalism, freedom etc.) are transferred to that media organization in the mind of the viewer.

As this review suggests, visual imagery must not be understood as only evidentiary. Visual frames need to also be contextualized within an ideological position. For example, camera angles provide varying levels of credibility for the subject and source (Campbell 1991). The visual schema operating within such an image combine to transfer an understanding of that subject's identity to the subject itself. These identities are drawn from a shared culture that implicitly understands such visual cues and their transferred meanings. For example, corporate media consistently rely upon images that are based on marketing categories embedded within a shared culture and mutually understood identity of consumerism (Machin 2004). Identities are formed and perpetually reconstituted through continually shared visual re-presentations. Stereotypes are persistently regurgitated through still and moving visual representations to reveal the constitutive identity of those captured within the frame as well as the media outlet that re-presented the image for consumption (Beasley & Standley 2002; Entman 1992; Fink & Kensicki 2002; Signorielli, McLeod & Healy 1994).

Every media organization and media outlet creates their own visual identity – the implicit boundaries where particular information is included and excluded for their readers. This purposeful focus on visual identity has become progressively more refined online. Early information on the web was purely academic without any aesthetic sophistication (Veen 2001). As the medium gained notoriety and attention through the 1990s, online design increasingly attempted to make elements more 'user-friendly' and idiosyncratic by directly reflecting a user's unique, individual experience (Cordone 1998). Within corporate news media, design alterations 'are usually planned so as to maximize the functionality and aesthetic appeal of the product for consumption in a competitive marketplace' (Cooke 2005: 23). This rush for commercial return has led many within corporate media to cut their expenditures and converge their design styles across integrated print, television and online outlets (Cooke 2005), presumably as a decision based on economies of scale. While that kind of visual convergence can happen across outlets with a shared owner, this study aims to explore whether convergence is happening across the mediated spectrum, possibly the result of a shared individual emphasis on commercialism.

Design principles

Whether the design is of a newspaper, website, magazine or poster, there are certain guiding principles that drive the aesthetic of a publication. Research has shown that different techniques and aesthetic approaches signify different meanings and identities to viewers. For example, the overall design of a web page itself can suggest an identity of sophistication, seriousness and professionalism if it follows a structured, aligned construction (Williams 1994). When elements are aligned, there is an invisible line that connects items and indicates their relationship. Without any alignment, the media organization appears haphazard and unstructured. In deconstructing design, experts have generally agreed upon several guides (Lauer & Pentak 2002) which have implications for the potential ideological division between alternative and mainstream media: unity, balance, rhythm and contrast. These widely accepted design techniques, when skilfully used, create an identity of cohesion, professionalism, serenity and calmness (Williams & Tollett 2000). When manipulated, these techniques can also translate into a re-presented identification of disorder, tension, a sense of chaos and division. For example, balanced designs have been found to denote an identity of strength (Lauer & Pentak 2002), whereas an unbalanced design creates a sense of uneasiness.

Unity, which is determined through proximity, repetition or continuation can communicate specific ideological, geographical or symbolic cohesiveness to the reader (Lauer & Pentak 2002). This concept is closely related to the Gestalt theory of visual cognition, which states that through various methods of unification there is a resulting perception that the whole is substantively different than the sum of its parts. Balance is an element frequently used to demonstrate an identity of strength and professionalism or isolation and uneasiness (Lauer & Pentak 2002). For example, professionalism can often be elucidated through symmetrical balance while isolation can be evoked in asymmetrical designs. Each design also has rhythm that can be seen as either progressive or alternating. The rhythm of a design creates a sense of movement and purpose. Contrast can have a strong effect on design. More contrast emphasizes difference and divisiveness while less contrast communicates calmness. Alignment and structure are generally seen in mainstream publications while organic placement is more frequently seen in independent publications. All of these factors come together in the overall design of a publication. Design can help to re-present a confrontational identity with a challenging or even hostile approach. It can also demonstrate an extremely professional and corporatized identity which can display significant skill or experience.

Williams and Tollett (2000) suggest that type on web pages can create an identity that is sophisticated and professionalized if a few simple rules are followed: type must be readable, not in too many colours, not too large, stable in movement and unblinking. Typography that breaks these rules transfers an

identity that is seen as elementary. Further, these authors have argued that organization, structure, a navigation menu and a simple background in a website can create a more professional identity (Williams & Tollett 2000).

In creating imagery for a specific audience, designers often pay close attention to attracting the interests of their constituency. Designers must presumably balance the needs of their audience against the agenda of the media organization, the design interests of the media and the organization's budget. Each one of these important facets in the creation of an aesthetic presence is, in its own right, central to the output. For the aesthetic of a site to be successful, the design must reflect the content and the identity of the media as well as attract the media organization's core audience.

Deviance from the mainstream is an important conceptual categorization in differentiating the alternative from mainstream media. Admittedly, in their existence as operating outside of mainstream media, alternative media, by their very definition, deviate from the norm. Yet some alternative media might deviate further from accepted societal values than others. Standards of deviance within alternative media have historically been constructed on loose political grounds. Meaning the further away from moderate centrist views, such as similarity to the majority of citizens and the amount of change advocated (Shoemaker 1984), the more deviant the media outlet. Alternative media can deviate from the mainstream along almost any conceivable axis, such as occupation, sexuality, politics, philosophy, economics or violence.

There is a diverse range of rhetoric, moving from the militant to the moderate (Simons 1970), found amongst those who feel they have been marginalized by the mainstream media. More deviant groups and media have historically represented themselves through direct persuasive imagery that could often utilize violence (Ray & Marsh II 2001) or subversive design techniques, such as instability and fragmentation. In doing so, their media have challenged design techniques and popular aesthetic conceptions. Historically, there are countless instances of those who wished to instigate the 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 1977) of visual images in the absence of 'electoral clout or (in most cases) economic influence' (Conklin 1997: 713). One would presume to see far more challenging visual stimuli in a modern world dominated by images and not words (DeLuca & Peeples 2002), whereby alternative media may need to rely upon direct, emotionally charged imagery to gain audience share. More deviant groups have historically represented themselves through alternative media with direct persuasive imagery that utilizes themes of confrontation and challenge, often through violent or sexualized imagery (Ray & Marsh II 2001). However, that might not still be the case in an online environment where the whole world is watching.

Recent research has found a rather homogenous and safe range of visual identities for non-profit organizations on the web (Kenix 2007a). Kenix (2007a) argued that, given the multitude of audiences online, non-profit organizations

are attempting to homogenize their message to reach the largest audience. Their dilemma is that there is not simply one single public that visits a site. Rather, there are several publics who may navigate through a website and are in no way homogeneous (Giussani 2003). The biggest challenge to those uploading content on the web is that they must 'take into account all of these elements, the wild diversity of the public, the different cultures, the different media tools, and to make something coherent' (Giussani 2003). This attempt at coherence may be behind the drive towards homogenization; however, how exactly these images converge also reveals important cultural influences.

This study examines alternative and mainstream media in much the same way that non-profits were analysed in previous research (Kenix 2007a), which examined the level of homogenization across visual identities in an era where consumerism has come to define so much of individual and group representation online. Given the importance of visual communication to processing information and the wide range of news sources that citizens examine on a daily basis, this research explores whether there are, in fact, differences in visual content across political alternative and mainstream media or if there has been a conflation of visual re-presentations online. Independent media may be homogenizing their visual messages through more professionalized visual approaches to news and self-imposing a more homogenous perspective on visual representations. This approach may be contradicting the political, text-based information that users are receiving, if alternative texts are truly as disparate from the mainstream press as suggested by previous scholars (i.e. Atkinson 2005; Atton 2002a; Downing 2001). This upcoming study examines the opening source pages of 100 mainstream political news sites from around the globe and compares the visual content to that of 100 independent political news sites. These websites are compared according to design principles (unity, balance, rhythm and contrast), layout (structure, organization, alignment, navigation menus, backgrounds), typography, symbols, photographs (violence, sexualization, confrontational) and logos.

Visual identity among alternative and mainstream news sites

In an effort to obtain the most extensive listing of alternative news sites possible, the search terms 'directory of independent political news sites', 'directory of alternative news sites', 'independent news websites', 'alternative news websites' were inserted into the Google search engine. This resulted in a comprehensive list that was then examined individually. Two coders read each site's 'About Us' page for a description of the individual websites and then selected the most appropriate 100 websites from that list. Those selected were websites that described themselves as independent or non-profit and provided news that was somehow different from the mainstream. One hundred mainstream websites were collated in much the same manner through a Google search of 'directly of mainstream news sites' and 'mainstream news websites'.

Just over half of all media coded were seen as 'not deviant at all', whereas the remaining half ranged along a scale of somewhat non-deviant to very deviant. The relationship between perceived deviance and type of media was highly significant with mainstream media being far more likely than the alternative media in this sample to be seen as 'not deviant at all'. Deviance was defined as the perceived distance from the mainstream. Alternative media were also far more likely than the mainstream media to be seen as deviant. In the final analysis, nearly all of the mainstream media sampled were seen as not deviant, whereas nearly all of the alternative media were categorized as deviant to some degree. Even though this was the case, a small percentage of independent websites were coded as having either somewhat confrontational or very confrontational design. Almost all of the designs used throughout the sample of 200 websites were generally safe and visually expected. Although the content itself might have been seen as more 'distanced from the mainstream', the design was formulaic in its approach. An example of this contradictory interrelationship can be seen on the Anarchist Age website. The site promotes an anarchist society, which is a 'voluntary, non-hierarchical society based on the creation of social and political structures that allow all people equal access to that society's power and wealth'. This is a decidedly different approach from the mainstream, capitalistic economies of contemporary society. The Anarchist Media Institute produces live analysis of news every day. The site also has a weekly programme titled 'The Anarchist World This Week' and 'The Anarchist Age Weekly Review'. Much of the selected news items revolve around a recurring theme of critiquing four central topics: 'capitalism, increasing population growth, finite resources and increasing greenhouse emissions'. The site argues that current economic, governmental, capitalistic and political processes have to be completely abandoned if society can 'survive the challenges thrown up by the four horsemen of the 21st century apocalypse'. As one can see from this brief review, the changes advocated by the Anarchist Age are fairly dramatic, but their website design is formulaic and non-confrontational.

A near majority of all the websites sampled relied on unity through proximity in their designs. In fact, most mainstream and alternative sites used some form of unity in their design approach, although independent websites relied upon unity in their approach significantly more. The same was true for the number of websites relying on emphasis by placement, obvious demonstrations of scale and symmetrical balance. These design guides were overwhelmingly popular throughout the entire media spectrum. Taken together, these approaches helped to create a strong sense of cohesive design in many of the websites sampled, such as The Minnesota Independent, an alternative news site, which drew heavily from these design guides to create a unified design approach. The Minnesota Independent is one of 10 websites across the United States that are part of The American Independent News Network, a non-profit organization which 'investigates and disseminates news that impacts public debate and advances the common good'. They state that their

reporting 'emphasizes the positive role of a democratically elected government in securing the common good and social welfare, and the continuing benefits of our founding culture of egalitarian government by the people, for the people'. The Minnesota Independent follows a common design template for all 10 state-based news sites. The Independent banner is centrally balanced, suggesting strength and reliability. Objects throughout the website are symmetrically balanced. Section headers are emphasized in their placement through recurring font usage and size as well as symmetry in colour. In this instance, the same green found in the headline is duplicated throughout the site to unify the page. Stories are unified by their proximity to each other and their section headlines. Photos are unified to their accompanying stories via the close proximity to the corresponding text. Sections are clustered together via their proximity to other design elements on the page, such as vertical separation lines and coloured text.

Mainstream media relied upon emphasis (particularly emphasis through placement), balance and obvious demonstrations of scale more than the alternative press, although this design guide was still readily apparent throughout the media spectrum. Overall, mainstream media were seen to be more organized and aligned than the alternative press, although neither of these relationships was significant as general organization and alignment was found throughout the media spectrum. However, the relationship between rhythm and media type was highly significant, with mainstream media relying upon alternating or progressive rhythm far more than would be expected through chance alone. The independent press were relatively unlikely to draw upon these same design guides in the 100 websites sampled.

The independent press was also significantly less likely to use contrast or white space as a design guide in their websites. Contrast in design and the interspacing of text against a wide breath of white space not only offers visual interest but is also generally more pleasing for the viewer as they negotiate textual and visual content. Type was also generally more readable in the mainstream press than the alternative media sampled. Perhaps as a result of this lack of readability, contrast and whitespace, independent media were more likely than the mainstream press to be seen as not visually appealing at all.

The mainstream press were much more likely to use a combination of technology than the alternative press, which often had no technology, such as Flash, frames or animated gifs, on their website. The mainstream news sites in this sample were far more likely to integrate social networking into their online content. They were also much more likely to be seen as professional in their design approach. This estimation of professionalism in design was likely influenced by their use of highly technological inputs, such as Flash and social networking. In fact, nearly three-quarters of mainstream sites were seen to be either somewhat professional or very professional in their visual presentation. This number was almost double that of independent websites, which were seen as much less professional. An interesting caveat to these findings is that

the mainstream press also relied upon violent images and sexualized imagery statistically much more than those in independent media, even though they were seen as more professional. It may be that visual demonstrations of sexuality or violence have been relied upon so much by commercial media that they are now intertwined with contemporary conceptions of professionalism.

There were high levels of commercialism present across all of the sites sampled in this study. Contributing to this commercialism was a near totality logos present across all websites sampled. Logos have their origin in commercial corporations and are an essential part of how a company or organization 'sells' itself. Independent media have embraced this approach. Almost all in this sample relied on a logo to visually represent their company or organization. Given the near monolithic numerical results, adjusted residuals were unvaryingly low, and the relationship between logo usage and type of media was found to be insignificant.

Only 15 per cent of independent media design was found to be non-commercial by coders of this study. This was substantially more than the 4 per cent of mainstream content found to be non-commercial, but it does represent an extremely large proportion of commercially represented, independent news. Thus, roughly 85 per cent of independent media were found to be generally commercial in their design approach. In addition to this, over three-quarters of independent websites had advertising on their site, whereas 95 per cent of mainstream media reported the same finding. This difference between advertising and media type was significant, meaning that mainstream media had significantly more advertising than the alternative news sites sampled, but one should not overlook the fact that such a high percentage (75 per cent) of independent media relied on advertising revenue. Independent media were also statistically far more likely than the mainstream press to have invitations to buy something on their site or pleas for financial support.

The mainstream media in this sample were much more likely to elicit the response, 'I get a strong sense of what this organization is about by just looking at this site', than the alternative press. The mainstream media were far more likely than the independent press to convey their textual content visually, whereas alternative media were seen to not convey their content accurately. This highly significant relationship suggests that independent media were misrepresenting their content. The identity of alternative media was seen to be 'somewhat clear in their design' far more than the mainstream press, whose identity was much more likely to be 'very clear in their design'.

A converging image?

These results do not suggest a monolithically homogenous visual representation across the 200 websites sampled here. There were many important differences that remained between the alternative and mainstream news media sampled in this

study: first, the mainstream media relied on sexual, violent images more than the alternative press and were also seen to be more professional. They were more organized and aligned and used emphasis, rhythm and balance in their design more than the independent press. The mainstream media also relied more on contrast and white space as well as readable text and technology. These design factors combined to create an assumption that mainstream news sites were more professional than independent news sites. The intermix of sexual, violent images with a strong sense of design has long been a part of mainstream media. It may be that visual demonstrations of sexuality or violence have been relied upon so much by commercial media that they are now intertwined with contemporary conceptions of professionalism. A lack of aesthetic professionalism and relatively little reliance on design guides in the independent media sampled could create a visual environment likely to leave viewers frustrated by the difficulties inherent in simply deciphering the relative importance and meaning of content. If everything is emphasized, through a lack of efficient design, then nothing is emphasized, and this can feel haphazard to the viewer. One could assume that the limitations in design might be due to a lack of resources in the independent press sampled.

Although the differences were tangible, there were some striking similarities across the mainstream and alternative spectrum found in this study. The principal area of a shared approach between the two media types relates to commercialism. For example, nearly all of the websites in this sample relied on a logo. Logos have long been a central component to corporate visual identity (van den Bosch, de Jong & Elving 2006). A strong visual identity has been said to provide increased visibility and greater recognizability (Balmer & Gray 2000), whereas a weak visual identity has suggested dysfunction within a corporation (Baker & Balmer 1997). Independent media have clearly embraced this concept and have incorporated logos to ‘sell’ their identity. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the pervasiveness of commercialism within contemporary culture. Independent media appear to be adopting corporate communication tactics to compete within a crowded, commercial, online sphere. Indeed, the acceptance of a logo within the independent media sampled for this study was likely to be relatively swift, given the commercial pressures endemic to a capitalistic society. The pervasiveness of this commercialism stretched into the overall design itself. Roughly 85 per cent of independent media were found to be generally commercial in their design approach. Three-fourths had advertising on their site and independent media were also statistically far more likely than the mainstream press to have invitations to buy something on their site or pleas for financial support. Thus, the alternative media in this sample were expressing commercial interests at the same rate and, in some instances, with even more enthusiasm than the mainstream press. Commercialism has become so endemic within society that its acceptance within the largely non-profit alternative media spectrum has become uniformly commonplace.

It is simply assumed that a commercial perspective is essential to survival – a notion that has not historically been very commonplace in the alternative media community. The contemporary media system appears pre-structured to include consumption. Therefore, the act of marketing oneself is endemic to the process of communication, and that marketing message is not viewed within a necessarily conceptual framework but within the confines of the media message as a product.

There were also several visual re-presentations that, at first, appeared counter-intuitive in the alternative press, in particular. For example, although most independent sites were deemed deviant, or different from the mainstream, their visual content was decidedly non-confrontational. It is important to question how these visual constructions are received by viewers who are likely bombarded with challenging visual imagery in other mediated arenas (Waller, Fam & Erdogan 2005) but find few confrontational images within the independent press, whose textual content may actually even negate those visual constructions. One has to wonder if such a disconnect between imagery and message is seen as a point of invitation or disconcertion to the viewer. In a media sphere of shock, sex and violence, these safe, unchallenging visual messages may be inviting to a viewer who is searching out alternative news coverage with perhaps a positive difference. Yet these images may also be seen as cynical and misanthropic to an audience accustomed to sexualized, violent and challenging images found in other media. If this reticence on the part of the alternative media in this sample is due to a desire to reach larger mainstream audiences, a considerable issue becomes whether independent media might be forfeiting the 'symbolic capital' so necessary for smaller organizations, in their zeal to attract mainstream readers.

It is also possible that the very notion of what creates symbolic capital in independent media has changed. It is hard to imagine the possibility of a 'deviant' and challenging image gaining prominence when contrasted against the findings revealed in this study. Indeed, such an image may now not be seen as empowering but as debilitating to a more deviant media organization. What of those who have a radical, deviant message? Certainly, representations over time have an inevitable impact on how an organization considers its operations and purpose. Thus, a mainstreamed image may suggest a much more mainstreamed approach in the process of newsgathering and information dissemination. This has obvious implications for democracy and political participation, particularly for those who continue to view themselves as 'outliers' in society. Those with particularly radical messages may very well be negotiating an increasing sense of defeatism when faced with such a non-confrontational, commercial block of visual imagery in alternative media. This lack of confrontation among commercially minded independent media, coupled with a shared consumerism with the mainstream press, runs counter

to the perception that the Internet operates as a diverse, heterogeneous arena of multidimensional communication.

Finally, the mainstream media in this sample were much more likely to elicit the response, 'I get a strong sense of what this organization is about by just looking at this site', than the alternative press. The mainstream media were also far more likely than the independent press to convey their textual content visually, whereas alternative media were seen to have an incongruence between their visual content and their text. This suggests a certain level of deception that may again be driven by the need to attract as many viewers as possible. If the images and design are non-confrontational, even if the text is challenging on some level, then there is an increased opportunity to attract a larger audience. Such a disconnect between text and image is concerning as visual messages typically generate the first, and longest lasting, cognitive processes inherent to communication. One must consider why alternative media would misrepresent their textual content. Here again, the drive to conflate media messages with the mainstream appears to be a likely cause. The pressure to homogenize your message, even when facing financial constraints that likely limit the possibilities of one's visual identity online, is continuing to increase as the media spectrum converges.

6

Defining Media through Organizational Practices

Gans (1979) was among the first to argue that journalists' personal values and beliefs affect how they frame stories and what types of stories they report. Gans found that journalists held certain values that could not be extracted from their writing and that those values were taught to journalists through his or her education, co-workers and superiors. The values of journalists were originally said to be ethnocentricism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderate positions, adherence to social order and national leadership. Gans argued that these specific values were learned through principally two sources: formal education and the individual organization. In his seminal piece examining a socialist at *The Wall Street Journal*, Reese (1990) argued that journalists must work within the broader value system or ideology of an organization when creating media content. If a reporter deviates from this norm, she or he will face an inevitable reprimand or 'repair' from within the organizational system. Tuchman (1978) concurred that it is not the news topic itself that makes a subject newsworthy but its relationship to the values of the news media. These values dictate the normative behaviour of those in the news and help to define what kinds of sources are used and what types of routines are followed.

These early studies established the salience of organizational values on resulting content and ushered in a stream of research examining organizational norms. These evolving norms are in no way fixed and are perpetually in flux. A wide array of more contemporary research has found contributory values that do not appear to necessarily correlate with those on Gans' original list. For example, autonomy (McDevitt, Gassay & Perez 2002), controversy (Graber 1997), objectivity, fairness, timeliness and proximity (Shoemaker & Reese 1990b), a promotion of political accountability (Bennett 1996), drama (Hershey & Holian 2000), and an emphasis on the 'horse-race' or game-oriented aspects of political issues and events (Jamieson & Capella 1998) have all been said to constitute at least a part of mainstream journalism's values and are therefore constitutive to the norms of modern mainstream journalism – at least for now. The compounding and complex influences embedded within media content have led scholars and practitioners to argue that objectivity,

one of the longest held values within the media, should now be seen as an organizational goal, rather than a template for practice – at least if one equates objectivity with neutrality. This shift away from objectivity stems from knowing that each media worker crafts their own content from an interconnected nexus of their own personal values, organizational values and commercial influences.

Indeed, the entire normative structures that exist within media systems are created through a demanding interplay of converging factors – many of which are outside a media worker's direct control. One study examining mainstream media in Argentina found that the capacity for watchdog journalism fluctuated over time in response to external influences (Pinto 2008). This research examined three newspapers over 20 years and discovered that the political and economic environment, as well as journalists' relations with elite actors and their own shifting ideologies, played a role in building – and destroying – the propensity for watchdog journalism in Argentina (Pinto 2008). This highlights the delicate balance of internal and external influences embedded within every media institution, which somewhat precariously coalesce to form the values that journalism has long suggested are absolutely fundamental to its existence.

While the notion of personal and organizational values has historically been revered within the journalistic community, the public does not appear to share in that enthusiasm. With respect to the public acceptance of traditional journalism values and norms, 'in many cases, the public and the press, including traditional journalism and the civic journalism movement are on separate tracks headed in different directions' (Heider, McCombs & Poindexter 2005: 962). For example, the public is far less supportive of watchdog reporting or rapid responses than journalists are and the public also widely support the notion that journalists should offer solutions (Heider *et al.* 2005) – a model of reporting that has historically been eschewed by mainstream journalism but is now gaining acceptance. These solutions and calls for action have historically been more readily found within the alternative press.

In comparing contemporary perceptions of the mainstream press with earlier estimations, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press recently wrote that 'today, the public considers the news media even less professional, less accurate, less moral, less helpful to democracy, more sensational, more likely to cover up mistakes and more biased' (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism 2004, cited in Heider *et al.* 2005). Perhaps in response to audience disdain, many major mainstream news organizations, such as the *Guardian* (Singer & Ashman 2009), have extended their historically closed sources and routines to include engaging with audiences and drawing from user-generated content. Citizens' input ranges from acting as contributory sources to the sole creators of media.

Gans (1979) argued years ago, sources with economic or political power are far more likely to influence content than those without as much money or political sway. This obviously still holds largely true across the media spectrum. This means that a public relations representative, for example, might be much more likely to get their position into news content than a victim of crime or a local victim rights advocate. These normative structures within a media system are very likely not be the result of any malicious intent but rather, the logical response to a long relationship between organizations that is cultivated over many years. Similarly, entrenched interest groups, such as the Sensible Sentencing Trust, a Napier-based organization, which argues for stricter prison sentences in New Zealand, have systemic connections throughout the media industry. These connections have been cultivated over years and result in the Sensible Sentencing Trust being used as a frequent source in crime stories.

