

Towards alternative media as critical media in Africa

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Social media have enhanced and reshaped alternative media in Africa. It was unsurprising, for example, that the February 2016 edition of *New African* magazine dedicated its cover to protesters from South Africa, under the heading 'The #ashtag generation: Inside the new protest movements'. It referred to hashtags such as #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall and #ZumaMustFall as having played a critical role in shaping the struggles from below (Nyamnjoh, 2016). The courts attempted to ban students from using the #FeesMustFall, making it evident that the use of Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and other social media as alternative communication has been met with increased attempts by authorities to censor and control access to the new technologies as a way to stifle oppositional forces. Arguably, underground and oppositional communication in Africa is expanded and amplified online, but using only social media as a way to define alternative media and communication in Africa is limiting, as it does not sufficiently illustrate its role and position, or the processes, actors, forms, audiences, content and strategies involved. A fixation with social media carries the danger of overlooking other small-scale oriented communication and media used by the marginalised or have-nots. Such bottom-up alternative media forms are usually more independent of the state and the market, operating within spaces that are horizontal and counter-hegemonic – both important for self-representation.

Downing's (2001) notion of 'radical media' is useful here because it clearly points to alternative media as not only taking many different forms but also as expressing 'an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives' (2001: v). Atton (2015) underlines that issues of media power, representation, participation and citizenship are paramount, as are key questions about the 'situatedness' of alternative media and communication in specific contexts and moments. However, while we acknowledge the work of Downing (2001), Atton (2002, 2015) and others, we seek to align alternative media in Africa more with the trajectory of 'critical media'. We use critical theory to define alternative media as critical 'mass media that challenge the dominant forms of media, production, media structures, content, distribution and reception' (Fuchs, 2010: 178). Such an approach goes beyond alternative media activism to encompass media literacy and other elements of media democratisation as a way to build cooperation rather than exploitation in Africa. Here, the notion of alternative media incorporates a variety of dimensions such as difference, independence, opposition and representation, with the importance of each of these determined by the parameters of particular struggles among various groups in society (Masilela, 1996; Mano, 2007; Willems, 2012).

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The trajectory of alternative media in Africa can be situated in different historic moments and contexts. However, while several books and journals have been published on African media since the departure of the colonial powers, there is still scarce literature on Africa's alternative media and their role in political change in post-independent African nations (Mabweazara, 2015; Nyamora, 2007; Skjerdal, 2012; Spitulnik, 2002; Willems, 2015). To conceptualise alternative media as critical media, it is necessary for the history of alternative media in Africa to be understood in relation to suppressive behavior of colonial regimes, the dual legacy of European missionaries, discriminatory politics, economic inequalities in post-independent nations, and a lack of press freedom in conditions of capitalist exploitation (Nyamora, 2007). The notion of alternative media can also be situated in an informed understanding of African public life, the relations between elites and the generality of the masses. Given the widespread poverty that exists in Africa, and the growing negative effects of global capitalism on the continent, research on alternative media and communication ought to be approached from a combination of critical theory and critical political economy.

It is the aim of critical alternative media to help transform African society towards the realisation of a fairer or more 'cooperative' society by uncovering the essence behind dominant ideologies. As is noted by Fuchs (2010: 182), alternative media as critical media foster cooperation instead of competition and aim to 'produce potential for the dissolution of exploitation and oppression'. Critical alternative media are, therefore, needed to help deal with domination, express standpoints of the oppressed and dominated groups and argue for the advancement of a fairer society (2010: 173). The objective of critical research is to link researchable problems 'with interpretations that involve radical changes in the established order' (2010: 173). The form and content of critical media are thus oppositional, with clear alternatives as part of counter-hegemonic strategies against dominant forces. As a form of alternative media, critical media provide a voice to the voiceless, media power to the powerless and the means to circumvent censorships and other controls.

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