Although power and money still allow many to gain wider access to the media, the inroads by citizens into mainstream media does represent a fundamental shift in the normative structure of mainstream media organizations. There is still a strong sense of caution within some mainstream media outlets and not all have readily accepted using citizen-created content (Paulussen & Ugille 2008). Yet a recent study examining the BBC found that the managers have moved to user-generated content because of 'public service broadcaster obligations toward inclusivity and mass reach; a means to combat viewer disengagement with mainstream news; a response to increasing competition for audiences; anticipation of the constantly changing skill sets of audiences and the increasing and changing capacities and forms of ICT and, the editorial ability of the BBC to make UGC fit its own traditional news values' (Harrison 2010: 243). Harrison's (2010) examination of the BBC argues that successful integration of user-generated content has ranged from unsolicited to solicited, expeditious to an audience watchdog perspective. Examples of positive – and to be precise profitable – use of citizen-created content at the BBC that were both solicited and unsolicited abound: emails about contaminated petrol, reports from those in the army as to the morale in Afghanistan, pictures of tsunami damage, narratives about emergency rule in Pakistan and recent images of a man who had reportedly deceased long ago.

This shift in media routines, or the repeated practices embedded within a job, changes not only how the media view their audience but also how they view their own position within society. Routines form the context by which we consider and define our jobs and determine how quickly we succeed (Tuchman 1977); they are the practices of a larger group or organization in which a person knowingly or unknowingly participates. Thought of another way, routines are the values of a specific organization put into practice. The routines one follows are predicated upon what others in that specific organization have historically done. Following routines of collecting sources, journalists essentially dictate – to a large extent – what is included in a report and what is omitted (Berkowitz 1992).

These consistent contact procedures in newsgathering consequently define what is expected and what constitutes news. Over time, repeated practices result in predictable patterns of coverage that are dictated by organizational assumptions about the audience and circulation trends. These shifted routine patterns may form media values that are different from the historical values of conflict/controversy, the unusual, and timeliness. As the incorporation of citizen-generated content into mainstream media continues to rise, the patterns of coverage are likely to refocus on the local as represented from within a community and result in a stronger sense of communal values.

This shift in values will happen as long as citizens continue to increase their levels of input into the media system. However, the actual reality of such an evolution is still questionable. For example, blogs pose a very real challenge to journalistic norms and practices, especially objectivity, gatekeeping practices, accountability and transparency. If embraced, the possibilities of blogging could drastically transform modern journalism across the mediated spectrum. Yet early evidence suggests that blogs, as an example of participatory communication, are actually moulding to fit traditional journalistic norms and practices. 'Blogs, in other words, are being "normalized" by journalists much as other aspects of the Internet have been' (Singer 2005: 174). Blogs largely maintain tight control over their own information and perform traditional gatekeeping roles for their readers. This normalization of sources, routines and gatekeeping practices is continuing unabated even though the format of blogs is 'explicitly about participatory communication' (Singer 2005: 192). Others disagree and argue that the same kinds of participatory communication are needed, and presently relied upon, in mainstream media as well. In an examination of Indymedia, Platon and Deuze argue that the independent, alternative outlet 'is not that much different from established forms of journalism in the kind of problems, issues and editorial discussions it faces in the practice of everyday publishing' (Platon & Deuze 2003: 352).

Indeed, the normative structures of media may be converging as mainstream journalists find themselves increasingly open to accepting input from average citizens rather than elite sources – and as alternative media workers assimilate mainstream practices into their own routines. Atton and Wickenden recently argued that radical and mainstream outlets are increasingly adopting 'elements from each other, whether in writing style or in news values and framing' (Atton & Wickenden 2005: 491). They also found that the alternative publication, such as *SchNEWS*, relied on a 'counter-elite' of sources who hold significant 'power, legitimacy and authoritativeness' (Atton & Wickenden 2005: 355) in their community. Pools of sources can be hierarchical and represent a relatively narrow range of voices within the publication. Such practices obviously mirror much of the criticism often directed at the mainstream media.

Conversely, an extensive survey of the media industry found that a very large proportion, 72 per cent, of journalists supported giving average citizens a

forum in the mainstream media to express their personal perspectives on public affairs. Further, over half of journalists surveyed thought that an important role of journalism was to provide possible solutions to societal problems (Weaver *et al.* 2006). Obviously, the overwhelming majority of news generated by mainstream media is still generated by professional journalists, but this type of engaged input into mainstream content was almost non-existent even a few years ago. While BBC managers have pointed to rather altruistic reasons for engaging citizens, some within mainstream media fear that these changes are primarily due to cost-cutting measures (Harrison 2010). Without a serious and reflective investigative enquiry with decision-makers at major mainstream media outlets, it is impossible to prove whether the shift to citizen-created content is purely for financial gain or not. However, it is worthwhile to note that such a change does allow for large newsrooms, which are already under incredible financial pressure, to draw heavily from the notion that 'the world is your freelancer' (World Editors Forum 2008: 96, cited in Harrison 2010) – all for the relatively low cost of an internal moderator and an open line of communication.

Whether the motivations of a relative openness in the normative structures of sourcing, routines and values can be traced to monetary concerns or not, the change does signal a shift in the normative structure of the media. Media have traditionally existed within two organizational frameworks: participatory and hierarchical. Mainstream media have historically operated almost exclusively within the latter category, although as this chapter illustrates, some of the hierarchical structure is now under modification. Conversely, larger alternative media have also co-opted this professionalized, hierarchical format as well. Atton's fascinating review of the relative outsider British National Party website found that it operated as a hierarchical organization that prevented 'members from sustained, active involvement in the construction of their own identities' (Atton's 2006: 573). In some cases, the philosophy of alternative media cannot be reconciled with the reality of the normative processes inherent in a commercially minded alternative media outlet (Gibbs 2003). A compelling example of such a disconnect was found in the *Honolulu Weekly*, an alternative publication in Hawaii that was aligned with the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies. While 'alternative' in its stated philosophical approach, *Honolulu Weekly* found itself constantly conflicted between the ideals of an alternative publication and 'the *business* of running a successful alternative paper' (Gibbs 2003: 590). The alternative publication operated through largely uncooperative professional norms that were generally hierarchical and anti-democratic. Gibbs (2003) cautions that

> [scholarship must not] make the false assumption that alternative newspaper organizations are completely oppositional enterprises that challenge the dominant elite on every count … In fact, the reality of the *Weekly* is that the 'alternative'

> label at best only thinly disguises its deep roots in capitalist modes of production. At worst, it is used to justify the hyper-exploitation of its workers in the pursuit of matching upscale readers with niche-market products. (Gibbs 2003: 603)

When an organization operates under a hierarchical model of instruction, the 'agents of resistance', or the actual receivers of the media message, can be artificially distanced from those who are 'directing them' (Atton 2002a: 103). This prescriptive method of alternative media communication is evident within some modern, more commercial, forms of alternative media and can best be explained by the commoditized, mass culture approach to communication. Through professionalized norms and processes, any media outlet, be it under the banner of alternative or mainstream, is far more likely to 'reach' a more substantial number of people through a professionalized, hierarchical, interconnected organizational network of communication. This hierarchical norm lends itself to the increased possibility of effectiveness if one measures efficacy by the number of those in an audience who know of one's message. However, readers can also feel rather discouraged and disconnected from those who disseminate information from what can be perceived as an elite and hierarchical position.

There can also be a lateral form of organization and communication, which includes 'multiple experiences and concerns' (Downing 1984: 19) that are in direct opposition to the mass culture approach. This model of media aims to create an alternate 'value system' (Rau 1994: 13) from a community of engaged participants. Eyerman and Jamison (1991) call this process of identity creation within a unified membership, knowledge production. In his examination of the alternative publications, *Green Anarchist* and *Do or Die*, Atton (2002a) found that the interspaced writing from movement intellectuals and reader/writers on the same page, 'offers a challenge to intellectual discourse as well as the opportunity to discuss the ideas in that discourse to an extent unknown in the mainstream media' (Atton 2002a: 111). One also sees this interdependency of input in mainstream sites of information such as BBC's Have Your Say or the explicitly collaborative ABC Open in Australia, which teams 50 editors with citizens across the country 'to share ideas and stories' (ABC Open 2010) in projects that are offered by the ABC, or alternatively, conceptualized by individual citizens.

More voices within media implicitly democratizes the content. It removes the 'hierarchy of access' (Glasgow University Media Group 1976) that has been endemic to much mainstream media reporting processes. Media that welcome a diverse range of input are 'transformed into an egalitarian, devolved communicational tool for theory and for action' (Atton 2002a: 111). This input from citizens – at times referred to as native reports – can range from unsolicited letters or writings or video clips that are selected and included within a publication. The concept of native reporting, principally thought of as an approach mainly in alternative media, is actually rooted in the innate and

universal processes of investigative journalism. Robert Chesshyre, traditionally a journalist for mainstream British papers, such as the *Guardian, The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*, wrote that when he first came home to the United Kingdom after working as a correspondent for *The Observer* in Washington, DC, he 'had to learn again the native idiom' (Chesshyre 1987: 13). Embedded within such a comment is that there is a localness intertwined within compelling storytelling. This sense of familiarity exists within both textual and visual language. It invites the reader within a geographic location, site of knowledge or space of emotional understanding. Within the context of media that embrace citizen-generated content, readers develop a deep understanding of the language because they also contribute to its creation. This is one of the central arguments towards including readers/writers as contributors to media. Otherwise, the creators of content that might be intended as emancipatory in nature, may actually be acting much more like colonists. When readers are removed from any relationship with the content, the creator is 'placed either above or at the centre of things, yet apart from them' (Spurr 1993: 16). Native reporters can actually document their own reality and become empowered by the process. This first-hand information also elevates the knowledge and discussion within the larger community as it is more relevant and far more informed than an elitist perspective from outside the close network of community relationships.

Atton rightly argues that native reporting can 'power away from the mainstream back to the disenfranchised and marginalized groups that are the native reporter's proper community' (Atton 2002a: 115). Native reporting can validate the identity of communities that can be overlooked in conglomerate, mainstream news. Yet as mainstream media continually segment their markets, in the hopes of increasing advertising revenue, they also allow spaces for marginalized groups to enter into more intimate, communal exchanges that now operate within mainstream media. For example, the corporate-owned Discover San Diego, a mainstream blog replete with advertising support from Hard Rock and Warner Brothers, which began in 2007 as an extended lifestyle guide to the local area, now has a predominant 'San Diego Wiki' component that actively encourages local participation, 'ultimately creating an accurate, interactive resource that provides the best information from your point of view' (San Diego Blog 2009). This communal blog and interactive wiki manifests itself as an extension not only of San Diego's identity but also of those who live there and contribute to content. Those who have been previously marginalized by mainstream media have the possibility to shift attention away from celebrating redundant, corporate sites of monolithic consumerism to recognizing unique, independent, sites of cultural regeneration – all through a mainstream media outlet. Through contributing to this mainstream portal of information, lone citizens operating outside of corporate marketing schemes and planned tourist attractions can collaboratively construct what may

eventually be seen as endemic to San Diego and perhaps celebrated within the mainstream.

The influence of the Internet on normative structures of the media

It would be remiss not to discuss the influence of technology on the increased acceptance of citizen-generated content in the mainstream media and the growth of deliberative democratic practices across the media continuum. These technological advances have been supported and fuelled by major global events, such as the 24-hour news channel explosion after the first Iraq War and the proliferation of social media during the revolutions in Iran, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. The Internet is inherently technological, which still prohibits many potential users from engaging with this medium. It also relies on a relatively wealthy infrastructure within its host country that is simply not available in some parts of the world (Hamilton 2000b). With these large caveats in place, the Internet remains widely responsible for increasing the access that citizens have into all media. In 2007, American Internet usage stood at 211 million, which represents 69.9 per cent of the total population. This means that almost 70 per cent of the US population actually used, rather than only had access to, the Internet. With this unprecedented growth of the Internet, has come the potential benefits of self-representation for independent media, non-profit organizations and social movements as well as the ability to communicate with other individuals and organizations that have similar causes – essentially forming a Habermasian public sphere. The technology allows for an extraordinary opportunity to propel democratic participation (Dertouzos 1991: 75), where individuals can assert their 'ideas, concerns and demands before all others' (Rheingold 1993: 46). The technology has been said to be 'a way of revitalizing the open and wide-spread discussions among citizens that feed the roots of democratic society' (Poster 1997: 209).

However, many of the Internet's early promises have eventuated through quite an uneven praxis. For example, non-profit organizations could strongly benefit from Internet technology as 'a resource that has never been available to non-profits before now: affordable, direct, interactive access to the public at large' (Civille 1997: Introduction). Non-profit organizations and activist groups have long charged that traditional mass media misrepresent their purpose or polarize their issues to the general news audience (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney 1998). The Internet has developed as an important arena for non-profits to 'get out their message' given that many are 'sceptical of what counts as balance in the mainstream media' (Hume 1995). This ability to pass the traditional media gatekeepers is the central reason for the Internet's

ability to rival mainstream outlets (Internet World Stats 2007). By cultivating interactive, personalized, one-to-one relationships, non-profit organizations can presumably grow strategically on the Internet (Peppers & Rogers 1999) and encourage participatory behaviour (Hardy & Scheufele 2005). Given the overwhelmingly positive findings relating to interactive technology, it was therefore surprising to find that most non-profit organizations do not appear to engage their readers in any meaningful conversation online (Kenix 2007b). Indeed, almost all non-profits (94.2 per cent) surveyed did not post information about email lists or Listserves; 98.5 per cent did not have any information on or evidence of newsgroups; 98.5 per cent did not list information about discussion forums; and 95.7 per cent of non-profit organizations did not provide chat rooms. This problematizes any notion of the Internet as a haven for deliberative democracy. If there is no forum for discourse between those that are in some way associated with the non-profit organization, there certainly can't be a public sphere – at least not in the Habermasian tradition.

This is not to say that activism has not grown online. Activists are defined as 'two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion tactics, or force' (Grunig 1992: 503–30). Their success depends upon their ability to access and to use power resources (Heath 1997). Because of these capabilities, many have argued that the Internet in particular is useful for activism (Preece 2000; Scott & Street 2000). This is because the Internet allows for increased density and centrality (Coombs 1998) between individuals through strategic, focused information dissemination. In this case, density is the number of links a stakeholder has with other network members while centrality refers to the closeness, degree and 'betweenness' of members within a network. This connective web provides space for individuals to take action (Spencer 2002). Activism has exploded online in heavily interconnected global protests that have never been witnessed prior to the Internet.

The mainstream press argued years ago that the Internet would become a new tool for staging protests and demonstrations (Friess 1999). With no central control point (Berman & Weitzner 1997), activists can quickly mobilize. Sustained collective action thrives on the Internet (Virnoche & Marx 1997), particularly if it orginates offline (Wellman & Salaff 1996). The Internet, through alternative media such as blogs, chat rooms, twitter and social-networking websites, is an extremely effective tool for political movements (Curran & Couldry 2003; Kahn & Kellner 2004) that have a long history of agitating for social change in partnership with alternative media. For the first time in history, Internet users now have the ability to produce, receive and distribute information with government officials (Bacard 1993), media outlets and fellow citizens to effectively participate in the democratic process (Atton 2004).

However, many organizations and media outlets online continue to see the Internet principally as a tool for information dissemination (Tsaliki 2003)

and not as a conduit for discursive, interactive communication (Kenix 2008d). Many continue to view the Internet as a portal for information that they themselves can use, but not one that does serve external users with interactive communication in any meaningful way. This is in stark contrast to the widely held assumption that the Internet is an effective tool for activism and democracy; allows for communication with members and readers; makes an organization more visible and credible and leaves those without a website at a decided disadvantage (Kenix 2008d). This disconnect between stated beliefs and actual behaviours suggests a self-reflexive, somewhat fractured mirrored theory of 'communication' that does not resemble traditional theories of communication, which have argued that a sender and a receiver are equal participants within an engaged public sphere.

There are hundreds of thousands of virtual communities in cyberspace, 'flourishing via e-mail lists, electronic bulletin boards, online chat groups and role-playing domains' ('National Voter Turnout in Federal Elections: 1960–2008' 2008). Yet the role of the Internet in creating open democratic spheres and virtual spaces for marginalized individuals and groups should not be overstated. Traditional measurements of democracy have not shown any dramatic shifts in democratic participation and involvement since the Internet's expansion. Over a decade after the world wide web exploded onto the technological landscape, voting in the United States – the principal civic act – still has not surpassed the 'high' of 63.1 per cent in the Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy presidential election campaign in 1960 (Pew Research Center 1998). American citizens do not trust governmental institutions (Becker 2001), and there remain no citizen initiatives at the US national level (Blumler & Gurevitch 2001; Diani 2000). The advent of new democratic processes because of the Internet has remained far from clear (Craig & Flood 1998).

Money and access have largely dictated the growth of the Internet. In the United Kingdom, 62 per cent of Internet users buy products online (Office for National Statistics 2010). The Internet has become synonymous with consumption. This fact, coupled with the knowledge that online shoppers are more impulsive than others (Kenix 2008e), makes the Internet fertile ground for future growth in electronic commerce. Such an emphasis on making money has led non-profit organizations and smaller, independent media to pursue or establish a corporate model (Kenix 2008e). With the rising corporatization of the Internet, one has to wonder if the only avenue for an online public sphere in the modern, corporatized, digital era is squarely within a corporate, economic context. Many independent organizations rush to sell goods and services (that were once free) simply to prove the benefits of the Internet to board members and potential donors. In scrambling to find ways to make money on the Internet, one New York organization stated that they decided to sell previously free items, 'simply to prove that the Internet has some value. We just

really find that we cannot give away that much stuff any more. We've found in this economic environment, people are just going to have to pay a little bit of money for it' (Kenix 2008e). The desperation to raise funds on the Internet has led several participants to even consider selling information that was once considered private. As one New York participant said, 'we get calls every day from people who want to buy our mailing list. That might be something …' (DiGrazia 2000).

It is hard to imagine a time in recent history when non-profit organizations, independent media or social movements would even consider selling their mailing lists to corporate entities, but this reality is an integral part of the consumption of information that the Internet helped create. Non-profit participants in particular fully believe that the corporate world has established a burgeoning web-based sales process that they simply must follow if they are to remain viable. The corporate development of the Internet has effectively removed many of the technological features of the Internet that were first thought to be a democratic salvation for independent media, non-profits and social movements, such as discussion boards and chat rooms. The apparent *raison d'étre* to be on the Internet is to make money and to spread an informational, one-way message. In many ways, the Internet is largely redundant in its efforts to communicate with the public, replete with information that is readily available in print as well (Finberg & Stone 2002). There is also nascent research which suggests that there is widespread redundancy within the entire media spectrum because of the 'Internet effect'. Independent blogs and the mainstream media had a strikingly similar agenda during the 2004 US presidential election, regardless of political leanings (Lee 2007). Perhaps the mantra of focused online economic growth has contributed to why many users believe online content does not hold much credibility (Finberg & Stone 2002) and perceive content to be intrinsically duplicitous. The next study explores how the normative structures of current event blogs are displayed through their online content. The findings are contextualized against that of mainstream journalism in an effort to ascertain what differences remain.

A study of current event blogs

Journalism, in the broadest sense, examines proximate topics that involve prominent individuals and have broad effects (MacDougall & Reid 1987). Using these unique qualities as the foundation for growth, mainstream journalism has evolved into a modern bureaucratic network of organizations that aim to observe and objectively document events in a shared reality (Davis 1996). Yet like all cultural institutions (Williams 1977), journalism's norms, values, sources and practices are constantly changing. The conception of journalism

as a solidified foundation of institutionalized practices, such as news beats and organizational routines (Shoemaker & Reese 1996), continues to exist, but in parallel with a view of mainstream news as a manufactured representation of an elite ideology (Herman & Chomsky 1988; Tuchman 1978).

As this book has argued, it is important that research not polarize mainstream and alternative media as complete, binary opposites. However, there are certainly tendencies that place media on very different points across the alternative/mainstream spectrum. Mainstream media have been seen to be motivated by commercial, for-profit, objectives that privilege institutions over movements (Downing 2001) and operate within a 'hierarchy of access' (Atton 2002a), which generally dictates who is sourced according to perceived credibility. By this definitional framework, *The New York Times* would be considered more mainstream than the blog *The Osterley Times*. The former is replete with advertising and paid subscriber benefits, as well as 'objective' content written only by professional reporters who are paid by *The New York Times*. In contrast, *The Osterley Times*, which has no advertising and is written by an unknown author with no listed professional affiliations but holds a stated ideological position from the libertarian left, would be seen as more alternative.

There was an explosion of current events blogs during the Iraq War and the tumultuous American presidency of George W. Bush (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright 2005). Profit-centred, corporate and multinational news conglomerates, which now own most of the world's mainstream media (McChesney 2004), may also help to explain the rise of political, current events blogs. As mainstream news content continued to emphasize entertainment and sensationalism (Williams & Delli Carpini 2000), more independent, alternative political news blogs gained attention for their perceived different approach to current events (Atton 2004). In 1999, there were about 50 existing blogs and they were only known by a few individuals (Johnson, Kaye, Bichard & Wong 2007). However, by 2006, 29 per cent (57 million) of American Internet users accessed blogs (Lenhart & Fox 2006) and by 2007, 8 out of 10 Americans knew what a blog was and almost half of America had visited blogs (Synovate 2007). As an example of blog proliferation, the readership and authorship of political blogs had already exceeded that of political print magazines and columns by the year 2004 (Mayfield 2004).

This phenomenal growth may be due to the dynamic nature of blogs. While some alternative blogs are updated weekly, many more are updated hourly (or even more frequently), with postings in reverse chronological order. Some are interactive and allow viewers to post comments (Lenhart & Fox 2006). Unlike static websites, blogs depend upon hyperlinks not only to boost attention to their own blog, but also to ensure that users can be quickly led to relevant information. At their idealized best, weblogs have been said to be a space to reflect on the 'deluge of data' (Blood 2002) that we receive, offering an antidote to the mass-mediated, corporatized culture that surrounds us. They have the

capability to report news without the constraints of censure or the pressures of advertising and draw upon a diverse range of sources. At their reductive worst, bloggers have been said to be strongly opinionated and even vitriolic in response to those who oppose their political positions (Johnson & Kaye 2004).

While most blogs don't see a fraction of their potential audience, blogs do have far more democratic possibility than previous print or digital publication formats. Blogs, unlike other forms of news, can emphasize audience participation and personalization in the creation of content (Wall 2005). Many blogs continue to remain rooted in personal disclosure (Lenhart & Fox 2006). The majority of blogs contain a personal diary or journal, the possibility for two-way communication (Herring *et al.* 2005; Viégas 2005) and are also available for open access (Lenhart & Fox 2006). In general, blogs remain a relatively easy to construct, interactive, flexible and inexpensive mode of self-publication (Herring *et al.* 2005). Many scholars continue to believe blogs can offer a 'radically different kind of news discourse than the one found in mainstream news media' (Haas 2005: 388). This departure from mainstream news content to an activist, alternative space is rooted within three unique capabilities of blogs: the ability of blogs to steer mainstream news coverage; the possibility for independent and non-corporate reporting, which is based on a wide array of diverse sources (Bruns 2003); and the juxtaposition of alternative, independent reporting with uncensored commentary.

Personal current events news blogs, meant to serve as an alternative to mainstream news (Haas 2005), have begun to proliferate on the Internet and many tend to follow a similar pattern of presentation. These specific kinds of blogs have been found to be extremely influential in politics (Bahnisch 2006; Mayfield 2004; Trammell 2006). For example, New Zealand blogger 'Whale Oil' pushed against that country's name suppression orders in criminal court cases by identifying those accused on his blog. In response, Justice Minister Simon Power recently introduced a bill to Parliament that will not allow widespread use of suppression orders throughout the country. In America, specific examples come from the sudden rise of Howard Dean's 2004 presidential bid (Stromer-Galley & Baker 2006), the resignations of news executive Eason Jordan from CNN (Seeyle 2005), Senator Trent Lott as the Senate Majority Leader (Bowman & Willis 2003) and Dan Rather from the CBS news anchor desk (Glaser 2004). There is also research to suggest that blogs helped fuel the speculation that John Kerry won his campaign based on premature exit polls (Carlson 2007). Drawing from these examples and countless others, political/current events blogging has been heralded as the beginning of the end of journalism's sovereign reign (Rosen 2005). This new alternative form of 'amateur journalism' (Lasica 2003) has been said to be the long-awaited answer to journalism's longstanding weaknesses (Regan 2003).

Yet the breadth and depth of this 'amateur journalism' remains to be seen. Schiffer (2006) examined five of the top political, current events blogs and

found that they had a strong impact on mainstream editorial pages but very little effect on hard news pages or television coverage, despite large-scale mobilization efforts online. And, for all its suggested points of difference, current events blogs have also been found to be remarkably similar to mainstream journalism – at least in terms of journalistic norms. Reese *et al.* examined six news blogs and found that in the regurgitation of mainstream content, these blogs provided 'an important secondary market' (Reese *et al.* 2007: 257) for corporate journalism. It has also been suggested that the linguistic discourse of blogs might result in a situation where bloggers are just as easily talking *at* their audience rather than *with* their audience (Clark 2002). This study of current event blogs, of which a portion was published earlier (Kenix 2009a), explores whether the post-modern journalism of current event blogs draws from the norms, sources and values inherent to alternative media or from something more akin to their contemporary mainstream counterparts.

Four blogs (two deemed among the most popular and two among the least) were selected from the instantaneous memetracker, Tailrank, a small start-up company based in San Francisco (Tailrank 2008). The two most commonly found blogs were crooksandliars.com and thinkprogress.org. At the time of this study, Technorati reported that Crooks and Liars received an authority ranking of 4,544 and Think Progress received a ranking of 6,314. The numbers here represent the number of blogs linking to the website in the last 6 months and place both of these blogs in the top 10 most popular political blogs. The least popular blogs included in this study were oliverwillis.com and the-osterley-times.blogspot.com, both represented as liberal. Their authority ranking from Technorati was 708 and 135, respectively.

Within the sample period 1,712 hyperlinks were recorded: Think Progress had 828 hyperlinks within the text of their blog, Crooks and Liars had 565 hyperlinks, Oliver Willis had 215 hyperlinks and *The Osterley Times* had 104 hyperlinks. There were a total of 344 posts during the 7-day time period sampled. Think Progress had 144 posts, Crooks and Liars had 112 posts, Oliver Willis had 57 posts and *The Osterley Times* had 31 posts. Overall, these links rarely led to alternative news sources and overwhelmingly led to mainstream news sources, mainstream news blogs and mainstream pop culture sources. The four current event blogs sampled for this study almost exclusively linked to 'like-minded' blogs, rather than 'opposite-minded' blogs. These blogs did not link to unofficial sources, such as personal websites and alternative news blogs.

These initial findings challenge some previously held notions of alternative media's norms and values. Research has traditionally found that the normative structures of alternative media result in expansive, in-depth coverage (Duncombe 1997), independent reporting (Atton 2002a), unique stories not covered elsewhere (Makagon 2000), two-way patterns of communication between the writer and reader (Rodriguez 2001), engaged and open discourse (Ostertag 2007), personalized reporting (Atton & Wickenden 2005) and encouragement

of social participation (Tracy 2007). Yet the blogs in this sample displayed characteristics much different to what has been traditionally considered within the norms of alternative media.

Binary, reductive analysis

The content of the blogs in this sample presented polarized nodes of information with a clear 'right' and 'wrong' position. Often the text was constructed sceptically to emphasize the division. For example, two posts from Oliver Willis read, 'Are you S******* Me??' and 'Drill Now?!' The use of repeated punctuation in both headlines work to exclaim the incredulity of those opposing the author's position. The prevailing discourse is of a smarter 'us' versus stupider 'them'. The text of all the blogs sampled relies heavily on obvious ridicule and distance between the author and the opposition. The ridicule of those who oppose the bloggers position is unflinching. Oliver Willis writes, 'someone forgot their Centrum Silver again' when discussing how McCain inaccurately referred to an Iraq–Pakistan border. Again, in reference to congressman and then-presidential candidate, John McCain, Willis writes, 'John McCain bitching about someone else supposedly getting preferential media coverage is sort of like attacking Jeffrey Dahmer for cruelty to animals and ignoring the other stuff. Seriously. This guy'. Such obvious ridicule depends little on contextualization and relies on an absolutist, binary analytical approach. One of many additional examples comes from John Amato at Crooks and Liars who writes about McCain's response to being questioned about affirmative action. Amato states, 'That McCain answered by talking about his opposition to "quotas" was, of course, ridiculous. "Quotas" and "affirmative action" are not the same thing'. The blog then immediately proceeds to discuss the politics of his answer in the context of McCain's previous voting record. This example illustrates a common blogging tactic. First, denigrate your opposition and then offer a reductive analysis in retort. Here, Amato labels McCain as ridiculous without explaining exactly why that is and instead describes McCain's voting record in reductive, simplistic terms. One of the benefits of hyperlinking is the endless amount of information that can be attached to a topic. Using this instance as an example, one can assume readers would be better informed with supplementary sources describing quotas and affirmative action as well as links to independent reporting that might address the impact of affirmative action in society. Without such ancillary material, the reader is left to choose a side and argue according to the simplistic arguments provided.

The blogs here also appeared to overstate their claim to 'truth' while undermining their opponents' attempt to do the same. On 28 July 2008, John Amato, from Crooks and Liars wrote that a study by the *LA Times* 'proves' the media are harder on Obama than McCain, showing how it was 'obvious'

that this latest talking point was 'complete B.S. from the start … surprise, surprise'. The *LA Times* study certainly didn't 'prove' that the entire media are harder on Obama, but it did suggest that the three network television news programs in America used less positive statements for Obama than they did for McCain. This is an important difference that likely would have been highlighted if the situation had been reversed, as was the case when three of the four blogs reported on Robert Novak's car accident in Washington, DC. On 23 July 2008, Crooks and Liars wrote 'Novak hits pedestrian with Corvette, keeps driving … I'm sorry, but I think most normal people would notice a 66-year-old man rolling across their windshield. I'm just saying …'. This story was alongside an image of read 'Robert Novak: Douchebag of liberty'. Also, on the 23rd of July 2008, Think Progress ran the headline 'Witness: "No way" Novak didn't know he hit someone; victim was "splayed across the front" of his car'. Only one of the three blogs, Think Progress, reported later that Mr Novak had a brain tumour and that he may have had a temporary 'blackout' because of this medical condition. However, none of the blogs, or any of the commentators, made any apologies about their previous statements or coverage.

Dependent reporting

There was no evidence of any primary reporting from the four blogs sampled here. In each case, the blogger followed a similar pattern of representation. A typical post opened with an initial, oppositional, and at times, cynical opening sentence that introduced the viewer to the content that follow. Second, a quotation or excerpted paragraph from a mainstream outlet was flowed in the text and finally, the blogger closed with a statement challenging the mainstream position that was either based on opinion or drawn from a mainstream source. This format integrates mainstream reporting throughout its derivative posts.

An example from *The Osterley Times* on 23 July 2008 opens: 'It's a sad day for McCain when even Joe Klein thinks he has gone too far. But his recent unbelievable comments regarding Obama have caused Klein to say this'. The post then re-mediates a two-paragraph quote from Joe Klein and then ends with the blogger writing 'I expect McCain's campaign to get more scurrilous as time goes on'. The blogger doesn't explain who Joe Klein is, and doesn't link directly to his website, which is an example of the sometimes coded language found in these blogs. However, given the format of other posts, the reader would assume that Klein holds official stature (Klein is a political columnist for *Time* magazine and author of six political books). The personalized, first person closing predicts future behaviour from a decidedly opinionated perspective. By constructing the post in this manner, the blogger ingratiates herself or himself with the like-minded reader and invites the reader

into specialized knowledge that the blogger gained only after doing extensive research through the mainstream media.

Think Progress, a blog that tended to use less polarizing language than the others in this sample, continues this format, but with a more measured tone and a stronger reliance on quotations for substantiation. For example, in reporting on the hiring practices of Monica Goodling, a former US government lawyer and political appointee in the George W. Bush administration, Think Progress begins on 28 July 2008 by writing that 'today's Justice Department report – which faults department aide Monica Goodling for "violating federal law" through politicised hiring practices – reveals Goodling's bizarre and thorough way of ensuring she hired only the most tried and true conservatives'. The post then moves into an extensive quote from the Justice Department report and ends by saying, 'The report noted that Goodling refused to hire one Assistant US Attorney because she thought he was a "political infant" who had not "proved himself" to the Republican party'. While relying on the words of other official sources, rather than constructing this sentence as pure opinion, this post still maintains the same format that is frequently seen in blog postings. In this case, the blogger first identifies with like-minded readers by distancing Think Progress with the upcoming text. Here, Think Progress immediately labels Goodling as 'bizarre' but then sources the related information from the official Justice Report. The blogger closes with a challenging statement that purposefully quotes 'political infant' and 'proved himself' from the Justice Report to metaphorically connect back to the original charges of 'bizarreness'. By using quotation marks here, the blogger marginalizes Goodling and calls her legitimacy into question. The viewer, who was first alerted by Think Progress to Goodling's penchant for 'bizarre' behaviour, is eventually rewarded for being given this knowledge with a final righteous confirmation from the blogger.

Hyperlinks 'represent relationships between producers of web materials, and they can be viewed as structuring connections between sites for web users' (Foot, Schneider, Dougherty, Xenos & Larsen 2003: Introduction). If indeed hyperlinking is a 'non-random' and purposeful act of building associative socio-epistemic networks (Rogers & Marres 2002), then only the preponderance of mainstream news links in this study is meaningful. Similar research examining warblogs (Wall 2005), found a heavy reliance on mainstream sources. It could be argued that both political blogs and warblogs would lose relevance if they did not draw from 'mainstream agendas of broad social concern' (Redden, Caldwell & Nguyen 2003: 77). However, relationships formed through hyperlinks are inherently dialogical, meaning that a form of dialogue occurs between these two texts that provide meaning for communities (Burbules & Callister 2000; Mitra 1999). The viewer often infers associations between the producers of information found on these links (Adamic & Adar 2001). In this sample, the associative meaning can

only be one of a strong, albeit critical, relationship with mainstream news. These cognitive, communicative connections extend to online and offline locations (Hine 2000). If this text linked to more 'alternative' sources of news, which provided an independent reporting of events, the remediation of content might have a very different, regenerative and multiplying effect on social communication. Instead, the opposite is actually occurring within this sample of blogs. The blogs that were referenced to more, and seen as 'popular' relied on mainstream sources more than other, lesser known blogs. The popular blogs actually moved away from the sphere of blogs and into relationships with mainstream news, suggesting a conformist process of homogenization.

The associative relationships and political alliances (Park, Thelwall & Kluver 2005) that exist because of hyperlinking, remain whether one is contradicting or agreeing the news content cited. The mutually dependent relationship solidifies the association. The mainstream news outlet depends upon the blog to increase traffic to its own site, while the blog depends upon the mainstream news outlet to provide content for analysis. Within the interconnected sphere of blogs and mainstream news, the blogs sampled for this study become an extension of corporate news rather than an example of alternative communication. The remediation of mainstream news found in this research may serve to strengthen, rather than weaken or challenge, views found in the elite, mainstream press as these blogs are providing a much wider audience for mainstream views.

Story redundancy

There was also much overlap in content between the four blogs. On one randomly selected day, 65 per cent of content was replicated in one of the four blogs randomly sampled. This suggests a substantial level of content remediation, not only from the mainstream sources where this content derived from, but also within the political blogosphere itself. This type of coverage mirrors mainstream 'pack' reporting (Murley & Roberts 2006; Qamra, Tseng & Chang 2006).

The blogging community has a widely used practice of linking to others that have already linked to you. While this can be seen as an act of kindness, there is also a distinct possibility of a self-limiting 'echo chamber'. Kumar *et al.* (1999) were among the first to suggest that like-minded groups quickly form and self-replicate online. Such circuitous behaviour has been called an 'unbearable incestuousness' (Clark 2002). Tateo (2005) examined 77 right wing Italian websites and discovered a highly coherent, tightly knit network of intra-linked groups. Through the circuitousness of such hyperlinks, superstars can be born. In an early and intuitive analysis of digital culture, Mead asserted that being blogged (or hyperlinked) by a well-known blogger

'is the blog equivalent of having your book featured on *Oprah*' (Mead 2000: 102). To repay the favour, the blogged quickly becomes the bloggee and a self-referential circle can begin. As this circuitous spiral continues, it inevitably shrinks and an elite A-list (Clark 2002; Trammell & Keshelashvili 2005) of blogs can emerge. Such a group then could rely upon coded and direct messages that only the regular astute viewer could decipher. The result is that the once heralded egalitarian Internet runs the danger of becoming a capitalistic positioning shuffle.

One-way communication

Within the sample period, Crooks and Liars had 10,401 comments, averaging 92.86 comments per post, and Think Progress had 11,778 comments, averaging 81.79 comments per post. *The Osterley Times* had 19 comments, averaging 0.33 comments per post and Oliver Willis had 883 comments, averaging 28.48 comments per post.

It is important to note that almost none of the total 23,081 comments were openly solicited. Meaning, there were very few 'open threads' evident on these blogs and no direct encouragement of audience contributions. Crooks and Liars was the only blog to utilize the open thread function whereby users are directly encouraged to create the entire content for a particular blog posting. On the 25th of July 2008, Crooks and Liars wrote an open thread that read, 'here's a fun game to play in comments, kids. Finish this sentence: "Bill O'Reilly is the new __________" Enjoy!' Such an approach entices users to participate directly in the blog. There was no evidence of a similar entreaty for comments on any of the other sites sampled.

There was little evidence of other types of invitations to communicate, such as asking questions of their audience. Questions would serve to recognize at least the possibility of a communicative relationship. In the instances that did exist, it was difficult to deconstruct whether the question was meant to be rhetorical or directed purposefully at the viewer for engagement. For example, on 27 July 2008, in reference to the notion that Barack Obama might employ Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman as his running mate, John Amato, the author of Crooks and Liars, wrote 'he is kidding, isn't he?' Given there is a possibility for exchange in the commentary, one could initially assume that this is an invitation for communication with the readers. However, after examining the 259 comments in response to this article, it becomes clear that this question was meant to be rhetorical and not as an opportunity to exchange further information with the readers. Out of the 259 comments, eight viewers stated their reply to Amato directly. This suggests that the audience do not appear to assume any direct, communicative link with the author. Their efforts at communication appeared to be directed to others commenting on the site, rather than the author. Of the 259 comments to this post, there

were 110 comments that were directed to another person that had already commented. This constitutes 42.4 per cent of all comments.

Continuing with this particular post as an illustration, one of the eight comments directed towards John Amato was negative. The negative comment resulted in a relatively rare response from Amato. The comment, from 'Alex', read, 'Um, John, I suspected all along you supported Hillary in the primaries. Now your true colours are at last emerging'. It is not necessarily revealing that Amato responded to a viewer, but that he then chose the next comment space to respond to a person who thanked him for his measured and restrained commentary during the primaries. Amato responded, 'Thank you so much. I received hundreds of emails like that'. This is a unique illustration of how the text is, in fact, selected by the blogger and does not constitute a conversation, even when the pretence is a conversational relationship. Amato points to the 'hundreds' of emails received (that cannot be substantiated from the viewers' perspective) as proof of his measured approach. He certainly may have received all of the emails cited here, but the possibility of an engaged and equally informed conversation did not transpire. Amato squelched the discontent directed at him on his site and quickly changed the focus to a positive representation of his work. The only other instances of Amato posting a comment in response to other commentators within the entire sample period were in three 'soft' stories about music and sports.

The unknown author of *The Osterley Times* posed nine questions to readers in four separate posts that received no comments in response. There was also no example of *The Osterley Times* blogger responding to any comment from viewers. There was no evidence of direct engagement with the audience from Think Progress and no evidence of the same from any of the viewers. The comment section of each post from Think Progress was searched for any direct comment, statement or question to the person who wrote the post or to 'Think Progress' as an entity. None were found. There was also no evidence of any responses from the writers at Think Progress. This lack of engagement in the comments may be because Think Progress is not the creation of just one person and several people post stories on the blog. Such a practice may inhibit readers from creating a relationship with an individual writer. The institutional nature of the blog name, may also work to exclude any direct response or engagement.

One key component to the growth of blogs has presumably been the relationship bloggers have with their readers (Kayes & Johnson 2004). A high level of communication has been found between the blogger and readers in the past (Wall 2005). This research finds a much more mainstream model of communication with bloggers posting infrequent responses to commentators, rarely soliciting input and scarcely answering audience questions. The principal area of engagement and interchange on these blogs occurred between the commentators themselves and did not involve the blogger at all.

There were no meaningful invitations for communication and conversation. Rather, these blogs operated as a one-way linear form of communication with a parallel, and sarcastic, sphere of communication occurring within the commentary.

Caustic commentary

Except for the notable exception of oliverwillis.com, none of the bloggers here utilized the comment section for any meaningful level of communication with their readers. This may be due to the sheer amount of blog comments received. Oliver Willis had far fewer comments than Think Progress or Crooks and Liars, which may be a contributing factor to Willis' increased engagement with commentators. As comments continue to rise within a blog, the level of reciprocity may be likely to decline. But the selectivity of comments demonstrated here on the part of the bloggers may reflect what Herring *et al.* labelled the 'asymmetrical communication rights' between bloggers and the audience, whereby bloggers 'retain ultimate control over the blog's content' (Herring *et al.* 2004: 6). These authors were referring to the bloggers' control over the creation of content and the moderation of comments. Yet this research argues that the bloggers response, or lack thereof, to reader comments may also play an integral role in the manipulation of communication processes online. By only responding sporadically, if at all, to the multitude of relatively pithy comments, the bloggers' status remains eminently superior to those commenting and removes any possibility of a meaningful, communicative exchange.

However, if the blogger does not contribute to commentary content, then this section might be better understood as a separate communicative sphere from the blog itself. When viewed in that context, it could be argued that these comments represent a democratic effort at community building. Yet the overwhelming majority of discourse found within these blogs did not suggest much interest in exchanging information. As Wall (2005) correctly argues, comments can work to form more of a 'neighbourhood bar' than a Habermasian public sphere. There are indeed a few occasional insights, but the scorn, cynicism, mockery and generally obnoxious statements make up the overwhelming majority of comments in these blogs sampled. A cursory look through comments finds numerous examples, such as one from 'kel' who commented on *The Osterley Times* that 'McCain is a fool' and 'thebhc' who stated flatly, 'Great work, Brokaw, you toad'. Crooks and Liars comments included one from 'P. D.' who wrote that 'McCain and respect in the same sentence? It's like saying Karl Rove has a conscience' and another from 'St. Paul Scout' who wrote, 'I want to know, who dresses (John McCain)? And how does he manage to eat with a fork and not stab himself in the eye?' A commentator, 'Leftside Annie', to an article about Pat Robertson advocating

an Israeli air strike on Iran, said, 'I hope Jesus comes and raptures his evil old ass STAT'. On Oliver Willis, 'Jay' wrote, 'Christ, this (blog post) is beyond stupid'.

Given the multitude of asynchronous, largely sarcastic and often angry comments online, one has to consider the function of these statements within the blogosphere. Daily Kos recorded its 20 millionth comment in July 2008 (Libit 2008), but some, like *The Atlantic*'s Marc Ambinder, have given up in frustration and closed their site to comments. Executive Editor of LATimes.com, Meredith Artley, recently said that 'I'm not sure what good hundreds of thousands of comments or message boards do for anybody … I have never known anybody to just read through all of that and think it's worth revisiting' (Libit 2008). Certainly, the ability of ordinary citizens to post comments online is a radical departure from established mass media practices and the ability to post like-minded comments also may facilitate a sense of community online. Participating within a thread of commentary may resemble the previously predicted communication pattern that emphasizes viewers not only consume a mediated product, but also work to help create and construct the meaning of that product (Rheingold 2002). However, one has to wonder what kind of community and what type of meaning is being created. As has already been mentioned, the vitriol directed towards these commentators in specific and those who oppose their views, in general, may serve to coalesce the community by helping to confirm what the majority of commentators believe to be right. Habermas (1989), who articulated this notion of a public sphere, certainly argued that democracy can be messy. But, by almost any definition, a self-assured, one-dimensional and oppositional fighting front does not equate to democratic debate within a public sphere.

Coded language

The political position of these blogs was immediately apparent. Headlines such as 'McCain Caves to Right Wing on Gay Adoption' from Think Progress on 27 July 2008, 'John McCain, Gaffe Machine?' from Crooks and Liars on 26 July 2008, 'Pentagon Told Obama He Couldn't Visit Troops, Republicans Still Stupid' from Oliver Willis on 25 July 2008 and 'McCain Meltdown' from *The Osterley Times* on 23 July 2008 are fairly obviously positioned and purposely evocative. The general reader with a basic understanding of American politics would feasibly be able to ascertain the political position of these blogs.

Yet in the text of these blogs, there are layers of meaning within each post that depend upon a historical knowledge in the area of politics and events in the news. For example, on 24 July 2008, in a post titled 'Pravda at Black Rock', Oliver Willis wrote that 'CBS scrubs yet another one of McCain's

senior citizen gaffes from their coverage. Uncle Joe would be proud'. The reader is expected to have enough knowledge of newspapers and geography to know that *pravda*, translated into 'The Truth' was the most popular newspaper of the Soviet Union and an official mouthpiece for the Communist Party between 1912 and 1991. Uncle Joe, in this case, presumably refers to Joseph Stalin, given the reference to *pravda*. Yet, after reading all of the linked material to this post, this research was still not able to uncover the meaning of 'Black Rock'. Such layers of meaning presumably work to unite a community with shared referential experiences, but they also work to exclude readers who don't have the same historical knowledge or shared cues that combine to form a communal experience. One might assume a similar headline, such as 'evidence of CBS news tampering harkens memories of controlling, Communist regime', would be more inclusive and inviting to readers who may have varying degrees of knowledge in certain areas. Such examples suggest an assumptive, and even elitist, blogger position within what can be construed as a communication hierarchy. Certainly, a reader can find this information on the Internet. However, a political blog aiming to create informational opportunities within an alternative media space could explain histories within different contextual analyses that might not be as readily available to the casual viewer.

Personalization

On 24 July 2008, *The Osterley Times* blogger posted a story on Barack Obama's speech in Berlin. The blogger wrote, 'people living within the most powerful country in the world can have no idea of what it feels like for those of us who live outside it … we have watched, dumbfounded, as (Bush) has been allowed to act as if the law is what he says it is. Our faith in America is shattered. And that is why we so wholeheartedly embrace Obama'. *The Osterley Times* blogger writes this from a decidedly personal perspective, and repeatedly uses words like 'we' and 'us' and 'our' to invoke a sense of community and intimacy. This quote also illustrates what Fairclough (2003) has called an intertextual mix of populist lexical choices. In this example, the blogger is speaking for all people outside of the United States while also connecting with official and prestigious Democratic nominee, Barack Obama. This gives the blogger, and those who agree with her or him, stature while also placing the blogger in a superior position above those who might support the inevitably weaker McCain.

There are repeated instances of personalization found throughout each of these blog posts except for Think Progress, which writes from a much more formal, and mainstream institutional voice. The other blogs in this sample all use the first person in their postings. Even *The Osterley Times* blogger, whose identity is unknown, constantly writes from this personal position. On 28th July 2008, this blogger writes 'is it just me or is John McCain starting to sound

insane? … Sorry. This is my third post today on McCain … I am unaware that anyone had ever suggested that this might be his reason for running for President'. This alternative form of reporting is distanced from any pretence of objectivity found in the mainstream press. It works to provide a sense of transparency to like-minded viewers who believe the blogger 'is someone the readers can believe they know, someone who is not manipulated by a corporate boss or a filter of professionalism' (Wall 2005: 165). In doing so, such highly personalized discourse helps to create a relationship between the reader and author – something that is rarely seen in mainstream media. While there was ample use of personalized reporting, this alone would not qualify these political blogs as an 'alternative' media space when balanced against the weight of this research, particularly as the first person accounts were often used to re-mediate mainstream content.

Apathetic online participation

Only 1.1 per cent of hyperlinks were to a petition. Think Progress uses perfunctory calls for action, such as 'watch it' for videos and 'read the rest of this entry' for text, but these are relatively banal entreaties for behavioural changes. Interestingly enough, the other three blogs did not even use this level of direct language in enticing readers through blog material. However, more importantly, there were no instances of any meaningful call to action. Outside of the few petition hyperlinks, there was no evidence of a blogger actually urging a reader to do something in response to what they have read in this sample.

Thus, as this review illustrates, blogs can contradict most of the characteristics that define alternative media. The blogs in this sample largely linked with mainstream journalism and other like-minded political blogs rather than independent media outlets or a diverse range of sources. There was a strong reliance on reductive analyses, relying on basic contradictions and frequent use of coded language that only frequent readers would understand. There were no meaningful invitations for two-way communication. There was also no evidence of independent information and little instance of unique analysis across the blogs sampled. There was also widespread redundancy in stories across these blogs, which mirrors mainstream 'pack' reporting and a frequent use of caustic commentary. There were very few open invitations to create content and no clear arguments made for democratic participation. While there was frequent reliance on personalized reporting, this alone would not qualify these political blogs as an 'alternative' media space when balanced against the weight of these findings.

Atkinson defines alternative media as 'any media that are produced by non-commercial sources and attempt to transform existing social roles and routines by critiquing and challenging power structures' (Atkinson 2006: 252). By this definition, the political blogs sampled here could not quite meet this

definitional hurdle. All four blogs were non-commercial sources, but they all were also arguing for one entrenched power structure over another. In this case, all four blogs readily critiqued mainstream content and argued against the conservative, politically powerful, Republican Party. However, these arguments were drawn heavily from mainstream positions and were on behalf of the liberal, politically powerful, Democrat Party. The bloggers' critiques *and* their solutions both depended upon the existence of these power structures.

Hamilton (2000a) argued that alternative communication constructs different traditions and values. Yet the structure of these blogs largely followed a one-way communication model grounded in mainstream media practices. There was widespread redundancy in stories across the four blogs sampled, which mirrors mainstream 'pack' reporting. There were also very few open invitations to create content. The 'open thread' in Crooks and Liars was the lone instance of explicit commentator contribution and there was also very little communication between blogger and commentator. If the goal of alternative media is to subvert the 'hierarchy of access' (Atton 2002a) and 'emphasise first person eyewitness accounts by participants' (Atton 2003: 267), then again the blogs sampled for this study did not qualify as alternative, rather these blogs strongly adhered to the mainstream model of a distanced and knowledgeable content creator and a generalized body of apathetic readers.

It has been suggested that alternative media offer a platform for groups and individuals that have been marginalized by the mainstream media (Atton 2002a). Arguing whether or not the mainstream media has marginalized political bloggers, is somewhat akin to arguing whether or not the mainstream media are liberal or conservative. It depends who is asking. Conservatives argue that the liberal media has shut them off from media access while liberals claim the exact opposite is true. Yet all blogs undeniably offer people a platform to speak to a wide audience – something that has not been historically possible through mainstream outlets. But, while these bloggers write from outside the walls of mainstream institutions and from a personalized perspective, which is also traditionally outside of mainstream journalistic practices, the text of these blogs still derived from within the institutional framework of mainstream society that the bloggers purportedly critiqued. There was no evidence in this sample of bloggers establishing a new way of organizing media or sharing meaningful self-disclosure that reported on personal experiences or struggles; no resistance narratives outside of established political norms and practices; no facilitation of democratic participation and cultural disruption.

Downing (2001) has argued convincingly of the complete mainstream blockage of public expression and the necessity for alternative media to fill the cultural and social gap. There is little evidence here that political blogs are fulfilling this ideal. Rather, these blogs exist as somewhat of an overlapping sphere between mainstream and alternative media, extending and drawing upon mainstream practices – without corporate sponsorship and at times with

a personal voice. Many of the values these blogs appear to critique are the same values they have subsumed from mainstream journalism. What emerged from this study was a sample of blogs that acted as contract ombudsmen for the mainstream press. The principal difference was that they were not on the mainstream payroll – a welcome relief for newspapers facing continual budget cuts – and, rather than 'answering' to public concerns about content, these blogs were driven by individual interests created within the culture of mainstream media.

This research argues that these political blogs, which have been conceptualized within academia as an alternative to mainstream media, actually draw very little from what has been defined as alternative media. Further, these blogs appear firmly grounded within the ideological mainstream and make no attempt to create alternative identities outside of entrenched, elite systems of power. The ability for citizens to speak with a broader reach was one of the few 'alternative' qualities found here. But, ironically, this ability may have actually served to strengthen mainstream media given that bloggers simply re-mediated mainstream content and therefore gave these perspectives much more consideration and voice than they previously had.

As this research suggests, there is extensive overlap between what was once considered 'alternative' and 'mainstream'. The blogs in this sample critiqued mainstream content with mainstream ideology and normative practices found in mainstream journalism through a far-reaching, once 'new' and 'alternative' medium. If one actually examines online, alternative blog content, it becomes apparent that there is far more overlap between the blogs in this sample and modern, mainstream political talk radio, than definitional frameworks of what constitutes alternative media. It is not enough to label what was once alternative media, something like 'citizen media', for example, without careful consideration of what separates the two. Simply because content is produced by an individual citizen, as was the case here in some of the blogs sampled, does not mean it does not rely upon corporate models of communication, mainstream ideologies and corporate content.

7

Defining Media through Ownership

Since White's (1950) seminal article asserting that journalists act as gatekeepers of information, researchers have been examining the higher level influence of ownership in dictating content (Gitlin 1980; Shoemaker & Reese 1996). It has been argued that those who control the media also control the predominant ideology of society (Grossberg *et al.* 1998; Herman & Chomsky 1988; McChesney 1999). One of the principal points of opposition against the present media merger frenzy is the fear that a monolithically owned media will create content that is one-dimensional and therefore lead to a less-informed public. This fear is based on the precept that a multiplicity of outlets will offer a multiplicity of voices (Bagdikian 2000; Shoemaker *et al.* 1991). There is a widespread and historical presumption that concentration of media ownership is not healthy for freedom of expression or for a plurality of perspectives (Ofcom 2006). In 1945, the US Supreme Court stated 'one of the most vital of all general interests [is] the dissemination of news from as many different sources, and with as many different facets and colors as is possible. That interest … presupposes that right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues, than through any kind of authoritative selection' (US Supreme Court 1945). The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in America has historically concurred and 'traditionally assumed that there is a positive correlation between viewpoints expressed and ownership of an outlet. The Commission has sought, therefore to diffuse ownership of media outlets among multiple firms in order to diversify the viewpoints available to the public' (Federal Communications Commission 2003). However, counter to this stated position, the FCC and other regulatory agencies around the world have slowly been relaxing media regulations and allowing media conglomerates to deepen their horizontal and vertical streams of ownership. This has led many in academia to argue that these fundamental principles of diversity in ownership have been ignored and the present media system is far too concentrated to ensure a healthy democracy (Bagdikian 2000).

The rate of media concentration has been staggering. Even the media baron Rupert Murdoch has described the current pattern of technological development followed by corporate consolidation and then global content distribution, as 'fairly chaotic' (Select Committee on Communications (Lords) 2008: 118). The speed of this process has been no less than dizzying. This frenzied accumulation of media has many concerned because they view a conglomeration of media as

implicitly a conglomeration of power. If political power is centralized, then 'the media of communication tend to become instruments of that centralization; the uses to which the media are put reflect both the needs of the ruling group in maintaining their power and advancing their policies, and also the lines of control that run from the political center out or down to subordinate units' (Cohen 1963: 16).

Echoing the concerns of the Supreme Court in 1945, some have gone further to suggest that a monopolistic, conglomerated media, existing without diversification in ownership, allows for propaganda to thrive. After all, propaganda can only exist in accordance with a centrally controlled media system. 'As long as a large number of independent news agencies, newsreel producers, and diverse local papers function, no conscious and direct propaganda is possible' (Ellul 1969: 102). To the contrary, a concentration of ownership in the hands of a few transnational media corporations can give 'dominant firms in local markets an immense amount of power to influence critical decisions' (Cooper 2002: 6) through propaganda that only informs citizens what the dominant media firm wants them to know about. Research in support of such claims has found that after mergers take place, there is a marked level of homogenization with the parent company's historical patterns of content (Bush & Zimmerman 2010).

These kinds of results do not bode well for smaller media companies that are constantly under threat from large conglomerates. In some countries, almost all of the media companies are owned by overseas managers. For example, very few of New Zealand's media outlets are actually owned by New Zealanders. The Australian media conglomerate Fairfax Media Publications owns both of the two Sunday newspapers, *Sunday News* and *Sunday Star Times*. Only one of the six major metropolitan newspapers, the *Otago Daily Times*, is outside of major corporate control. The transnational companies, APN News and Media (ANM) and Fairfax, own 16 (72 per cent) of the 22 peripheral provincial newspapers (Industry Overview 2006). If provincial and metropolitan outlets are combined, only 8.6 per cent of all mainstream newspapers are independently owned in New Zealand (Lealand 2008). Roughly 63 per cent of daily and weekly newspaper circulation is owned by Fairfax and 28.5 per cent is owned by APN (Lealand 2008). This means that out of roughly 4.3 million people 'only about 60,000 readers still have an independent daily newspaper – 10,000 less than in 2001' (Rosenberg 2008: 2). Paul Norris, the previous head of one of the leading broadcasting training institutions in New Zealand, has argued that foreign ownership in the country is 'without parallel in the Western world' (Paul Norris 2002: 36). In fact, in New Zealand, every 'major media company in the private sector is foreign-owned' (Paul Norris 2002: 36). This is an amazing statement in a world already overrun by conglomerated media corporations.

The moral acceptance of increased consolidation that has been argued to put revenue building before newsgathering is a major contributor to the present, consolidated media marketplace. There has been 'a paradigm shift in the media sector – from a supply to a consumer-driven model' (Valcke 2009: 22). The media are now largely considered to be simply another product to be consumed and not an essential component of a healthy democracy. This shift is reflective of an overall change in attitude towards consumerism over the last half century. This change on the part of both audience members and producers has resulted in a vastly different media system, which is much more likely to respond to consumer desires than citizen initiatives.

As media conglomerates continue to grow – at last count six firms controlled most of the news, entertainment and commentary in the world – academic interest in media regulation and ownership has also intensified. Recent scholarship has argued that ownership is paramount in deciding journalism norms, behaviours and routines because it is the owners who, either directly or indirectly, have been argued to have the greatest influence over the final product (Bagdikian 2000; Chomsky 2006; Pritchard, Terry & Brewer 2008). Some have suggested that this influence on content is connected to the owner's relationship, or lack thereof, with the community. Shoemaker and Reese state that 'the greater the physical distance of the owners from the community being served, the more community interests may take a backseat to corporate and economic factors' (Shoemaker and Reese 1990b: 167). Therefore, without an undivided interest in the surrounding community, media owners are more apt to supplant consumer interests with corporate subsidies.

Researchers examining diversity in ownership argue that media owners have a critical role to play in dictating content, but because most contemporary media owners are situated outside of a wide range of audience identities, the owners produce content that most readers do not believe reflects their own interests. Women own less than 6 per cent of commercial television stations in America, while minorities own slightly more than 3 per cent (Turner & Mark 2007). The critical/cultural philosophers, Habermas and Ellul, see this lack of diversity in ownership leading to a lack of local coverage (Omachonu & Healey 2010). If the owners' identities are not intertwined with those who read their mediated texts, the owners are much more likely to opt for global, nationalized content that has already been collected rather than investing their energy and money into collecting media fare with a local angle.

This reliance on prepackaged national content has been connected directly to corporate ownership, creating a 'hegemonic expediency' across professional, conglomerated newsrooms. In one such case, 40 television stations were found to re-broadcast a Department of Health and Human Services video news release about a 2003 White House-supported Medicare law (St John III 2008). The governmental video news release was relayed as if it were genuine news, when in fact it could easily have been seen as propaganda. In this case it

was suggested that journalists 'internalized the needs of news owners' whose influence 'not only constructs the economic realities of the newsroom but also shapes how journalists perceive their range of ethical choices' (St John III 2008: 111). In doing so, reporters made ethical decisions to publish content that they knew was not created by journalists but was economically advantageous for the owners. Research such as this suggests that the interests of owners have the ability to permeate routine decisions in media organizations and are the driver of daily decision-making.

Ownership has been suggested to be paramount in deciding journalism norms, behaviours and routines because it is the owners who presumably – either directly or indirectly – have the greatest influence over the final product (Bagdikian 2000; Shoemaker & Reese 1990b). As is the case in any company, the owner can set and enforce policy. This means that the organizational level of influence can be particularly powerful in terms of resulting newspaper content. However, unpacking this influence of ownership can also be notoriously difficult. Patterns of interrelationships can eventuate in ways that are not immediately apparent. For example, when Silvio Berlusconi, the conservative leader of the centre–right coalition in Italy and president of the private television network Fininvest, was re-elected prime minister of Italy in 2001, it was found that news content on public television became more conservative (Durante & Knight 2009). This change in public television's approach may have been in response to his political rise to power purely as a prime minister or it may have been a competitive retort to his influence on the private broadcasting network he owns. It would be impossible to fully disentangle the causal relationship even though there appeared to be an indirect connection based on the ownership of Fininvest. Changes in media content after changes in ownership suggest that the owner of a media company may indeed have a relatively strong influence on content.

Homogeneity across media owners

As this review illustrates, much of the research exploring the influence of owners on media content has indeed found striking results. However, this book, like other research examining the political economy of news (i.e. McChesney 2000a), argues that simply changing owners will likely not have a dramatic influence on content. Rather, it is the entire capitalistic framework that interconnects the institution of media into a larger hegemonic system that has the most powerful influence on content (McChesney 2000a). It is this system that is intrinsically woven throughout, not only the media industry but also the entire contemporary social, political and economic environment. This fundamental state of a consumer-driven, corporate environment makes it

difficult to compare content across the media spectrum when almost all 'media outlets – even those that editorially oppose "corporate media" – are themselves corporations' (Pritchard *et al.* 2008: 2). This intrinsic corporate model of operations throughout the media spectrum is seen by some as inherently contradictory to how media should operate. However, such a corporate focus has become more accepted within media over time. Even with such widespread acceptance, the contemporary media system certainly still has its critics. In the technological rush for conglomerated efficiency in the assimilation, distribution and profiteering of news, modern conglomerated media across the entire spectrum may be sacrificing their ethical and moral core. Stated bluntly, 'efficiency and morality are a contradiction in terms' (Christians 2002: 83) that threaten the media as a whole.

The blame for a corporatized media generally falls on the mainstream, but when one examines the history and development of mainstream media, and in particular journalism, their altruistic, democratizing, investigative roots are apparent. It is undeniable that media are increasingly sensationalistic and consumer driven. However, this focus on entertainment has not always been such a central part of media content. While mainstream news media have never been particularly attentive to the issues surrounding marginalized groups, they have historically served as the watchdogs of our society – and therefore satisfied the informational demands of mainstream society. This mantra of investigative journalism dates back to the first English periodicals in the seventeenth century. *The Parliament Scout*, which first began in 1643, and *The Spie*, which rolled off the presses one year later, were both dedicated to muckraking, independent reporting. Even these names 'suggested something new in journalism – the necessity of making an effort to search out and discover the news' (Sommerville 1996: 65). Perhaps drawing from the rich tradition of muckraking journalism across the Atlantic, James Madison called for all journalism to serve as 'a bulwark of liberty' when crafting the Bill of Rights in the United States. The auspicious origins of journalism flourished until somewhat of an apex, which began at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1900, Ida Tarbell exposed the ruthless and destructive business practices of John D. Rockefeller when he served as head of the Standard Oil Corporation. This work was originally published in an 18-part series by *McClure* magazine and was later turned into a popular book. In 1906, Upton Sinclair wrote the classic novel, *The Jungle*, which exposed the brutal meatpacking plants in Chicago. Sixty-six years later, in 1972, the Watergate scandal was exposed by two intrepid reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, and resulted in the resignation of President Richard Nixon. As these examples illustrate, citizens have long been able to live within a deliberative democracy, such as this, under the assumption that mainstream news journalism served as an important check on governmental power and industry abuse. Yet much of that has changed in recent years. Drastic cutbacks in globalized conglomerate media corporations

have meant that modern journalism is now severely under-resourced, under-funded and largely unable to serve as a corrective, balancing force against power, corruption and greed. While many mainstream journalism institutions proclaim to be investigative watchdogs, most of contemporary news remain focused on lifestyle, health and celebrity entertainment with relatively little attention to areas such as national security, education, economics, the military and social welfare (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001).

The rise of a contemporary, 'trivial press' in western democracies can be traced to the establishment of a 'stable bourgeois democracy' (Bek 2004: 374), which is embedded within a capitalistic system of governance. As societies grow more democratically stable, the population slowly divorces itself from political and economic matters and the press becomes more trivial. Similarities in coverage across media outlets are then likely not as closely aligned to ownership, but to a widespread capitalistic, free-market ideology and the implicit acceptance from citizens that capitalism is needed as an intrinsic tie to democracy within western societies (Christiansen & Barnartt 1995). The omnipresent ideology of commercialism across the media spectrum problematizes the role of specific owners dictating content in either alternative or mainstream media. A more economic perspective on ownership argues that audience preferences, advertisers' financial interests, market technological capabilities and institutional profitability have a much stronger influence on content than ownership (Hamilton 2004). As businesses standardize and find more efficient modes of telling stories, content becomes more homogenized over time (Underwood 1993b). The media industry has moved to more formulaic and standardized forms of content because of economic pressures. This economic mandate to demand profitability has resulted in content that appears personalized but simply 'reflect(s) greater diversity in formatting and packaging in response to market demands' (Bennett 1996: 374–5) and not meaningful variations in content. Consumer preferences play an inordinately large role in dictating content, whereas ownership has a reduced level of influence within this broader capitalistic media system (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2010). Certainly, owners play an important role in crafting content, but it is impossible to divorce the owner from the system that she or he operates within.

A large range of research has found homogeneity across news outlets that are owned by different corporate institutions. The purpose of these studies may not have been to examine the influence of ownership models on content, but if little difference exists between media outlets owned by different corporations, one might be able to infer that ownership has actually played a minimal role in dictating coverage. For example, the three major television networks in the United States, each owned by a different parent company, all dedicated very little coverage to the genocide in Darfur – unless celebrity actors like George Clooney, Mia Farrow or Angelina Jolie dedicated their own attention to the deaths. When that happened, all three broadcasters reported on their

activities (Eke 2008). These similarities in coverage have very little to do with the owner and everything to do with the predominant corporate ideology of consumer preferences. Similar results were found by the American Progress Action Fund (2005), which examined cable news networks, CNN, MSNBC and FOX News, and found a universal dearth of information on the fighting in Sudan but extensive coverage of the Michael Jackson trial, Tom Cruise and the 'Runaway Bride'.

Other research, which has attempted to examine ownership influence directly, has found striking uniformity across varied ownership models. One recent study examined commonly owned newspapers, television stations and radio stations in three separate communities during the 2004 presidential campaign in the United States (Pritchard *et al.* 2008). These researchers found that one owner does not necessarily translate to one voice across their media ownings. In fact, they found that cross-owned media served the public interest in the same manner as independent companies and neither type of media outlet was found to be more or less 'favourable' to a particular candidate. The authors cautioned that these findings do not mean that 'media owners do not have the ability, in theory, to slant the news and opinion their newspapers, television stations, and radio stations disseminate. It is to say, however, that there is no evidence that the owners of mainstream media outlets – those that cater to broad, ideologically diverse audiences – systematically use their theoretical power to slant the news' (Pritchard *et al.* 2008: 24). This finding was echoed in still other work reporting that cross-owned broadcasting stations actually provided about 11 per cent more news programming every day than television stations that were independently owned (Shiman 2007). Further work from the Project for Excellence in Journalism examined over 23,000 stories on 154 stations and found that the news originating from stations that were cross-owned with newspapers were of a higher quality than those that did not have such an organizational structure (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2003).

There are two broad factors that have been suggested as central to a robust, democratic media: localism and diversity (Napoli 2007). Theories concerning the influence of ownership in achieving localism and diversity in news content generally fall into two categories: geographical distance from the audience and economic interests. As was briefly discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the first argument is that the more physically local the ownership and management are, the more a news outlet will pay attention to local issues (Napoli 2001). However, in an examination of 289 American television stations, it was found that 'ownership concentration does not appear to hinder or promote the provision of local public affairs programming' (Yan & Napoli 2008: 20). In fact, none of the following were found to be contributing factors to local news production in broadcasting: duopolistic ownership structure, existing as part of a larger broadcast network, location in the same geographical area of the broadcast market area or extended ownership of another broadcast station in

the same market (Napoli & Yan 2007). Further, a broadcast station's financial strength and competition within the market had been found to have a more positive effect on the amount of local broadcasting news than the geographic locality of the owner (Napoli & Yan 2007).

Another sweeping study from Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) examined phrases used by members of US Congress and then identified which phrases were then used predominantly by one political party or another. The authors then compared these phrases to content from 400 daily newspapers (representing 70 per cent of total daily US circulation) in an effort to uncover bias and potentially help to understand the role of ownership in content. For example, phrases labelled as conservative or Republican, such as 'death tax' and 'war on terror' were compared against Democratic or liberal phrases such as 'estate tax' and 'war in Iraq'. Drawing from the work of Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005), the researchers then compared circulation rates with zip codes and voting patterns and found that readers demanded newspaper content which engaged with their own personal political ideology. For example, those in predominantly Republican zip codes subscribed to newspapers that relied on Republican phrases more and those in predominantly Democratic zip codes subscribed to newspapers that relied on Democratic phrases more. When these comparisons were made in states across America, the influence of ownership largely disappeared (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2010). Here again, consumer ideology rather than the ideology of a specific owner, was the largest predictor of newspaper slant or bias.

These types of studies suggest that there is a strong demand for biased information across society, which is being met by revenue-seeking media within a competitive capitalistic environment. Biased information confirms one's own personal ideologies. Citizens support newspapers that confirm to their own beliefs. Individuals hold news outlets in higher esteem and believe they are of a higher quality if they substantiate their own prior expectations (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2010). Therefore, news outlets don't slant their reporting due to ownership dictates. Rather, newspapers slant their reporting to align with readers' previously held beliefs 'in order to build a reputation for quality' (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2006: 280) and therefore boost circulation numbers. This cycle of confirming ideologies through biased and selective information is perpetually circuitous, as an article titled 'The Self-Perpetuation of Biased Beliefs' states plainly: 'bias begets bias' (Suen 2004: 379). Each media outlet might have a particular perspective that some see as biased, but these perspectives derive from a truncated range of options on offer within a commercial media environment.

This suggests that merely examining who owns the media does not guarantee a pluralism in perspectives. Media types, legal indicators, economic factors and media genres must be considered in assessing media pluralism (Valcke 2009). This broad model of assessment, which was

prepared for the European Commission, has been called the Media Pluralism Monitor. Measurement tools such as this have helped to better understand what actually constitutes diversity in media content. It is a complicated and ambiguous descriptor (Entman & Wildman 1992) for what many consider to be the cornerstone of a democratic media system that then helps to create a well-informed citizenry. Variety, as Glasser (1984) points out, is about the raw numbers of choices available, but diversity also addresses characteristic differences. Diversity, within the larger context of a marketplace of ideas, has been deconstructed into three components: source, content and exposure (Napoli 1999). Source diversity includes diversity in ownership of programming and media outlets as well as diversity in the workforce. Content diversity deals with programme types, demographic representations and ideas or viewpoints represented. There is an assumption in regulatory policy-making that the greater the amount of source diversity there is, the greater the amount of content diversity (McChesney 2007). However, there are numerous legal challenges in the United States, highlighted by Napoli (1999), in addition to the studies reviewed here, which suggest that American policymakers have yet to demonstrate substantiated causal support for this presumed relationship.

Exposure diversity asks how much diversity in content is actually received by audiences, either horizontally across all broadcast channels, magazines or newspapers, for example, or vertically, within an individual channel, magazine or newspaper (Napoli 1999). Exposure diversity is generally the most overlooked aspect of diversity, but offers interesting insights into the 'more is more' concept of media variability and difference. Increasing underrepresented types of programmes can actually lead to a decrease in audience reception for those programme types (Wober 1989, cited in Napoli 1999). Youn (1994) also found that increasing the diversity in programme choices on cable television led to audience members significantly limiting their own exposure to those increased viewing options. It has been found that television consumers tend to stay focused on only 13 channels, no matter how many options given, which is about the same number of websites that the average Internet user will check regularly (Ferguson & Perse 2000). With all the limitless information available online, research has found that there is much more concentration of audience attention online than in other traditional forms of media with less options for content, such as television, radio and newspapers (Hindman 2007) and that focus remains clustered around well-known, institutional media outlets (Dahlberg 2005). Therefore, calls to tighten restrictions on media ownership in the context of contemporary technological advancements may not be realistic or necessary. Broadband Internet connectivity, mobile phones and social networking sites all contribute to a plurality in perspectives that was not possible in the past, whether users access this diversity in content or not.

Despite how audience members select and process content, there remains a consistent finding in ownership research that problematizes the notion of

an omnipresent owner shaping the media. The relative homogeneity found in media content is a globalized phenomenon within media dependent upon a capitalistic framework. In an examination of Argentina's print and online newspapers, Boczkowski and de Santos (2007) found that there were distinctive patterns of homogenization, or a focus on the same stories, between a specific print newspaper and its online distribution, between online newspapers, and indeed, across all print and online newspapers. Previous research has suggested that similarity in coverage is primarily due to shared patterns and processes of journalistic practice and the persistent monitoring of other media (Plasser 2005; Schudson 2003). These processes have become homogenized within a shared capitalistic framework of media outlets. The accelerated news cycle and reliance on the interconnected wire service are also recurring reasons for any homogenization of content (Rosenstiel 2005). Both of these commonly used newsgathering tactics are directly tied to economic incentives aimed to build profit from media content.

Corporately owned news

The floor has been slowly dropping on mainstream journalism for years. The Internet has certainly accelerated the rate of decline, but the relatively recent corporate model of management and ownership in journalism is the ultimate culprit. The late Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black argued in his last opinion in 1971 that 'the government's power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the government. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government' (cited in Gerhart 1998: 388). Yet the profiteering focus of news reporting has meant the press are not 'free and unrestrained', as there are very real fiscal restrictions on the types of news stories that are now told. The imposition of a business model has changed how journalism approaches investigative reporting and how we, as citizens, view journalism. It is this very perception of journalism as a business that has kept citizens from protesting the present state of news media. If modern mainstream journalism is based on a capitalistic, competitive market, then it simply must be producing what 'the people' want (McChesney 2004). In such a marketplace, the corporation is shackled to supposedly insatiable public desires that are responsible for the falling standards in modern journalism.

The power of choice by an individual citizen between news media is drastically blunted in a corporate media environment. The choices given to an average news consumer are still largely limited – even with the Internet revolution of information. Citizens choose from the relatively narrow

range of news that fills the global mainstream newshole. As they make their selections from within the news offered, the individual producers within these conglomerates are vindicated that consumers chose to read their news, rather than another outlet. But very little attention is paid to the level of commercialization within news content. Could it be that viewers actually want an entire broadsheet of advertising on page two of the newspaper? Do citizens enjoy having their 30-minute news broadcast interrupted by 8 minutes of commercials? Do these same citizens revel in the paid product placement that occurs within the news programme itself? What types of news stories exist as a whole and what interface or framework exists for exposure to news stories? The consumerism embedded within the contemporary media system has, for example, created an environment whereby the press largely ignores the failures of business but increases their coverage of government inadequacies (Croteau & Hoynes 2003). As a result of this governmental critique, commercial mass media outlets have been constructed as the 'objective' source of news, free from any hint of government propaganda – even though the media have eluded any meaningful critique of the economic forces behind societal structures, that is, the very economic forces that benefit multinational media conglomerates.

Over time, citizens inevitably develop an interest in tales of governmental largesse and what can be seen as a blatant disregard of taxpayer funding. The media conglomerates then continue their focus on governmental issues as a response to citizen demands for transparency while examinations of the private sector remain scant. This destructive cycle of commercially based news practices results in the very real dearth of meaningful fiscal reporting that preceded the economic disaster that was to come in September 2009. No investigative journalism from either the alternative or mainstream press systemically exposed the extravagance and unethical behaviour of corporations, which began the sub-prime disaster that led to billions and billions of dollars of losses from 401(k) plans, individual retirement accounts and personal savings. Such disregard for examining the economic behaviour of corporations is intrinsically tied to the vested economic interests of media companies. Executive producer of Globalvision, Danny Schechter, recently said that contemporary business reporting offers very little context or explanation because 'many of our major media companies don't operate in a world apart from these (economic) pressures' (Schechter 2006). However, many smaller, independent media are also feeling these economic pressures, perhaps even more directly than those in the mainstream media because they do not have any economic safety net that might present itself in a conglomerated ownership structure. Reductions in editorial budgets across the media spectrum result in heightened commercial pressures everywhere.

Journalism as an institution was created on behalf of the enlightenment of civil society. Without an informed citizenry, 'the cost to society in the form of ignorant, lousy governance, and less fulfilled individuals arguably is immensely

high, economically, culturally, and politically' (McChesney 2004: 204). The converse is also true. Provocative, investigative journalism informs society and produces positive externalities – informed citizens who have valuable input in policy, business and local governance. However, a commercially focused, multinational conglomerate media system is not capable of generating these positive externalities as they run counter to the mission and purpose of their existence. Any for-profit business must have its economic returns as the fundamental focus of everyday operations. Commercially minded alternative and mainstream media are no different. Economic incentives drive operational behaviour and resulting content.

With very little funding and a mandate that has moved away from citizen issues, media increasingly respond to easy entertainment stories rather than investigative work. David Simon (2009), a reporter from *The Washington Post*, provides a devastating illustration of what can happen when journalism no longer has the resources to cover the news nor the inclination to expose corruption. Simon recalls 20 years prior when he reported on crime in Baltimore and relied on judges to support his right for information when confronting a recalcitrant police force. He recounts how the police feared the press and their power to report corruption. In a blatant example of weak journalism, he highlights a recent case of a police officer who shot a citizen and no major alternative or mainstream press covered the story. He eloquently writes, 'In an American city, a police officer with the authority to take human life can now do so in the shadows, while his higher-ups can claim that this is necessary not to avoid public accountability, but to mitigate against a nonexistent wave of threats. And the last remaining daily newspaper in town no longer has the manpower, the expertise or the institutional memory to challenge any of it' (Simon 2009: B01). He points out that the failure was not only on the part of mainstream media but also on the part of the blogging community and citizen journalism. All ignored a subject that should be of vital interest to citizens. Simon (2009) cites the media conglomerate profiteering of the 80s and 90s, the self-destruction of newspapers with the rise of the Internet, and the commercial mandate embedded within the entire media spectrum, as the responsible agents for the present meltdown in journalistic responsibility.

As this example illustrates, the conglomerated ownership model within a capitalistic media environment has huge implications for resulting news content. Commercialism influences not only what stories are told but how they are told as well. As Carragee and Roefs (2004) have argued, there is a relationship between media frames and 'broader issues of political and social power' (2004: 214). It is the endemic capitalistic structure of media frame sponsors and those within the media who frame content. Although capitalism has been implicated as a central component to ownership influence, academic scholarship has largely overlooked comparisons in ownership models of community newspapers. This is an important omission as community newspapers, in particular, play a very credible

(Armstrong & Collins 2009) and important role in individuals' understanding of their immediate social political world (Glascock 2004). If corporate ownership influences content through propaganda, a lack of attention to local issues and homogenous representations of what is most certainly a diverse world replete with distinctively different peoples, ideas and perspectives, then this would likely have a profound impact on how citizens engage with and understand their own community networks and local political decision-making. Small, independent community newspapers and websites are slowly disappearing in the rush for conglomeration. The influence of ownership in the mainstream press, while decidedly complex, has received the overwhelming bulk of attention in academic scholarship, but little is known about the extent of corporate ownership into community media and the kind of resulting content that citizens receive about the political decisions being made in their own neighbourhoods.

A study of webpage ownership versus content

This study examines two randomly selected online community news websites owned by News Corporation and two online community news sites within the same geographical region that are independently owned. This resulted in *The Brooklyn Paper*, which is owned by News Corporation that manages the Community Newspaper Group, which runs *The Brooklyn Paper, Bronx Times-Reporter, Brooklyn Courier-Life* and the *Queens Time Ledger*. The second community newspaper owned by News Corporation that was included in this study was the *Melbourne Leader*, which is one of a consortium of 33 suburban papers in Melbourne that are all owned by the media conglomerate. The independent community newspapers used for inclusion in this study were found through Google searches for 'independent community newspapers' in both Brooklyn and Melbourne. In the case of Brooklyn, *Brooklyn Eagle* appeared to be the only independent news site in the area that was published in English, so it was included for this study. It is owned by a local publisher J. Dozier Hasty, who also publishes the *Bay Ridge Eagle*. *The Dandenong Star* was the Melbourne news site included in this study. It is owned by Star News Group, which is an independent family newspaper company in the Melbourne region that runs 23 community newspapers in the area and is the main competition to the News Corporations *Leader* community newspapers. The only other listing in the first 20 Google results for 'independent community newspaper in Melbourne' that was not part of the *Leader* newspapers or the Star News Group news sites was for the *Melbourne Observer*, which did not have an online component and therefore was not suitable for study.

Content was collated by creating a randomized constructed week. Coders selected content over a period of 7 weeks and each week they gathered content

on a different day of the week (i.e. during week 1, they gathered content on Monday; during week 2, they gathered content on Tuesday etc.). It was determined at the beginning of the study that 10 randomly selected articles would be chosen from each website on each day of analysis. This number was selected because in some cases, these websites did not have more than 10 new articles on their pages for the day. This methodological approach resulted in 280 articles; however, 20 articles were removed because it was found that in the randomized selection process, these pages were included but they were not actually articles. Each article from these four websites was the unit of analysis for study. The qualitative content analysis was completed with two coders who were asked to examine variables drawn from previous research examining influences on media content. After reviewing the literature, 20 variables were created for examination.

An uncertain influence

The relationship between the type of media (mainstream or alternative) and interest towards elites and non-elites was significant. The most pronounced value difference was that mainstream community content was found to be of interest to both elites and non-elites far more than would be expected by chance alone. Sixty-four per cent of mainstream content was found to be of interest to both elites and non-elites, whereas alternative community content was statistically much less likely to produce content of interest to both elites and non-elites. Mainstream media relied on non-elite sources more than would be expected by chance alone and relied on sources without specific citation far less than would be expected by chance.

One of the many examples of content that was found to be of interest to both elites and non-elites came from the corporately owned *Melbourne Leader*, which discussed a proposed revamp for a Melbourne market on 6 December 2010. The article asked locals in the headline to 'have your say'. The text quoted Councillor Peter Clarke who detailed his plans for the changes, but also outlined how the development could impact the local community through 'increased traffic'. A local neighbourhood representative said, 'any overhaul should be respectful of the market's heritage', to which a government councillor responded that there would be 'a lot more green open space'. There was extensive discussion in the article of a 'public–private partnership' in developing the market and repeated statements that councillors are seeking citizen's input into the project. The article ends by stating, 'Do you support a major revamp of the Queen Victoria Market? Tell us below'. However, there were no stated comments left from citizens concerning the project.

A contrasting example comes from the independent *Brooklyn Eagle*, in an article titled 'Marty Presses for an Apple Store There' on 6 December 2010.

The article reviews New York City's Request for Proposal to turn two floors of a municipal building into retail outlets featuring an Apple Store. Borough President Marty Markowitz is quoted as saying it is 'one of the best retail locations in the city'. Without citation, the reporters state 'the building is served by 14 subway lines and many bus lines, making it an ideal location'. Assemblywoman Joan Millman is ebullient when she is quoted as saying that the project is the 'apple of my eye' – clearly drawing a metaphorical comparison to the Apple retail store. There is no investigative discussion as to the repercussions of such development and no consideration of how citizens might respond to this new retail centre except for one mention at the end of the article, which reads that Deputy Mayor for Operations Stephen Goldsmith stated 'we have at least 1,000 empty desks in the city's offices ... it wouldn't be difficult to find space for the displaced employees'. The possibility of the impact on citizens is dismissed as quickly as it was raised.

A near majority of content was found to have no propaganda present. The relationship between outlets and propaganda was significant with mainstream community sites addressing citizen and government concerns equally more often than would be expected by chance alone. Mainstream community media was also much less likely than alternative sites to create content that could not be viewed as either pro- or anti-propagandistic. An example of rather anti-propagandistic coverage comes from the *Melbourne Leader*, which led on 23 December 2010 with the headline 'East Melbourne Bike Lanes' Costs Adding Up'. The article uses terms like 'splash' to describe how money was spent, suggesting that fiscal responsibility was decidedly lax and the government was at fault for such reckless spending. No quotes were drawn from individuals who supported the bike lanes, which were described as 'cuckoo' by one person. The article states that 'many local businesses and residents remain unhappy with the design' and one citizen called the project 'absurd'. There was no instance at all of a bike rider who perhaps was satisfied with the project. In this instance, citizens are decidedly unhappy with government actions and the local newspaper is utilized as a conduit for that dissatisfaction. No emphasis is made to better understand the reasoning why the government decided to fund these bike lanes. This repeated distance between those against the bike lanes and government representatives may 'suggest preoccupations within the particular discursive context, and which therefore add up to a representation of the world for a culture or for a group which holds status within a culture' (Matheson 2005: 22). In this instance, the (absurd, cuckoo) government holds far weaker status than those who have an obvious reasoned stance against the lanes and therefore stronger social status within their community.

Coverage that was coded as heavily favouring the government, or propaganda, was found on 2 December 2010 in a *Dandenong Star* article titled 'Mayor Makes Good'. The piece restates that the mayor is 'thrilled at the prospect of a new civic precinct', which would have 'huge environmental benefits as its

five-star energy rating would reduce greenhouse gas emissions'. The article is exclusively complementary with no counterpoint to the possible environmental costs of building in the first place, or the merits of the project itself.

Almost all of the media sampled for this study had advertising present on their sites yet almost none had requests for donations. The content itself was generally seen to not address commercial concerns directly. However, the relationship between media outlet and commercial concerns remained significant with mainstream media outlets equally addressing commercial and individual concerns more than would be expected by chance alone. Also, mainstream outlets had fewer articles seen as not applicable to commercial interests than would be expected by chance. On 22 December 2010, Alex Rush from *The Brooklyn Paper* wrote that 'Brooklyn leads the "chain" gang' referring to the 1,330 corporate stores within Brooklyn. The article begins quite positively in regards to chain ownership expansion stating that the area has '43 million subway riders each year, 150,000 shoppers … any national retailer that doesn't set up here is missing a great opportunity'. The reporter relies upon this quote that highlights the inherent mutual benefits of chains to a community. The choices available to the retailer are few because there is an obvious gain to be made here. If chain retailers do not open up their shops, then they would obviously *miss* an *opportunity*. Therefore, the benefits are clear and must be taken. There is no actual other choice. The reporter goes on to cite opinion polls showing widespread support for a proposed Walmart store in the area, but then quickly changes the articles' tone when he notes that there is resistance 'from the mom and pop businesspeople they shove aside'. Here, the choice to state that these businesspeople are *shoved* aside demonstrates how social forces engage the text (Hodge & Kress 1993). Within any news text, there are limitless linguistic options available for description. Yet some are inevitably chosen more than others. These discursive approaches are used, presumably, for a news outlet to relate better to their audience (Reah 2002). If that is the case in this example, then the linguistic choices are purposive and telling. The article began with positive coverage of the financial benefits that these national chains bring to the local economy. However, the article ends with a statement from Sal Casaccio whose independent pizzeria was evicted to make space for a national burger chain. He states, 'chain stores can't outdo true Brooklyn mom-and-pop service'.

The relationship between media outlet and original content was highly significant with alternative community media drawing on content already reported elsewhere much more than would be expected by chance. Alternative community media regurgitated content from both mainstream and independent source relatively evenly, but with slightly more content coming from other mainstream sources. Nearly half of independent community media content did not have a byline on the article, so it was impossible to ascertain if the reporter was relied upon repeatedly for content or if the story was the product of a

unique, individual reporting effort. A stated reporter beat was far more likely to be found in the mainstream press than the independent media sampled.

A near majority of content across these community websites was found to be focused on public issues. Investigative content was more likely to be found in mainstream community media, and mainstream media were far more likely to report issues thematically over a long period of time. Independent media were more likely to have content that was largely superficial or episodic. It is important to note that independent media were more likely to report stories where the time of origin was unknown, but far less likely to report stories that were obviously thematic and over a prolonged period. A sample of investigative pieces includes the history of murder-suicides in the Windsor Terrace community; the possibility of dredging Gravesend Bay where unexploded bombs have been since 1954; the debate between charter schools and state education in Fort Greene; how graffiti-art, and tagging, has grown within the Melbourne city district; and the history of how a Brooklyn neighbourhood has come to memorialize a horrific plane accident in 1960. However, superficial/episodic content, rather than in-depth/thematic content, was the most likely type of content found (75.8 per cent) overall across all media types.

There was no relationship between an emphasis on local content or corporate interests embedded into content and outlet type. This was because a strong majority of all content was overwhelmingly local in its focus across the sample. The consistency of coverage was evident in how many media stories were found across a variety of outlets and the mentions of social movements in media content. Further, content that might be more applicable to minorities was also found to be insignificant and very consistent across the sample, with an almost equal weighting across mainstream and independent sources.

The bias of a media outlet was much more apparent in the mainstream press than in independent media. The independent press were more likely to have their opinion be 'not obvious' in articles than the mainstream press. This relationship was highly significant. Bias was found when evocative language was used outside of direct quotes or when one particular perspective was highlighted repeatedly through sources and quotes without any meaningful counterpoint raised.

Repeated invitations to communicate were more likely within the mainstream press than independent media, whose instances of repeated invitations to communicate were so low that adjusted residual scores could not be generated. Mainstream media were also more likely to have the standard format for feedback, such as comments to the author, than independent media. Independent media were far more likely to have no invitation at all for readers to communicate than the mainstream press, whose instances of no invitations to communicate were too low to calculate adjusted residual scores.

Independent media were more likely to present no sensationalism than the mainstream press, which were statistically much more likely to rely on

sensationalistic reporting techniques than independent media. However, overall, a majority of all of media content had some level of sensationalism detected. Examples of sensationalism abounded across the media spectrum. One such example was found on 19 January 2011 in an article titled '"Tobacco" Woes! Suit Says State Lied to Feds to Privatize Park Warehouse'. This headline alone suggests a high degree of sensationalism in content. The use of an exclamation point and the word 'lied' are both highly evocative discursive choices designed to shock the reader and hopefully sustain their attention long enough to read the entire article. As Matheson (2005) has argued, there are a range of possible vocabulary items that can always be otherwise utilized. For example, this headline would have strikingly different emotive results if written as 'Lawsuit Alleges Misconduct in Park Warehouse Privatization'.

This study, much like the other case studies highlighted in this text, suggests that what we generally hold to be truths about alternative and mainstream media need to be reconsidered. In this examination of a constructed week of online content between two community sites – one set owned by media conglomerate Rupert Murdoch and the other set owned by independent owners – much of the previously accepted research surrounding the distinctions between alternative and mainstream media was refuted. Before reviewing these conclusions, it is important to state that an obvious limitation of this study is its small sample size. Much more work, which examines a larger body of content, is needed to examine remaining differences and overlapping similarities between alternative and mainstream media. However, this nascent research further problematizes previous studies which define alternative media by its distance from the mainstream. In many cases, the distance between the two forms of media was non-existent and in others, mainstream media actually swung in a direction opposite to what research would suggest.

In relation to alternative media, mainstream media presented content that was more balanced between elites and non-elites, with a higher reliance on non-elite sources. Mainstream media relied more on coverage that was balanced between citizen and government concerns, seen as neither pro- nor anti-propagandistic, and balanced between commercial and individual concerns. Mainstream media were more likely than the alternative press in this sample to produce content originating from a reporter on a repeated 'beat' and rely on investigative reporting with thematic coverage. Mainstream media also produced more bias in coverage and sensationalism as well as repeated invitations to communicate. In relation to mainstream media, alternative media presented content that was more lopsided in balance between elites and non-elites, with a higher reliance on elite sources. Alternative media relied more on sources without citation, content that was originally created elsewhere, superficial reporting practices and episodic coverage. Alternative media were also more likely than the mainstream press to be non-biased and non-sensational. However, they also had almost no meaningful invitations to communicate with their readers. Both mainstream and alternative community

media relied heavily on advertising, yet almost none addressed commercial concerns directly in content. A near majority of all content focused on public, local issues and there was no difference between the alternative and mainstream press in regards to mentions of social movements or applicability to minorities.

When these results are collated and compared with the completed narrative analysis, an ideological identity emerges which is quite distinct from the commonly held didactic positions of corporate versus independent positioning. All of the media in this sample re-presented the cultural value of localism as a 'unity of experience and action' (Atkinson 2006: 260). This alone would represent a unique finding among the literature examining mainstream and alternative media. However, it was the mainstream press that expanded both communal and individual responses to progressive, participatory action. Mainstream community media urged communication with readers and depended more on personalized, native reporting that relied on self-disclosure – a key quality of alternative media as defined by previous scholars. The producers of these mainstream community outlets drew upon investigative, thematic reporting and non-elitist perspectives to create narrative fragments that supported a non-corporate ideology.

It is important to highlight that some aspects of a commercial ideology were more readily present in mainstream community media, such as bias and sensationalism. However, that was overshadowed with the conflation of findings across both alternative and mainstream media and the distinctly 'independent' ideologies constructed within the narrative fragments of the mainstream press. The motives for such an ideology remain unclear. Within a capitalistic system, one cannot discount a financial imperative, which would suggest that, at least in regards to community media, independent ideologies may 'sell' better and are therefore celebrated by the mainstream press. Mainstream media have historically been far better at discovering hidden markets and finding unique communication models to exploit them. The evidence of independent ideologies in mainstream community media may simply represent accurate market research on the part of the mainstream. That possibility must be considered given that this study was confined only to community media and any conclusions cannot be made outside of this realm. However, this nascent research does suggest that further study is needed to examine the complicated, and at times, contradictory media spectrum as well as the contested role of ownership in dictating the differences between alternative and mainstream media.

8

Defining Media through Ideological Influences

Media both perpetuate identities to the public and are receptors of an ideology created and sustained within society. Media do not only send ideological messages out to the public but media systems are also interwoven into the ideological framework of society. Media also have their greatest influence on individuals over time. Through repeated exposure, media can have an influence on personal values, identity and beliefs (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach & Grube 1984). These values, identity and beliefs are undoubtedly reinforced by external inputs, such as friends, family, schools, teachers and other institutional forces in society. However, media play a 'significant role in shaping people's values and value orientation in contemporary society. Media content may articulate a value, demonstrate its applications, and foster a cultural environment for its adoption as a preferred standard for social comparison' (Paek & Pan 2004: 495). These social comparisons lead to ideological changes within individuals, communities and nations but at a glacially slow pace. One viewing of a hip-hop music video will not change how an individual views women, but a decade of watching this genre of music videos may have a profound impact on how a person thinks of the female sex. Cultivation theory (Gerbner 1969) argues that through long-term exposure to media, a cumulative effect begins to actually shape a person's views of social reality. Since Gerbner's (1969) groundbreaking research, there have been countless studies that have found mitigating factors against the cultivation of beliefs and attitudes through the media, but none have found that the cultivation effect does not exist. Research exploring cultivation theory has argued that such a long-term analysis of media effects can also help to explain actual behavioural changes and not just shifts in beliefs and attitudes that may occur over time (Entman 2004; Powlick & Katz 1998).

One's view of the world, or one's ideology, is formed through a network of life experiences and interactions within a myriad of social institutions, of which media play a central role. Individuals begin to shape their own ideologies by learning about the world, in part, through media frames. There are conscious and unconscious behaviours on the part of frame sponsors – and those that assemble these frames – that work to create frames in media content. These frames are not created in a social, cultural or political vacuum. They are

contested and formed by groups, such as social movements, politicians, business owners, organizations and the media themselves (Gamson & Modigliani 1989). However, in attempting to examine an ideological arc in the media, framing contests normally favour political elites (Kellner 1990; Tuchman 1978). This reliance on elites generally can be traced to journalistic practices that are drawn to frame sponsors with significant resources (Carragee & Roefs 2004). It is important not to overstate the role that media workers have in assembling content, but they are the receptors for competing frames from a variety of sources. These sources are generally tied to capitalistic structures that favour media conglomerates and therefore are more likely to be published. Unless there is a notable and obvious reason to counter hegemonic media practices (Kensicki 2001a), content throughout the media spectrum tends to favour those with power (Atton & Wickenden 2005).

In addition to favouring those with power, the media have been said to encourage a sense of distanced apathy or a lack of individual efficacy (Gamson *et al.* 1992), otherwise defined as a person's belief that she or he can affect political and social events by individual efforts (Bandura 1986). This media-induced political disaffection has been said to put democracy itself at risk (Crotty & Jacobson 1980). There is deep cynicism towards the political system (Caldwell 2006; Capella & Jamieson 1997), widespread lack of caring about the political process (Weintraub Austin & Pinkleton 1995), and a relatively low voter turnout rate (McDonald 2008), which is generally exacerbated by negative political candidate media campaigns (Ansolabehere, Behr & Iyengar 1993) or political horse-race news coverage (Capella & Jamieson 1997). Some of the cynicism in America at least may have given way with the euphoric rise of US President Barack Obama, but voter turnout during his election campaign still did not surpass the 'high' of 63.1 per cent in the Richard Nixon vs John F. Kennedy presidential election campaign of 1960 ('National Voter Turnout in Federal Elections: 1960–2008' 2008). Gamson *et al.* summed up much of the research in this area when they said that 'the media generally operate in ways that promote apathy, cynicism, and quiescence, rather than active citizenship and participation' (Gamson *et al.* 1992: 373). This apathetic ideology has been detected in news media content, which rarely discusses the cause of problems, who are affected by those problems and who is responsible to help solve these social problems (Kensicki 2004). News coverage, such as this, creates an ideological disconnect between problems in society and actual ramifications.

Within the hierarchical model of influences on newspaper content, ideology is the outermost and most comprehensive level of influence. Ideology can be better thought of as a 'relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs, of a kind that can be abstracted as a "world view" or "class outlook"' (Williams 1977). The concept of an ideological form of influence assumes that all the previous levels of influences are actually working together towards 'an ideologically related pattern of messages and on behalf of the

higher power centres in society' (Shoemaker & Reese 1996). Whereas the direction and power of the previous influences remain contestable, a dominant ideology subsumes all other influences on media content. It is at this level that it is important to question who ultimately benefits from certain routines or organizational policies? How are individual identities influenced and created by broader social ideologies? How is the structure of media ownership influenced ideologically? These are very difficult questions to disentangle and require comprehensive, longitudinal studies. But these questions are important to consider when one examines media and their role in society.

Media are more the result of cultural influences (Gitlin 1980; Hall *et al.* 1978) than any objective embodiment of reality, and these cultural influences coalesce to create an ideological perspective over time. The omnipresent cultural and ideological influences on media have led some to believe that mainstream journalism, for example, simply cannot serve its democratic function in society (Tuchman 1978). Media cannot exist outside of ideological constraints and pressures and therefore are constitutive of that very same ideology they re-present. For example, it has been found that the media have constructed an ideology that works against citizenship (Hwang *et al.*: 462). In re-presenting governmental activities through governmental sources, the media actually work to align the public with elites (Luther & Miller 2005; McLeod & Hertog 1999). The government, via the media, can reinforce dominant views and potentially reduce any potential for dissent (Crotty & Jacobson 1980; Dionne 1991). This creates a climate whereby media can induce disaffection (Capella & Jamieson 1997). It is undeniable that there is a deep cynicism towards politics (Dionne 1991), a declining faith in democratic institutions (Pinkleton & Austin 2004) and a lack of interest in the political process (Ansolabehere *et al.* 1993). All of these social indicators increase after exposure to media coverage of a political candidate (Hart 1994) or horse-race political coverage (Merskin 1999). Again, however, the path that an individual reader might take to accept any ideological implications behind media content is by no means simple. Given that media exist within a largely cynical, apathetic society, one can't be certain who caused the other to take on such an ideology.

Often, media users may find themselves in disagreement with certain perspectives uncovered in media content. When that occurs, those with oppositional readings to media turn to other sources to find perspectives that align better with their own (Festinger 1957). Individuals with particularly high levels of disassociation with the media will frequently experience feelings of dissonance (D'Alessio & Allen 2002). These people then make individual media selections that align with their own views and support their own perspectives (Shah *et al.* 2001). Therefore, on the individual level, acceptance of media messages can often be refuted or assimilated within p reviously held beliefs and not immediately accepted as part of one's own reality. This does not refute the systemic ideological biases embedded within all media (Herman & Chomsky 1988).

At the macro-level, one can see ideological consistency throughout society and across media outlets.

Commercialism

Habermas (1984) argued that modern media have contributed to the demise of a deliberative, vibrant public sphere, which existed during the Enlightenment. It was this sphere, Habermas asserts, which helped make parliamentary democracy possible. After much debate and deliberation, these interactive public spheres developed into a democratically driven public opinion. However, the public sphere collapsed under the weight of a bureaucratic industrial society embedded within state-organized capitalism that dictated control of a commercialized mass media (Kellner 2006). As the media shifted into a consumable product, rather than a tool for public discussion, the public sphere began its decline. Habermas argued that as this decline took root in society, individuals began developing consumerist and instrumental substitutes for participatory democracy.

The presence of commercialism within media and social ideology did not emerge as a potent cultural force immediately. There has been 'hidden advertising' in newspapers as far back as the nineteenth century (Baldasty 1992). In hindsight, these subversive marketing techniques were the first indicators of a burgeoning commercial media system. However, it wasn't until perhaps the 1970s that newspapers finally grasped the centrality that advertising would have in increasing their continually declining profit margins (Underwood 1993a). The commercial change in newsrooms was accelerated as masters of business administration (MBAs) moved into media managerial roles throughout the 1980s (Underwood 1993a). The result of these commercial changes is an environment where editorial content is aimed to be directly of use to users within the consumerist system – stories about consumer choices and issues are deemed to be important to consumers (Kunelius & Ruusunoksa 2008). Indeed, in the past few decades, there has been an explosion of non-news editorial content (Picard 1998).

Within a commercial marketplace, whether that be in mainstream media or the alternative press, 'quality and value are defined by consumers' and media maintain a hyper-reflexive 'responsiveness to consumers'. Media must offer immediate 'self-correction' according to customer desires. They must operate, however, within an environment of 'freedom of choice' (McManus 1994: 4, 5). These are the qualities that define a commercial media marketplace. If there is competition that depends on economic incentives, these qualities will be present. In the newsroom, these commercial qualities herald 'a move away from reliance on craft norms defining what is newsworthy and how to report,

toward a journalism based on serving the marketplace' (McManus 1995: 301). Contemporary journalism is now situated within the confines of a commercial media system whereby 'market concerns now determinate operation and content' (Picard 2004: 54). Entertaining story elements take precedence over objectivity, accuracy and relevance (Allern 2002). The news, in particular, is now 'packaged' (Kunelius & Ruusunoksa 2008), rather than relayed. There is much more attention on aesthetics and visual content in order to please the reader and hopefully gain audience share. This does not only occur in mainstream media but also across the mediated spectrum where outlets fight for attention in a highly visual and competitive marketplace.

Consumerist ideology in the media also translates to heavy editorial use of market research (Høst 1986, cited in Rolland 2006) to explicitly, and with a singular focus, attempts to satisfy consumer demand (Beam 2003). In doing so, the traditional craft norms of journalism – who, what, where, when, why – are exchanged for 'Who cares about a particular piece of information? What are they willing to pay to find it, or what are others willing to pay to reach them? Where can media outlets or advertisers reach these people? When is it profitable to provide the information? Why is it profitable?' (Hamilton 2004: 7). It may be that consumerism in media also leads to innovation of information (Rolland 2006), but the quality of that information largely remains at only 'adequate' levels in terms of citizenship needs (Graber 2004). Here, there is an obvious argument that alternative media answer questions not asked or ignored in the mainstream press; however, their own commercial pressures necessitate a consumer mandate if they require a profitable return. Those consumer mandates may differ from those in some corners of mainstream media, but they nonetheless remain.

Commercialization has many residual effects on media content. One of the more pressing effects is the increased power of politicians over journalists. However, commercial influences also result in more sensationalistic approaches to journalism and a reliance on entertainment as news (Thussu 2002). This trend towards celebrity and idolatry has reached almost every corner of the developed world. For example, Indian newspapers, such as the *Hindustan Times* and *The Times of India*, have seen remarkable increases in sensational coverage over the past decade (Mishra 2007). In a keynote address to the Press Council of India, the chair of that organization stated without reservation that 'we have commercialized and we have trivialized news' (Ray 2006).

In addition to a steadfast focus on entertainment, commercialization of the media also contributes to content that is largely from the perspective of investors and those with personal financial interests, than from average citizens. Research has found that during the financial crisis that peaked in September 2008 the entire media system failed to probe the global financial institution because of its prolonged entanglement with financial and political elites who played a major role in dictating positive (and false) financial content

(Marron 2010). Again, there may have certainly been a few outlets from within the mainstream and alternative press that signalled some concern with the financial industry, but there was no widespread, systemic condemnation of unethical financial practices from across the entire media spectrum. Just before the collapse, world media was fixated on Kerstin Fritzl's emergence from an induced coma after suffering multiple organ failure in the cellar of her captor's home. The sensational topic of the Austrian incest captor and rapist, Joseph Fritzl, was heavily reported and relentlessly discussed in media outlets, ranging from mainstream ABC Online to the more alternative Earth Times. While this case was no doubt fascinating, the ramifications of the horrific crimes were limited to a select unfortunate few, whereas the financial crisis had a strong global impact that was difficult to measure. Both alternative and mainstream media remained fixated on this sensational topic, albeit to different degrees, because it attracted the attention of fickle readers who have thousands of media choices.

Economic goals gain primacy if the organizational structure and internal policies are oriented towards revenue building and commercialism. Given that stockholders own most media firms, the pressure to maximize profit in exchange for increased share prices is an obvious pressure on content. In August 2008, Fairfax told the Australian Stock Exchange that it would be cutting 550 jobs from its Australian and New Zealand newspapers. This meant a much larger reliance on outsourcing and rotating employment rosters between newspapers that are owned by Fairfax. Attributing the cuts to loses in advertising revenue, the announcement was titled 'Business Improvement Program' and caused Fairfax shares to jump 14 cents on the news (Overington & Lyons 2008). The main constraints on media are no longer political but are economic, commercial interests (Croteau & Hoynes 2001). The economic influence that 'most endangers independent media content is the diminution of the border that separates journalism from advertising' (Harro-Loit & Saks 2006: 312). These relatively smaller media markets are particularly at risk to the intervention of advertising and related promotional interests into media content.

One example of the tension between advertising and content comes from *Mother Jones*. *Mother Jones* is an investigative, non-profit, alternative news magazine that has been publishing 'smart, fearless journalism' (*Mother Jones* 2010) for over 30 years. *Mother Jones* has consistently won major accolades for its investigative work. The magazine itself operates with about half of revenue deriving from subscriptions, advertising and over-the-counter sales. The remaining half is principally from individual donations and foundations. Like most media outlets, *Mother Jones* has seen a recent decrease in revenue, which has led to a reconsideration of operational approach and content. Its CEO Steven Katz said, 'Last year we sat down with editorial and talked about how to extend what we're doing in ways that would appeal to funders' (Katz cited

in Miner 2009). While Katz denies that foundations dictate content, others argue that in many ways advertisers are easier to keep at arm's length than foundations that are investing in opportunities that they believe will have a social impact (Miner 2009). As one critic writes, 'Advertisers spend money to make money. Foundations spend money to make the world a better place, and they deliberate long and hard about how to do that' (Miner 2009). If a foundation feels that its contributions are not generating the kind of return it had hoped for, it will agitate for change or simply pull its donation. This results in a situation where a non-profit, alternative magazine, such as *Mother Jones*, feels the same kinds of commercial pressures, albeit from non-profit entities, as for-profit news magazines, such as *The Listener*.

In 2009, on the eve of the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit, the interim CEO of *Mother Jones*, Steven Katz, announced that media outlets such as *The Atlantic, Wired, ProPublica, Grist* and *Slate* would collaborate their efforts in reporting from the conference. This decision was driven by economic incentives to share resources and increase profits, and does little to highlight the diverse range of opinions reporting from such an important summit. Rather, a collaboration such as this reduces those viewpoints to a select few who are sent on behalf of the consortium to report events. In 2005, *Mother Jones* had embarked on a similar collaboration with a group of Chicago-based independent media titled Media Consortium. As their website states, the consortium aims to increase their 'collective clout, leverage our current audience and reach new ones' (The Media Consortium 2011). They create a yearly report titled 'The Big Thaw' aimed at assisting alternative media. However, Tony Deifell, author of 'The Big Thaw', wondered aloud on the Media Consortium website whether 'what they've created is too pragmatic to be called "progressive," and whether "inclusivity" and "fairness" and a desire for "politically diverse conversations" should lead them to stop trying "to articulate political stances altogether"' (Diefell cited in Miner 2009). In their efforts to increase revenue share, individual contributors inevitably soften or homogenize their message to amalgamate within the collective whole. This process is mirrored in the revenue-building takeover efforts of media conglomerates and their smaller, recently purchased media outlets that must assimilate within the collective. The degree of change required might differ between for-profit and non-profit entities, but the economic necessity behind such collaborative decisions remains the same and has an influence on content across the mediated spectrum.

Collaboration not only allows for shared resources on the part of the media outlet but it also opens possibilities for advertisers who demand reduced rates for multimedia advertising insertions. Technology allows for such multi-platform reach at a personal level. Technological advances have left the public more vulnerable to 'entrepreneurs to appropriate our personal relationships in order to deliver more personalized advertising' (Baym 2009: 722). Technological

development has shifted democratic, public newsgroup sites, for example, into 'proprietary systems such as social networking sites, virtual worlds, and massively multiplayer games in which the users have few rights and limited, if any, ownership of their contributions' (Baym 2009: 722). In some sense, citizens attending to media across the spectrum have become modern indentured servants, generating content for media corporations that will then be profiteered through advertising with no direct economic compensation in return.

Advertising rates charged to companies are calculated based on the number of audience members who can be reached – commonly referred to as 'cost per thousand'. This circuitous relationship indicates that higher advertising rates are beneficial for all involved: advertisers reach more consumers and newspapers get more money to publish their material. However, this reliance on advertising means that higher income audiences are targeted as they are the most attractive to potential advertisers, given that they have more money to spend. An examination of the five daily broadsheets in the United Kingdom – the *Financial Times, The Times, The Telegraph, The Independent* and the *Guardian* – found that these newspapers are predominantly read by the upper classes of England or by those that make-up about 20 per cent of the population (Richardson 2007). Advertisers find the wealthiest classes as particularly desirable consumers (Gandy Jr. 2000), and media content reflects that interest. There are certainly a few media targeted towards middle-income earners, but there are almost none directed to the lower socio-economic classes because of their relatively small consumer purchasing capacity. This is the case for both commercially minded alternative and mainstream media.

The social relationships that characterize most developed societies around the world are all fundamentally structured around the same basic capitalistic tenets (Richardson 2007). Such global uniformity in structural approaches means that certain claims can be made about the practices of production and how societies are then divided into classes by their economic position in relation to that production process. This means that the principal goal of a capitalistic enterprise around the world is to earn money by selling something in return for the product. Society, or the market in this case, is then divided up according to the money that is available to make purchases. This model of capitalistic exchange is imperative for all modern media. If an audience is purely seen as consumers, then a media outlet itself must be made attractive to them. In order to appeal to a specific market, content is often directed squarely at our most base desires – humour, voyeurism, scandal and fear. Of course, individuals are not all attracted to the same types of stories, and often we are driven by very specific kinds of informational needs. The capitalistic market quickly accounts for this and efficiently aggregates smaller groups into market clusters based on specific kinds of information and calls this process audience fragmentation. This process results in specialty magazines based on individual interests, such

as *Tu Mai*, touted as 'New Zealand's leading indigenous magazine'; *White Fungus*, an experimental arts magazine from Wellington and *Pacific Wings*, a Christchurch-based aviation magazine.

While audience fragmentation is the result of a wide range of media options available to the individual consumer, audience segmentation is when media producers try to group consumers in very specific ways in an attempt to increase advertising revenue. This 'top-down' process keeps advertisers' interests at the forefront and groups audiences according to their economic class alone. Producers create content according to what they think audiences *might* be attracted to – in accordance with advertisers' or foundation interests. In this model, what becomes much more important is the buying power of the audience as a commodity and not their individual interests as media consumers. Segmented audiences for magazines with very small subscription rates but very large personal incomes are highly valued by advertisers who are keen to have a high return on their investment. As an example, *The Listener* reports that 62 per cent of its readers have investments, 24 per cent have household incomes over NZ$100,000 and 31 per cent are university graduates ('The Listener Reader Profile' 2008). That is why *The Listener* can charge NZ$13,900 for a double-page spread that reaches just 41,000 subscribers.

Commercialism is obviously evident in the funding models of mainstream media. Yet the depths of commercialism largely remain unexplored – merely accepted within modern society. In 2005, T-Mobile paid Catherine Zeta Jones a multimillion dollar contract to endorse its product through TV and print advertisements; Brad Pitt earned US$2 million from Heineken for starring in a commercial aired only once during the Super Bowl; Tiger Woods made US$75 million from endorsements in 2005 alone (Sirak 2006; Soriano 2005; Wenn 2006). The numbers are not only astronomical but also supported by modern society's explosive consumption habits. Paying Tiger Woods US$75 million in one year to sell products is not ludicrous if sales far exceed that amount. However, the fallout of sponsors after the Tiger Woods sex scandal in 2009 demonstrates how quickly a relationship, built on expected financial returns, can change. Habermas would surely argue that such ridiculously exorbitant endorsements and the spasmodically shifting fisheye lens of celebrity are the result of a society in decline. This decline is traced to our fetishization of consumption.

A consumer culture

The rise of consumerism within media content has been equalled with an 'extensive spread of consumer culture during the second half of the 20th century' (Harro-Loit & Saks 2006: 314). This commercialism has been supported by a media system aimed at promoting the economic interests of

the media itself. Magazines, for example, are often used as tools to 'legitimize' economic activity (Stephenson 2007). 'This situation has promoted self-interested behaviour aimed at exploiting market potential, and there is a growing conflict between the role of newspapers as servants of readers and the exploitation of readers to seek additional commercial gain' (Picard 2004: 54). A central purpose of commercially minded media is to increase profits, which generally come from advertising. This means that commercially minded media exist to encourage users to buy advertised products. Media have become entertaining, safe and homogenized, with a constricted range of ideas and opinions, so that readers connect ease and comfort with the products advertised within that particular media outlet. There is a perception of choice in a crowded marketplace, but these choices are purposefully selected and painstakingly constructed by others to fit within a marketing framework that returns the highest profit (Tomlinson 1990).

Individuals now consider the news and media content in general to be a product that is consumed (Kunelius & Ruusunoksa 2008). Political and social movements, which have long been celebrated for being outside of commercial interests, have also become commodified within commercial culture, and not without negative consequences. For example, girl power 'has been successfully reduced to a commercial slogan, and girl power's ability to inspire change is thereby limited by its commercialism. Its messages of empowerment are so watered down, its message that "girls rule" so inflated, that girl power does not threaten the status quo' (Hains 2009: 106). Agitating for social change, particularly among the young in developed countries, has been largely reduced to participating in ethical consumption (Banaji & Buckingham 2009). Citizens are encouraged to boycott products or purchase items that are seen to be less damaging on the environment or perhaps buy products that are economically helpful to an indigenous population. To the contemporary citizen-consumer, acts such as these are seen as political (Scammell 2000).

In developed societies, there is no cultural influence more potent or continuous than capitalism and, its cardinal constituent, consumption. Commercial pressures subsume the influences of individuals, editors and organizational structures (McQuail 1997; Soloman 2005). 'Both internal bureaucratic forces and external influential audiences work to maintain the validity of private ownership of the news media' (St John III 2008: 113). Capitalism creates an environment where the apparent necessity of private ownership is obvious and supporting actions only reinforce the judiciousness of such an operational framework. The capitalistic drive to increase profit results in an understandable and practical approach to increase much-needed profit share. This pressure to increase profits is felt throughout the media spectrum. Non-commercial broadcast media around the world are facing profound governmental pressure to become more commercial among 'broader critiques that see it as obsolete or irrelevant' (Hackett 2001). Indeed, the commercial

imperative across alternative media has led some media activists to view the entire media spectrum, including radical alternative media, as reproducing the 'dominant spectacle–spectator relation' ('Seizing the Media' 1992) in order to remain commercially viable within a competitive marketplace.

Embedded within the ideology of commercialism is the drive to value profit over any notion of social responsibility. Profit has become a central organizational goal for news outlets (Demers 1996) because of the explosion of media channels and the resulting competition for advertisers and readership share within a consumer culture. Effectively reaching targeted readership has pushed editors and other newspaper management to consider readers first when making content decisions (Schoenbach & Bergen 1998). Gaining readership – at any cost – has been the overriding factor affecting news content, in particular (McManus 1994). While this practice has its roots in broadcast journalism (Curtin 1996), newspapers now question the historically strong separations between editorial and business, which have historically been likened to the division between Church and State (Prochnau 2000). As mass media continue to multiply, some have even argued that newspapers *should* become more 'product like' and employ a marketplace theory (Beaudoin & Thorson 2002). This marketplace mentality pervades every aspect of our consumer culture and, some would argue, should be exploited by media organizations with a clear understanding that it is being celebrated by a majority of media users.

Critics of market-driven media assert that by crafting content specifically for readers of a particular market, journalism, in particular, is ignoring a basic social responsibility function (Bagdikian 2000). It is clear that the desire for targeted readership is intrinsically tied to advertising interests and the socio-economic class of its readers (Schoenbach *et al.* 1999). In defining appropriate news for specific readers, media management often search for 'class appeal' to attract potential and present advertisers (Blankenburg 1992). The allure of advertising revenue can be a strong incentive to streamline editorial content so that it is more relevant to prized upper demographic groups (Koschat & Putsis 2000). Business considerations supersede all other concerns because advertiser and investor interests inherently supplant ideals of social responsibility in a corporate news model (McManus 1994). All media must appear upper class and expensive (even if they aren't), ultimately to appeal to advertisers. Readers are then projected towards products in higher socio-economic brackets. Their product envy increases while satisfaction with their own personal circumstances dwindles. Yet readers continue to purchase that same media product, which makes certain lifestyles appear attainable.

Looking across the media spectrum, broadcasting receives nearly 100 per cent of its revenue from advertisers; newspapers obtain about 75 per cent of their revenue from advertising and magazines about 50 per cent (Herman 1995). The modern media industry, which depends heavily on advertising support, also works to drive out those who depend on the selling price alone, rather than

advertising dollars, for content. Therefore, advertisers and foundations actually have a large influence on those media that survive and fail in the marketplace (Barnouw 1978). Because of the monolithic reliance on advertising dollars in broadcasting, there is a 'strong tendency … to eliminate programming that has significant public affairs content' (Herman 1995: 85). This tendency towards profit-making is 'essentially corrupting' and 'distorts the ethical values writers and editors might wish to uphold' (Atton 2002a: 130).

The Internet has also seen an explosion in commercialized forces. Business has a strong financial interest in exploiting the Internet for commercial gain. The medium that was heralded as a space for marginalized voices has also been fundamentally exploited towards an 'interconnected regulatory framework with which global electronic commerce might evolve' (Simpson 2004: 50). It is not the medium alone that faces commercial pressures. Those organizations that find space on the Internet to speak about their cause also integrate a marketing focus into their message. In a national survey of more than 1,000 non-profit professionals, 9 out of 10 said that the Internet is an absolutely critical fundraising tool ('Nine Out of 10 Nonprofits' 2005). In 1999, the estimated volume of fundraising achieved over the Internet was 24 per cent of non-profit funding (Stewart 1999). Only four years later, Internet fundraising increased to 48 per cent of total funds raised in the non-profit sector (Wallace 2004). Recent research shows that non-profit organizations are implementing e-commerce at a rapid pace (Boeder 2002).

In 2007, research found that under half (43 per cent) of non-profits had something for sale on their site, such as publications or promotional material (Kenix 2007b). Items for sale were generally presented with a high level of sophistication. For example, Food First, an institute for 'food and development policy' (Institute for Food and Development Policy 2006), sold gift certificates, books, T-shirts, DVDs and videos – all with the familiar consumer-savvy, Amazon-style, online shopping cart. Sixty-five per cent of non-profit organizations sampled online had the ability to raise donations on their website (Kenix 2007b). Some organizations, such as Action Wisconsin, a non-profit, aimed to 'protect the civil rights of our state's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens and their families', signify donation levels by unique label classifications. A US$35 donation qualified the user as a member, US$100 as an activist, US$250 as a freedom fighter, US$500 as someone in the mayoral circle and US$1,000 as a participant in the governor's circle ('Action Wisconsin' 2006). These markers of prestige within a consumer-oriented culture are presumably used to encourage higher donation levels through a commercialized 'high-pressure' sales pitch. At each level, one can move higher up the rank of this commercially created society. In the first three tiers, one is merely attempting to struggle against 'the system', but in the last two tiers, one has succeeded and has become a part of it. These commercialized techniques, such as shopping carts and financial prestige levels, suggest that non-profits may have begun to embrace the corporate model

embedded in our market-driven society. These kinds of examples could lead one to wonder if non-profits have now shifted away from the view of the Internet as a potential place for effective advocacy and moved towards the 'inevitable subordination of ideals to material progress' (King, Grinter & Pickering 1997: 5).

Charges of commercialism have long been directed towards mainstream media; yet, as this example of non-profit organizations online seems to suggest, consumption and consumerism are embedded within our entire collective ideology – in spaces where they were not previously seen. For example, one study examined pollution coverage across three decades, from newspapers with high socio-economic readership levels, such as *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, to those with low socio-economic readership levels, including the *San Bernardino Sun*, the *Herald Examiner*, the *Los Angeles Daily News*, the *Los Angeles Herald Dispatch*, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the *Southeast Wave Star* and the *Southside Journal* (Kenix 2005b). The issue of air pollution specifically was chosen because of the finding of several studies that pollution affects those in lower socio-economic classes at a highly disproportionate rate (Bryant & Mohai 1992; Bullard 1994). Thus, one would expect to find a large amount of coverage applicable to those in lower socio-economic classes in newspapers that targeted those specific groups. Yet, regardless of socio-economic readership, newspaper size, type of ownership, geographic location, specific issue or time, coverage concerning the environmental movement appeared invariable in terms of socio-economic relevance to wealthier groups – even though those in the lower socio-economic classes suffer the most from health problems that are caused or exacerbated by environmental degradation (Eckholm 1977). This market-driven media coverage thrives within a deeply embedded commercialist consumer ideology.

Capitalism and consumption have grown exponentially together over the past hundred years. Consumerism is what supports capitalism. Capitalists profit while those who consume reap the short-term benefits of individual consumption. The ability for this circuitous relationship to evolve is largely dependent on technologies that have allowed a global reach of consumer products and the expansion of media conglomerates that promote those products (Paek & Pan 2004). This revolution in technology has contributed to the rise of a global consumerism, which views cultural identity through the framework of materialism (Beabout 2000). One can see this shift in cultural identity occurring in emerging economies around the world. China, in particular, is a fascinating case study of how a society can shift from traditionally held communal values to an individualistic, consumerist value system after exposure to media.

In recent years, the materialist values in China have exploded (Wei & Pan 1999) as consumption of global goods and marketing campaigns continue to multiply in the economically expanding country. These consumerist values have emerged as a sophisticated response to media messages. As Western

films and TV programmes infiltrated Chinese airwaves, it appeared that many in Chinese society eagerly responded with a welcome acceptance of individualistic values (Chaffee, Pan & Chu 1997). This shift to a consumerist society has been directly connected to the exposure of Chinese nationals to Western media content that subsequently has increased 'hedonistic pursuits and individualistic values among urban Chinese, especially the young' (Paek & Pan 2004: 495; Wei & Pan 1999). Exposure to advertising within media and the messages embedded within editorial content have been found to be firmly related to the acceptance of consumerist values in China (Wei & Pan 1999).

Chinese media are now essentially commercial entities that depend on advertising support and rising share-market values (Sun & Liu 2002, cited in Paek & Pan 2004). This is in stark opposition to the traditional state-owned media that operated in China for decades which did not rely on globally marketed products for economic support. The relatively rapid change in culture and the recent introduction of commercial media have led some research to argue that contemporary, capitalist and commercial media in China 'facilitate both the development of consumerist values that emphasize symbolic and status distinctions and an increasingly coherent consumerist ideology' (Paek & Pan 2004). This ideology is expressed through values, such as individual fulfilment and indulgence, an emphasis on desiring and coveting other consumptive lifestyles, individualism and heightened conspicuous consumption. These values are counter to traditional communal values, such as 'egalitarianism, collectivism, self-sacrifice and solidarity' (Meisner 1996: 495).

As is the case in contemporary China, consumerist values pervade the entire media spectrum in developed countries, and because of that 'the media may induce acceptance of such values among individuals who rely on the media to detect societal shifts in value configurations and to adjust their own choices accordingly' (Paek & Pan 2004: 495). Advertising is specifically aimed at selling products and, by default, consumerist values, so it is not surprising that exposure to advertising content over time encourages acceptance of materialistic values (Moschis & Moore 1982). Advertising has been suggested to be principally responsible for the global diffusion of what has been labelled 'affluenza' (de Graff, Wann & Naylor 2001) or a condition typified within people who 'have come to value too much the acquisition of material goods, leaving those persons shallow, unhappy, burdened with debt and living in a world of rapidly depleting resources' (Harmon 2001: 119). Affluenza has been most commonly centred not only in the United States (Horowitz 2004) but it is also theorized to exist broadly in other developed nations (McCormack 2001). It is a manifestation of contemporary commercial, consumptive culture.

While many researchers focus their efforts on the relationship between advertising and consumerism, many others have found that commercial values and consumerist attitudes are connected to media exposure in general. For example, television consumption has been correlated to individual

desires for specific luxury products routinely portrayed and associated with superficial representations of happiness (Twitchell 1999). Those who watch the commercially supported Channel One programme in the United States reported more individual, consumer-oriented responses (Brand & Greenberg 1994). The individualistic, self-satisfying 'me culture' has been 'firmly linked to mass entertainment and consumerism' (Sima & Pugsley 2010: 287). As defined here, mass entertainment spans television, the Internet, radio, texting, newspapers, movies, blogs, social networking and magazines. Blogging, for example, has been found to reiterate the individualistic values that fuel the rather conceited drive to consume. Bloggers routinely associate themselves with consumer-based images that are essential in reproducing their own commercial ideology (Sima & Pugsley 2010). Returning again to the example of China, Zhang argues that rising consumerist attitudes are inherently connected to 'the saturation of the media and the mass culture industry, the constant flow of international fashion and advertising, and the consumption of the latest MTV of Hollywood' (Zhang, Fish & Jameson 2008: 161). This consumptive shift does not mean that there will simply be an increase in spending on specific marketed products but rather that generalized behaviour patterns and attitudes towards a commercial ideology have changed (Humphrey & Mandel 2002). Even juxtaposed against this damning research, it is important to note that the influence is neither monolithic nor one-dimensional. The global rise of consumerism involves variables that interact from within that home culture and from outside (Braman 1996).

A study of vaccinations and ideology

This study examines the discourse of anti- and pro-vaccination in New Zealand alternative and mainstream online media within the social framework of Marxist ideology, which is evidenced by communal, mutually beneficial perspectives in contrast to individual, capitalistic perspectives. Principles of Marxist thought are rooted in models of behaviour that eschew individualized, consumerist ideology and favour communal, anti-consumerist action. Vaccination, as a case study, was chosen because of its explicit dependence on community efforts for overall efficacy. Vaccination schedules are most successful within a society when entire communities are immunized. If some within a community choose not to vaccinate, then others within the community face an increased chance of infection. Vaccination rates in New Zealand are amongst the lowest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). New Zealand ranks 33rd out of 35 developed countries for immunizations, according to UNICEF'S State of the World's Children report ('NZ's Vaccination Rates Lagging' 2009). Such low rates of immunization protection suggest an

examination of both the alternative and mainstream press to uncover what type of discourse exists in relation to vaccination campaigns.

The social praxis and generally accepted theory of Marxist thought, much like vaccination campaigns, depend on egalitarian, anti-consumerist, community-minded ideals. One could assume to find Marxist ideology throughout pro-vaccination discourse and that these perspectives would also be most likely to occur in alternative media, which has been found to depend on these same communal, anti-consumptive, egalitarian ideologies. Alternative media have been seen to traditionally draw from principles of Marxist thought, both in the type of discourse and the manifest or even latent intent of the communication. This is in contrast to mainstream media, which have been labelled 'individualistic' and driven by forces of consumptive capitalism.

Marxist thought

Corporations exist and thrive within a capitalistic, consumptive framework. Corporate entities reinforce capitalistic ideology through their everyday, routinized patterns of behaviour. Often corporations claim that they merely sell products, without taking any responsibility for their final end use in society. Such an ideological position argues that what people do with these products is completely up to the individual and outside of corporate responsibility. Perhaps this is most clearly exemplified by the behaviour of International Business Machines (IBM) who strategically assisted the Nazis, by selling punch card systems directly to them, which were crucial in the monitoring of Jewish victims across large geographical spaces before their final deaths in extermination camps (Black 2001). IBM made 'an international business out of mass killings by making profits from selling data storage and processing machines to the Nazis' (Fuchs 2009: 370). IBM, as a corporation within a capitalist ideology, argued that it made these business decisions solely as a means to increase profits.

Marx argued that corporations must accumulate 'for accumulation's sake, production for production's sake: by this formula classical economy expressed the historical mission of the bourgeoisie' (Marx & Engels MECW: 652). Mainstream media corporations have been found to be no different from corporations selling other, more material products in their corporate sale of information and ideology. Indeed, media are instrumental as an ideological means of communication (Fuchs 2008; McChesney 2007). Corporate 'media and the communication industry are not innocent, but deeply embedded into structures of domination' (Fuchs 2009: 370). The mainstream media are, in fact, central 'pillars of the corporate industrial infrastructure' (Sussman 1999: 86). Readers are engaged within this corporate media sphere as commodities. They are not engaged as equal partners in a communicative relationship.

Rather, they are audience commodities (Smythe 1981/2006) that can be sold to advertising clients as a profit to media corporations.

Media technologies are 'means for producing surplus-value' (Marx & Engels MECW: 371). The machine, as Marx conceptualized it, was the elementary factor of production that had the potential to disseminate a capitalistic message and multiply on itself until the individual worker was found to be redundant. Within the United States, media productivity, or output per hour, increased by 21 per cent from 1997 to 2006, while the number of employees within the field of print media dropped to 615,000 from 815,000 during that same time period. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics surmised that computerization and the expanding use of the Internet have eliminated many prepress and production jobs in the media (US Department of Labor 2008). As Fuchs argues, 'there is an economic interest in the substitution of living labour by technology to decrease the investment and reproduction costs of capital and its turnover time, which in the ideal case increases profit' (Fuchs 2009: 382). The present conglomeration within the media industries is itself representative of an essential component of capitalism (Knoche 2007).

These capitalistic organizational norms manifest into ideological shifts in knowledge. 'As a result of capital's drive for increasing productivity by employing new technologies, production becomes increasingly dependent on knowledge' (Fuchs 2009: 382) or what Marx called 'general intellect' (Marx 1858). Marx argued that social knowledge inevitably becomes a 'direct force of production' and is 'transformed in accordance with [production]' (Marx 1858: 706). This process of development lifts the importance of media within a society dramatically. Corporate media are of 'central importance for capital accumulation' (Fuchs 2009: 382) and for the promulgation of capitalistic ideologies. There has been a strong convergence across media content (Herman & McChesney 1997), which legitimizes capitalist domination.

This capitalist framework leads corporate media to misrepresent reality and create a completely alternate ideology that is inverted from the reality it supposedly represents. This capitalist ideology 'is the expression of dominant class interests' (Fuchs 2009: 390). Corporate media do not represent information that is in the best interest of the masses. Rather, those 'who lack the means of mental production' (Marx & Engels MECW: 59) are subject to the 'ideas of the ruling class' (Marx & Engels MECW: 59). These forms of domination are 'naturalized by the media and are portrayed as being unchangeable' (Fuchs 2009: 391). In explaining his theory of hegemony, Gramsci argued that the masses agree to this domination by 'refusing to resist, by hoping to gain advantages by supporting domination, or by not seeing through the presented lies so that, as a result, they consent to their own oppression' (Fuchs 2009: 391).

Independent media – particularly online media – have the possibility to subvert the corporate interests of capitalistic media (McChesney 2007). An

alternative press, as conceptualized by Marx, serves as a 'public watchdog, the tireless denouncer of those in power' (Marx & Engels MEW: 231). However, such an investigative and antagonistic alternative media are only possible outside the parameters of profiteering. Egalitarian relationships, both within-media and between-media users, can unite individuals through common cause. Individuals and groups can 'centralise the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle' (Marx & Engels MECW: 493). The decentralized network of information exchange through the Internet poses a unique opportunity to circumvent mainstream, capitalistic media and realize the theory of a democratic, participatory medium, first put forth by Marx and Engles 150 years ago.

The existing social roles and routines that alternative media seek to critique generally stem from capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy and the nature of corporations. It is this foregrounding in social critique that has historically placed alternative media in diametric opposition to the capitalistic, mainstream press. Marx and Engels (MECW) argued that relationships based on equality and an even exchange of information are central to a thriving, critical and engaged independent media. The ability of an alternative press to incite change depends on a mutual respect between the publication and its readers. This open form of discourse operates as a challenge to the capitalist media industry (Fuchs 2009). As has already been discussed, blogs have emerged as a democratic space in the mediated landscape. There is an obvious opportunity available on the Internet for individuals and groups to expand the reach of publicized activities, to oppose the framing of mainstream media and to generate a wider base of egalitarian support based on Marxist principles of a shared commonality. However, it remains uncertain whether online content truly is an alternative to mainstream media (Kenix 2009a). This research aimed to explore whether blogs, in relation to vaccination discourse, drew from qualities inherent to Marxist conceptualizations of alternative media or from something more akin to their mainstream counterparts.

There is much about online blog content that would suggest a Marxist relationship in opposition to corporate power. Many scholars believe that blogs can offer a 'radically different kind of news discourse than the one found in mainstream news media' (Haas 2005: 388). This departure from mainstream news content to a Marxist, alternative space is rooted within two unique capabilities of blogs: the possibility for independent, uncensored and non-corporate reporting, which can be based on a wide array of diverse sources (Bruns 2003), and the ability of blogs to exchange information with readers through egalitarian, anti-consumerist, communicative relationships. One could assume that there would be traces of such a communicative approach to pro-vaccination discourse, which is also found to depend on these same communal, egalitarian ideologies.

The case of vaccinations

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States begins its online discussion of vaccination with the headline, 'Disease Prevention – Protect Those Around You' ('How Vaccines Prevent Disease' 2009). This tenet of community-mindedness pervades much of the official discourse about vaccination. Many infectious diseases that were once common have now largely vanished because of the historic near-universal vaccination rates across developed countries. Diseases such as measles, mumps, polio, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), rubella (German measles) and *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) are rarely found in hospitals throughout the developed countries because of successful vaccination campaigns. The CDC states that 'vaccines are one of the greatest success stories in public health. Vaccines have ended smallpox, nearly ended polio, and reduced outbreaks of measles, pertussis, and other illnesses to an all-time low' ('How Vaccines Are Tested and Monitored' 2009).

Vaccines contain weakened antigens of diseases that trigger an individual's immune system to produce antibodies against these diseases (Anagnostakos & Tortora 1981). The cells that created these antibodies continue to hold a 'memory' of the 'original antigen and then defend against it when the antigen attempts to re-infect a person, even after many decades. This protection is called immunity' ('How Vaccines Prevent Disease' 2009). Immunizing individuals has a profound impact on the community, particularly on those who cannot be immunized because of poor health or age. Immunization also helps to protect those who have had a vaccination but, for whatever reason, did not develop immunity to the disease, which is the case in a very small proportion of vaccinated individuals. The Ministry of Health in New Zealand reports that vaccines protect 80–95 per cent of the children who are immunized ('Immunisation: Vaccine Safety' 2009).

Vaccinations, like any medication, have the possibility for adverse risks. Within the United States, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) must license vaccines before their use in the general population. The licensing process begins with computerized tests of efficacy, then moves on to animal testing and finally several phases of clinical trials with human participants. This licensing process generally takes 10 years or more ('How Vaccines Are Tested and Monitored' 2009). Continued monitoring occurs throughout the use of a vaccine as 'rare side effects and delayed reactions may not happen until the vaccine is given to millions of people' ('How Vaccines Are Tested and Monitored' 2009). New Zealand reports a similar standard of testing, whereby vaccines go through three phases of clinical trials until it is 'safe to the satisfaction of Medsafe, a division of the Ministry of Health' ('Immunisation: Vaccine Safety' 2009). The Centre for Adverse Reactions Monitoring (CARM) at Otago University in Dunedin records vaccination reactions to monitor the safety and effectiveness of the immunization. Possible side effects reported by the Ministry of Health are

'redness and soreness at the site of injections and mild fever' ('Immunisation' 2009). More severe side effects are extremely rare. For example, encephalitis (brain damage) following the measles vaccine has been reported in about 1 per 1 million doses. However, this number is very similar to the 'background' rate or the rate that would occur 'naturally' in society, so it is not clear whether the vaccine itself causes encephalitis in this single case. However, if one does attribute this case to the vaccine, the risk remains at about '1,000 times less than the risk of encephalitis from measles disease' (Ministry of Health 2006: 377). Any risk of severe disease caused by the vaccination is exponentially less than the risks associated with contracting the disease itself.

Yet, even with rigorous controls and the extremely rare occurrence of serious illness, there is a wide range of anti-vaccination discourse surrounding the safety and efficacy of vaccines. This research aims to explore this range of mediated discourse, particularly given that New Zealand ranks 33rd out of 35 developed countries for immunizations, according to UNICEF's State of the World's Children report ('NZ's Vaccination Rates Lagging' 2009). The overall immunization rate in New Zealand is about 83 per cent. The Ministry of Health in New Zealand reports that if vaccinations are to be effective for the entire community, the rates of compliance need to be 95 per cent ('Low Immunisation Rate Triggers Measles Outbreak' 2009).

In the middle of 2009, a measles outbreak in New Zealand was declared by the Ministry of Health as a precursor to a 'potential measles epidemic' (Ministry of Health 2009) – more than 100 cases in just the Canterbury region of New Zealand alone. In August, the incidence of reported measles for the year was more than 10 times the number of measles for the entirety of 2008 (Ryall 2009). These numbers prompted the Ministry of Health to announce that as of August 2009 all unimmunized children will be excluded from class if a child in their class contracted measles.

The decline in immunization rates in New Zealand could clearly be attributed to many factors: cultural changes, a lack of information received from medical practitioners and religious beliefs are only a few of the myriad possibilities. However, the information in available and accessible media must also be included as a potential barrier to vaccination. This research examines the discourse surrounding vaccinations in alternative and mainstream online media to better understand how vaccinations are reported overall in the online content of New Zealand media. In doing so, this research also questions whether alternative media, which have been found to depend on communal, egalitarian ideologies, represent vaccination differently than the mainstream media, which have been labelled individualistic and driven by forces of capitalism. Vaccinations are a social issue that depends on an effectively communicated community-based intervention to succeed. Without a full understanding of the communal benefits of vaccines, individuals may opt to leave their children without vaccination, thereby reducing the overall efficacy of vaccines and the physical health of society.

Anyone who has spent more than 15 minutes online knows that the Internet has an unparalleled ability to spread innuendo and rumours. Vaccination discourse online certainly falls prey to high levels of misinformation and confusing rhetoric. This research does not aim to substantiate or refute these rumours in any systemic way. Rather, it hopes to examine, through the framework of Marxist praxis, how alternative and mainstream online discourse presents vaccination to better understand the sometimes conflicting nexus between the ideology of an issue and that of a medium. Therefore, this study explores how vaccination is represented in the mainstream and alternative online press of New Zealand and whether the blogs sampled in this study are representative of a Marxist form of alternative media.

This study examined high-circulation New Zealand online newspapers and 100 blogs of the most popular blog postings about vaccinations in New Zealand. Overall, within the top 100 websites listed by Google, there was strong support for vaccinations. A majority of 54 per cent were found to be in support of vaccinations, 31 per cent were against and 15 per cent were neutral. However, there was a strongly significant relationship ($p = .000$) between the type of source and the degree to which it supported or opposed vaccinations. Blogs were far more likely (adjusted residual score of 8.8) than other sources to be against vaccinations. Such a high adjusted residual score suggests a very marked departure from the model of independence (well above +2 or below –2) and a strong demonstrated strength in this relationship. Of mainstream news sources, 85.7 per cent were found to support vaccination, while 93.3 per cent of blogs were found to oppose vaccinations.

Blogs engaged in a highly individualistic narrative directed towards personal gain, rather than the betterment of the community. This level of argumentation does not constitute an alternative media propelled by communal Marxist praxis. In contrast, news reports consistently reminded the readers of how their own personal actions could benefit society. Such stances within the mainstream and alternative press subvert traditional views of the media, which have suggested that Marxist theory is embedded in alternative media content and capitalist tenets remain entrenched in the mainstream press. For example, an article from *The Press*, a mainstream newspaper, on 10th August begins by stating that 'a generation of Kiwi children is at risk of potentially deadly disease due to apathy or parents being wary of vaccination, health experts say'. The use of the term 'generation' gives an expansive scope to the problem ahead and blames the risk of deadly disease on the 'apathy' of parents or, conversely, their wariness of vaccination. The term 'apathy' is equated here with apprehension, and the reporter holds the two in equal disdain. The result of this apathy is death across an entire 'generation' of children. The same article goes on to state that 'in a move to protect children, The Ministry of Health has told GPs to check with patients'. In this case, the general practitioner is positioned as the one who has the best interests of all children in mind and not the individual

parent who only sees the potential harm or benefit on his or her own individual child and not the society at large.

There are conceptualizations of community-mindedness in the alternative media sampled for this study, but they exist as the extrapolated obvious extensions of individual behaviour. For example, Beyond Conformity tells the story of a nearby family where the father was a 'known core antigen Hepatitis B carrier for over 30 years' but never passed the disease on to his unimmunized partner or children. This individual instance is then extrapolated to the larger society where individuals are warned of being 'warped' by doctors who are in support of vaccination as immunization was clearly not necessary for anybody given that it was not necessary for this one individual. Unique instances are cited repeatedly through alternative content without any mention of community protection or herd immunity.

Marxist thought hinge not only on communal tenets but also on a strong critique of corporate power blocs. There was a virulent oppositional discourse towards corporate power structures in alternative media content. The blog Archetype writes, 'the standard response of the Medical Establishment to any criticism of vaccination is to silence the dissenters'. Authors of alternative media are positioned far outside of mainstream positions of power and write of their 'censure and ostracism'. Yet there was very little in-depth social commentary to corroborate this oppositional discourse. While critical, investigative exploration has been found to be a cornerstone of effective alternative media (Armstrong 1981; Duncombe 1997), the level of analysis and argumentation found in the alternative press for this study remained decidedly superficial with little substantiation.

For example, the Politics New Zealand blog, self-labelled as the 'Department of Personal Opinions', wrote bluntly that 'mainstream are so unconscious that most fail to understand what is in these things and the rising tide of complications – it is all a scam'. This statement was made without any supporting evidence or argumentation. The author argued that 'mainstream', which could possibly be interpreted as the majority of society, was simply wrong. There was widespread condemnation in blogs for authority figures and for the medical community. This critique suggests a Marxist praxis, which attempts to sever relevant circuits of capital. Throughout blog discourse, writers were actively trying to 'transform existing social roles and routines by critiquing and challenging power structures' (Atkinson 2006: 252). Yet the level of critique again fell far short of an active, engaged challenge to mainstream structures of power. There was a social critique operating here, but without substantiation; the discourse failed to provide any legitimate, meaningful alternative. Critical, independent quality journalism is fundamental for an alternative media to successfully critique ideologies that legitimate domination (McChesney 2007). A blogger named Alice Dee stated plainly, 'I know what I know. [The medical community] really don't know much, just text book'.

There are repeated instances of bloggers citing 'a growing body of research' without any suggestion as to what that research might be. The New Zealand

Anti-Vivisection Society blog writes, 'in fact it has recently been discovered that side-effects were five times the number previously thought and one of these side-effects was a deadly blood disorder'. No substantiation is provided for such a claim. There are also several instances of assumptions in analysis that are asked and answered without support. For example, The NZ Single Parents Trust blog writes that vaccinations were 'promoted so quickly with very little research being given to the public because of elections coming up last year'. The writer here is asserting a blatant subversive act of politicians for personal gain but does not canvass any politicians to support such a stance. Even when a blog was written by a medical practitioner, the amount of substantive support was minimal. A blog called Healthonline, written by a natural medicine practitioner, argued that infectious disease epidemics of 60 years ago have passed but only because of 'improved hygiene and housing'. He made these arguments without any hyperlinks to supporting information or to any peer-reviewed academic research. There was not even any personal, anecdotal support to this claim.

The lack of substantiation found in alternative media was not replicated in mainstream outlets. Quotes were directly attributed to health care representatives that were easily verified through independent searches. Prominent medical representatives, such as Dr Johan Morreau, the paediatrics chairman of the Royal Australasian College, were repeatedly sourced for information. The level of analysis found in blogs did not draw from professional sources, but given the independent nature of alternative media, one would not expect such a correlation. However, one would expect to find investigative support and critical exploration in the alternative press (Armstrong 1981; Duncombe 1997).

Thus, 'alternative' blogs operated as hierarchically determined sites of one-way communication promoting individualistically opportune behaviours contrary to the community-driven model of communication typically found in alternative media. In contrast, mainstream outlets promoted behaviours supportive of community well-being and had equal, but albeit low, levels of egalitarian communication exchange. Yet how these media outlets communicated these divergent messages was complicated within a nexus of definitional characteristics coming from both the mainstream and alternative press. This study agrees with the recent trend in scholarship about alternative media, which has found that alternative media simply can't be explained or understood without placing it in relation to mainstream media (Harcup 2005). This research, much like the other case studies highlighted in this text, further problematizes a clearly delineated alternative and mainstream media.

Alternative media exerted a scathing, yet superficial, critique of corporate power blocks that relied on very little in-depth social commentary to corroborate this oppositional discourse. Thus, the distrust of corporate interests existed but any investigative analysis fell far short of what has defined much of alternative media. There was no meaningful request for a communicative exchange with readers in the alternative blogs sampled. There were also very few instances of

direct encouragement for behavioural change, which would not be expected given the history of alternative media as an agent of social change.

These findings demonstrate the complexity of categorizing one 'type' of media as ideologically capitalistic and the other as altruistic. These labels simply cannot describe the totality of media outlets, whether in relation to geography or topic or readership. Vaccination discourse in what has been labelled alternative media proved to be diametrically opposed to Marxist ideology, which calls for confrontational changes through educated discourse. Relying on highly individualistic accounts directed towards personal gain, alternative media most closely represented what might traditionally be expected from mainstream media. While mainstream news reports consistently reminded readers of how their own personal actions could benefit society, alternative media urged readers to look after their own interests. This ideological reversal again signals the complex overlapping spheres that exist along the media continuum. It should be noted that alternative media presumably made many of their most damning claims in this study based on their suspicions of corporate power. However, none of those suspicions were realized through rigorous examination on the part of alternative media, and thus their level of argumentation was decidedly superficial.

9

Conclusion

This book has attempted to demonstrate some of the similarities between what has been traditionally seen as alternative media and the mainstream press. As was stated in the introduction, this book does not aim to argue that the two are mutually exclusive or exactly similar. Rather, as is the case with much in social science, the reality is far more complex. This text offered numerous examples to highlight some of that complexity, but it is hoped that these serve only to start the conversation. The continuum of media is constantly evolving and therefore needs continuous scrutiny to better understand the meaning of media as an institution of power, entertainment and information. In this chapter, the text will explore possibilities for future development of media. In doing so, this text furthers the argument that the media spectrum is converging – not to a finite diminishing point – but rather to an ever-expanding, blurred intermix of media spheres that develop because of one another and not despite the other's existence.

In this final chapter, as was the case throughout the entire text, the goal is not to examine a truncated list of questions that are then systematically answered. It may be that most of the questions raised in this book simply cannot be answered. However, they must be asked if we are to gain a better understanding of our media as an entire continuum and not as silos of content that draw nothing from one another. Journalism, in particular, is in the midst of tectonic pressure to innovate, reorganize, generate revenue, entertain and inform. As this text has suggested, mainstream journalism has done much to bridge these gorges of change by drawing from traditionally alternative media practices. The reverse is also true. Alternative media have learnt from the successes and failures of the mainstream to create their own opportunities – and all media continue to exist within a pervasive commercial system dictating, to a large extent, many of the future directions in mediated communication.

This book has contemplated many of the influences on media frames – individual motivations, organizational practices, ownership and ideology. After exploring these influences, this book argues that ideology, and particularly commercial ideology, may have the largest influence. Shoemaker and Reese (1990) argued much the same over 20 years ago when they found ideology to be the largest enveloping sphere of influence on journalism. However, they applied this ideological influence only to mainstream media and, as this

text argues, that sphere of ideological influence is equally applicable to those within alternative media. The reach of ideology, and in particular commercial ideology, does not exist in a vacuum. It is constitutive within contemporary culture, which operates within a consumer-driven environment and is spurred by economic incentives. The inroads of commercialism into all forms of news are already largely evident. 'Professional journalism, with its veneer of autonomous and independent reporting in the public interest, allows corporate news entities to further solidify their place in society' (St John III 2008: 112). The veneer of transparency and objectivity creates an environment where citizens who attend to either alternative or mainstream media believe they are being served by a larger institution with professionalized norms that work to protect citizen interests. 'This is a portrait of public benefit that greatly legitimizes and stabilizes … the commercial institutional control of the news apparatus' (St John III 2008: 112).

The commercial imperative throughout media is grounded within a mass culture perspective (Bennett 1982) that aims for expansion merely for the sake of expansion. Yet such a belief is based on 'dubious assumptions' (Hamilton 2000a: 359). The first assumption is that bigger is simply better. The second assumption embedded in this mass culture perspective is that mass-produced and mass-circulated media are necessary to support sustainable social change (Cirino 1987). A third assumption, suggested by Hamilton (2000a), is that mass-scale production requires a corporate organizational system. Hamilton (2000a) convincingly argues that these assumptions are based on commercial ideologies that will inevitably influence those seeking representation and the re-presentation that they receive. 'Capital-intensive, professionalized forms' (Hamilton 2000a: 360) of participation are valued more than democratic, organic organizational structures within a commercial environment. These capital-intensive, commercial models of media have always existed, but has intensified as corporate consolidations increase. Alternative media have responded to this structural shift largely by promoting mainstream conventions, thereby limiting open-access participation and embracing commercial models of communication. There is a certain level of irony in this circuitous equation. As alternative media adopt more corporate organization models, this requires more professionalized modes of production, which implicitly locks out voices that were part of what made alternative media 'alternative' in the first place (Solomon & McChesney 1993). However, it appears that the alternative press simply must pursue professionalized, commercial practices if they are to compete within the media marketplace.

Again, it is important to remember that alternative media generally, although not exclusively, remain less commercially minded and more ideologically driven than the mainstream media. They continue to operate in ways that are often distinct from mainstream media. Perhaps buoyed by these remaining distinctions, many continue to steadfastly argue that

marginalized groups, which have historically found a more friendly reception in the alternative press, should not bother attempting to gain representation in mainstream media given that these media operate in ways completely opposite to traditional alternative media practices (Albert 2006). Those making this argument continue to adhere to a long-held philosophical dichotomy between media conglomerates, which reflect conservative political ideologies that support government and capitalistic corporations (McChesney 2000b), and independent, alternative media, which embrace liberal perspectives and citizen interests. As such, mainstream media simply can't be relied upon to portray any truth about those outside of corporate interests. While this text has attempted to highlight some of the contradictions in this argument, it does not deny that there remains much reason for concern. The institution of mainstream media can, and does, obscure the underlying meanings behind issues. Issues are often individualized, with very little substance (Gauntlett 1996). Yet, as this text has hopefully illustrated, it is increasingly contradictory to exclusively compartmentalize mainstream media as a singular institution that is managed and operated 'by the beneficiaries of the oppressive institutions we oppose' (Albert 2006: n.p.). It is impossible, through this one-dimensional perspective, for alternative media users to align at all with mainstream practices – the very practices that are now driving much of the alternative press. This text would ultimately argue that as citizens we must demand more from both alternative and mainstream media. Citizens, reporters and media owners from across the mediated spectrum must ultimately find shared avenues of cooperation for the advancement of democracy.

These shared cooperative moments have already occurred in the past. There have been several instances of the alternative and mainstream press covering the same issues and even relying on each other's resources. Atton (2002b) suggests that these moments of 'coming together' occur through three principal scenarios. The first instance is when the agendas of both mainstream and alternative media are shared and an event fulfils the needs of both outlets. An example of such an instance is from the large-scale protests against the WTO in Seattle. This was such a compelling, big news story that the mainstream media needed more immediate information, particularly from a human-interest angle. Conversely, alternative media aimed to explore the reasons behind the protests. Both had information that the other needed (Fenton 2007). Here, it was a mutually beneficial relationship where both 'sides' gained valuable information from the other. Both the mainstream and alternative news media need to embrace such shared moments. The second way that alternative media and mainstream media have historically worked with more cohesion is through incorporation (Atton 2002b). This has occurred when alternative media sources are needed for mainstream requirements of human interest or conflict. Again, there is an undeniable benefit to both parties; even when one addresses any lingering concerns that alternative media might serve as some

sort of sensationalistic voyeurism for mainstream outlets. The third method of cohesion is through dissidence. In such a scenario, the alternative press gains the attention of mainstream media simply by virtue of their 'alternativeness' (Fenton 2007). Here, the danger is that minorities can be misrepresented and their point of difference can be highlighted as a central focus in coverage. However, with stronger alliances, fully cultivated and developed over time, alternative media can work to mitigate against such misrepresentations.

Some alternative media run the risk of an ideological 'ghettoization' if they do not engage in cohesive processes such as these. If the purpose of a media outlet is to steadfastly remain outside of commercial interests, then the 'ghettoization' of some alternative media may be essential for principled reasons. However, if the purpose of a media outlet, whether alternative or mainstream, is to educate, entertain and inform citizens, then the acceptance of a commercial structure is inevitable for their own continued existence within a capitalistic system. Therefore, finding pathways for cooperation has institutional as well as economic benefits. This acceptance on the part of alternative media does not translate to a homogenous existence in concert with the perceived corporate media largesse. Rather, this acceptance acknowledges the constraints and freedoms of a commercial enterprise and pursues a greater understanding of the overlapping spheres of influence impacting the entire media spectrum.

Alternative and mainstream media must continue to learn from one another and change their structural models to better respond to economic challenges. As the expanse of the Internet continues to unravel into the farthest reaches of the globe, the strength of future media will be in their ability to detail local events within a specific place and time. Local content is thriving in some areas of the present media landscape and declining in others. For example, community radio is increasingly 'playing a crucial role in the democratic process by fostering citizen participation in public life' (Meadows, Forde, Ewart & Foxwell 2009: 155). Community radio helps to build local narratives that can be thought of within a complex pattern of 'local talk' that is central in creating public consciousness. However, the rise of community journalism within radio is not mirrored in local online and print newspapers. Local outlets are closing at an alarming rate (Greenslade 2009), largely due to the perceived needs of a globalized marketplace; a decline in journalistic standards, which at the local level continues to rely on single sources; a continued focus on reporters as the sole source for information without any reliance on readers for input; and an emphasis on stories with little consequence that require only simplistic newsgathering skills (O'Neill & O'Conner 2008). Alternative media could easily fill such a gap with networked local writers and readers who are eager to explore perspectives relevant to their lives – and then feed that information back to the mainstream. The dominance of locality in popular alternative news blogs is emblematic of such a need. Users are clamouring for hyper-local information that is pertinent to one's own immediate experiences.

Hyper-local online news content needs to be embraced by alternative news sources, particularly given the continued closure of mainstream local outlets after conglomerate takeovers. These local alternative sources of information can serve as reliable checks on local councils, police, education issues and legislation. Important partnerships with the mainstream media need to be forged, if hyper-local coverage is to grow. These kinds of relationships already exist and are generating important and necessary content. For example, *The New York Times* has recently partnered with local blogs in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and Millburn, New Jersey, to create local content in those two communities. *The Times* has also forged relationships with the City University of New York Graduate School of Journalism to create a collaborative blog titled 'The Local' which provides essential local content and analysis of citizen's contributions to news. This journalistic experiment has resulted in the creation of a large pool of regular internal and citizen-based contributors that add an important local source of information to the community. Gannett, the same company that first bought up and then was forced to close so many local newspapers, has now recently moved into hyper-local blogging. In doing so, this large media conglomerate is now hiring local, independent writers and university students to create hyper-local content within an established readership base.

As these partnerships increase between mainstream and alternative media, synergies need to be forged across smaller, local outlets as well. These synergies are already found within a conglomerated mainstream press but are still relatively new for alternative media. Within the United States, there are thousands of alternative media publications, but no cohesive unifying force that brings together all that content and readership. AlterNet is the rare example of what can be done when pulling across the alternative media spectrum. It receives more than 3 million monthly visitors and more than 7.5 million monthly page views (AlterNet 2009). It is unlikely that these numbers represent unique users given that this was not reported in the website material. However, even 3 million repeat viewers represent a significant amount. AlterNet claims to combine original reporting with material from over 200 independent media sources, 'including over 40 of the most compelling and insightful blogs' (AlterNet 2009). This is an impressive body of news and information that users can access quickly from one central control point – information that likely would not be seen otherwise.

Outside of the success of AlterNet, alternative media still tend to exist without any real connection between independent outlets. AlterNet should be examined further as a model for future growth in alternative media and how connections can be forged with mainstream alliances that already exist. As more and more websites proliferate the Internet, networked portals that offer obvious localized pathways for content must continue to grow or readers will likely overlook a substantial amount of content. Media mogul Rupert Murdoch has created news.com.au, marketed as news 'from all angles', which amalgamates localized news from newspapers across Australia: *The Advertiser, The Australian, The*

Courier-Mail, The Daily Telegraph, the *Gold Coast Bulletin,* the *Herald Sun, The Mercury* and *The Sunday Times*. This kind of consolidation will likely be more widely supported as information becomes even denser. Successfully finding information online is already dependent upon demographic factors, such as education levels (Hargittai 2002), and as more and more people flood the Internet for information, that information will simply need to be easier to locate. Silos of information will not be able to withstand the onslaught of content or the continued evolution of technologies. The cross-pollination of the myriad technologies available is producing a proliferation of content in multiple platforms. Navigational systems need to be developed to direct users across these platforms to media portals of information. These localized portals should draw from both alternative and mainstream media to provide important, unique, local content in a highly competitive marketplace.

Localized content thrives through social networking, which is exploding online. Any speculation about the future of media must include networking – across alternative and mainstream outlets. Almost 60 per cent of Internet users regularly use social media in some way (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010b). News has always been 'about connection, conversation and community' (Vargas 2009). A reader connects with content, in whatever form that information delivery occurs. That information then sparks the beginning of a conversation within each reader's personal social networks, whether that is online or offline. When a reader engages with that material, she or he is also joining a community of like-minded people. Arthur Miller, the famous playwright, once said 'a good newspaper is a nation talking to itself'. The future of all media will expand this statement in ways that simply can't be predicted at this stage, but active networking between readers of disparate media outlets will surely play a large role.

This integrated social network can be, and already has been, used for citizens to instantaneously verify sources and confirm perspectives. The unparalleled access to information means that transparency, not objectivity, will become the most important tenet of quality media reporting across the mediated spectrum. Objectivity, the long-standing principle of journalism, should one day be subsumed by transparency (Weinberger 2009). This has important implications for the mainstream press that will look to successful alternative media outlets, which still have a more immediate tradition of opinion-based reporting, for guidance. Alternative media are wedged within a unique moment in history to exploit this epochal undercurrent. Mainstream corporate newspapers and conglomerated broadcast networks have long relied on the credibility that their institution provided through their simple existence as a credentialed authority. This model of transferring information from an authoritative and objective source to citizens proved so successful because of the nature of communication prior to the Internet. The barriers for information retrieval were extremely high. For example, one could certainly pour through library

archives or government documents housed in official warehouses, but the costs in time and money remained too high for most. The mainstream authority on information relied on the widespread assumption of objectivity to impart information to the masses. The Internet drastically changed how citizens now think about information provided to them. The preponderance of information available to users means that transparency is now the most important quality of news information. Transparency allows readers to examine the arguments, assumptions and values embedded within messages. '[T]ransparency – the embedded ability to see through the published draft – often gives us more reason to believe a report than the claim of objectivity did' (Weinberger 2009). News information can easily be traced through heavily networked Twitter feeds or other online social networks. All media must increasingly integrate the 'connection, conversation and community' embedded within a user's personal experience if they are to succeed. Biases should be clearly stated so that users can clearly navigate through information. As one blogger recently noted, 'bias should be considered a built-in flaw of an imperfect system. And if each of us, as news consumers, is aware of the flaws in the system, we can account for them when evaluating what we're told by the media' (Brain Terminal 2006).

Citizens increasingly expect to be able to make an input into their media systems. This expectation will continue to rise as technologies become more and more accessible. Those who participate within the media will likely embrace their new-found sense of empowerment, which will 'signify participant's ability to take control of their own destinies' (Wagg 2004: 269). This access to the media will lead to much more media literacy and a demystification of the media (Sefton-Green 2000). Categories and job descriptions that have historically defined and organized modern media creators will continue to disappear. Many levels within organizational flow charts have already been removed and recreated. This trend will continue. Technological advances mean that the time and cost to produce content has substantially reduced, which has allowed many more avenues of input from a variety of content producers. David Simon, from *The Washington Post*, correctly argues that bloggers and other alternative media have not yet begun to fill the gap that newspapers are quickly leaving behind (Simon 2009). However, as newsrooms continue to cut their numbers, bloggers and alternative media will help to supplant the investigative abilities of a watchdog press (Lasica 2003). This shift in reporting necessitates a stronger alliance between mainstream reporters and contributing members of the alternative press. This is certainly happening to a much smaller degree now, but if alternative media is to continue growing as a viable segment of the media, then purposeful extensions of the mainstream press into input from alternative media and citizen-generated content will need to be more explicit.

As this book has already discussed, many blogs use comments as a form of feedback for readers, but still few use this space as an egalitarian exchange between consumers of the content and the producers. Very few media rely

on anything other than static, one-way forms of communication. Hamilton (2000a) suggests that alternative media, in particular, should remove artificial divisions between consumers and producers. But, we have seen in this text that mainstream media are also beginning to open pathways for citizen input. Much more is needed. All media need to resemble what Rodriguez (2001) calls citizen media, which are far more active in their identity. Citizen media are actually part of a larger process of inter-communication. They are a constantly evolving expression that includes thoughtful, individual reflections and analyses from individuals who begin to collate together and actually construct their citizenship. They do so through daily collective media action. These acts of citizenship empower those who participate. Citizen media can, and should, happen through the mainstream and alternative press.

Citizen or activist media encourages involvement on the part of readers (Waltz 2005). This insistence upon action does not need to fall solely on 'alternative' ideologies. In fact, many activist media have very mainstream goals, such as urging others to vote in governmental elections. An egalitarian and engaged network of communication will define the future of alternative media. A prominent example comes from a well-publicized MoveOn.org contest titled 'Bush in 30 seconds', which called for users to create a 30-second anti-Bush commercial and submit it to the organization's website. The contest proved to be wildly successful with thousands of entries and generated widespread mainstream media coverage. Each entry was given equal consideration and the resulting content was entirely user generated. Future media content will rely on users to increasingly act as 'foot soldiers' on the cyber frontiers. Content and reports will increasingly percolate up towards mainstream publication, rather than down from mainstream content, which is largely the case now. Such shifts in the directional flow of information could originate from an identifiable alternative media outlet or from readers who actively participate in collecting information within a mainstream outlet.

Although the capitalistic structure does legitimize the commercial behaviour of all media, there are examples of community-minded, engaged media that value readers as citizens and not as consumers – even within a commercial structure of operation. The two need not be mutually exclusive. As Carey argued years ago, the disaffected might 'begin to reawaken when they are addressed as a conversational partner and are encouraged to join the talk rather than sit passively as spectators before a discussion conducted by journalists and experts' (Carey 1992: 14). When individuals are no longer 'passive recipients of a data dump', they actually '[find] a way to do something' (Schaffer 2007). There are exciting possibilities for an engaged, reciprocal, interactive media system that learns from one another. All media, bolstered by citizen journalism, have the ability to strengthen 'civic culture by working to reconnect people to their communities [and] draw them into politics and civic affairs' (Friedland, Rosen & Austin 2003).

Commercialism and convergence

As this text has hopefully illustrated, there is a continuum of media that stretches from the margins to the mainstream and then back again. There are most certainly important differences that remain, but it is important to recognize the similarities, which provide an important context for judging the efficaciousness of an entire media system. Obviously, we need the media – every corner of the entire media spectrum – to tell us which issues are important and why so that, as citizens, we can respond appropriately. It is perhaps telling that some of the most politically active people are also some of the broadest users of media content. For example, political activists draw upon a wider range of sources across the mediated spectrum than individuals who are less politically engaged (Rauch 2007).

All media have an effect on all citizens regardless of explicit participation within democratic societies. This text has reviewed research finding that when readers are exposed to media content about environmental destruction, there is a sharp rise in environmentally responsible behaviour, such as recycling and conservation (Davis 1995). In discussing the agenda-setting research, this text highlighted the finding that negative information about African Americans in the media tends to influence how people feel about African Americans in general (Johnson *et al.* 1997; Peffley, Shields & Williams 1996). More specifically, when viewing negative images of African Americans, viewers tend to raise their opposition to welfare (Sotirovic 2001) and overestimate the number of blacks in poverty (Gilens 1995). Media exposure has been found to influence 'citizens' evaluations of government, feelings of self-efficacy, and levels of participation in the political system' (Gandy Jr & Baron 1998). As these examples illustrate, media matter. We certainly need the media for information, but, given the potential effects of media exposure, we need a media that engages us as citizens and enlightens us as individuals within a collective human spectrum.

There is a danger that the prospect of an engaged and enlightened media could very well diminish as commercial pressures become more and more pertinent to the media system. This pervasive consumerist ideology is perhaps the most potentially damaging force to media, but also a fundamental reason behind much of the convergence in the first place. Commercialism is a driving influence on the continued coalescence of media outlets into conglomerated entities and also one of the principal reasons behind the duplicitous forms of practice found across the media spectrum. This force of commercialism will increasingly work to define the overlapping spheres of alternative and mainstream media and will also dictate how both media types continue to evolve. The deepening connection between commercialism and the media is indeed extremely worrying.

Alternative media, in particular, must aim to find avenues of growth that exist outside of the influence of foundations or advertisers. Obviously, media

cannot remove themselves from outside of the commercial culture they operate in, but direct influences from financial interests need to be reduced. This charge is equally important for the mainstream press, but their connections with financial interests have a much longer historical basis and are therefore much more difficult to disentangle. However, it is this commercial influence that is the most dangerous to citizens in need of clear information. Transparency, the celebrated model of future communication, becomes very difficult to monitor with so many commercial influences embedding deeper in content. Funding models, across the media spectrum, need to be solicited from a wider base of individual contributors, rather than a relatively few number of advertisers or corporate sponsors. There is a possibility that as commercial pressures continue to intensify throughout the media, individuals will become more aware of such pressures and increase their own personal donations to media outlets. While this possibility does exist, it is important to remember that individuals are entrapped within the same consumerist ideology, so the likelihood that they will recognize commercial pressures on media en masse remains relatively small. Yet that does not preclude the possibility of many other enlightened citizens rising up to protest the increasing commercial pressures on media content. These voices need to be heard, and those within media must do their best to respond to their concerns. Citizens deserve a media that is, at least somewhat, situated outside of corporate interests. As commercially minded alternative media move closer and closer to consumerist ideologies, citizens must first awaken to recognize these changes and then demand a retraction to media content that can operate with a greater degree of freedom from commercial interests. This is not an impossible task. Media that are funded largely by individual donations will not feel the pressure of a monolithic interest dictating content. These sorts of funding models need to increase if citizens are to receive media fare that is not saturated with consumptive images and commercial subtexts.

It has been said, 'we get the media we deserve'. As global citizens participating in what can only be seen as a collective democracy, we must demand that the entire media spectrum move away from the consumerist ideology that threatens to entrap media content within a circuitous spiral of celebrity and entertainment. Undoubtedly, individual preferences, organizational practices and media ownership all play an important role in dictating content. As this text has illustrated, when these forces are compared between alternative and mainstream media, one can see some striking areas of overlap that need further examination and contemplation. However, those working across the entire media spectrum must recognize not only the power of these forces on content but also the omnipresent, commercial ideological arc that has had a profound influence on the entire media spectrum. Obviously, media must produce revenue if they are to continue producing content within a capitalistic system and that content must continue to support those money-making pursuits within such a

system. However, it is vitally important for all media to recognize the influence that such an approach has had on media content, so that they can work to either counterbalance such an effect with other, more purposeful, routinized approaches or simply be more direct in their own awareness that such an influence exists. In doing so, all media will be much better equipped to examine their true position along the media spectrum.

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