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CHAPTER 1

FROM ALTERNATIVE MEDIA TO CITIZENS' MEDIA.

*Ni los vientos son cuatro,
ni siete los colores;
caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar...*

Antonio Machado

It is 1984. Somehow I find myself riding a mule that forms part of an expedition, meandering up a wandering Andean trail. Our video equipment shakes and sways on the haunches of the mule ahead of me; "I hope the vibrations don't damage the camera," I mumble to myself. Claudia, my colleague, followed me on her own mule. Our journey had begun at dawn, when four men came to pick us up at the small hostel on the town's plaza. The night before we had agreed on the time and place. They would guide us to villages and communities accessible only by foot or by mule and

we had chosen the latter. The men belong to a grassroots organization of *campesinos* (peasants), what in Latin America we call *grupos populares*. This *grupo popular* (grassroots group) struggles against the conditions of growing inequality that have fallen on the rural populations of Samaná, Caldas, a coffee-producing region hidden in the Colombian Andes. The goal of our journey is to create a video piece about their work, the evolution of their movement, and the escalation of military and para-military attempts to exterminate any organized grassroots mobilization in the country. We film all day, interviewing several group members in their homes, their fields, trying to capture their everyday life of work, family, and political activity. Near day's end one of the interviewees asks me if there is any way they can see the footage, and I remember having seen an old black and white television set in one of the houses. The owner is pleased to loan his television set, and I connect it to our small camcorder; before I am finished, word has spread and the room buzzes with neighbors hoping to view the final product of our comings and goings through their day. Pushing the play button, I sweat in beads that roll down my face; the small room has become increasingly hot and humid as the whole community has crowded to join us; none wants to be left out; viewing the raw footage has become an important event. It was the first time that the community had the chance to look at itself on television, and this first encounter with a mediated image of itself had profound effects on each of its members. All my

readings on democratic communication and unbalanced information flows could have never prepared me to understand the profundity of this experience. I was witnessing a community looking at itself and in the process, transforming its self-images. I will never forget one woman reacting to the footage taken at her house: "I never realized my kitchen could be so beautiful!" The solidified perception of her kitchen was now shaken by the new perspective allowed her by the video camera.

More than fifteen years later, I have participated in many different alternative media experiences. I have witnessed how marginalized urban women in Colombia and poor young Latinos in Texas produce alternative video; how Catalans of different ages, genders, and walks of life develop their own alternative television programming in Spain; how men and women from isolated rural areas in northern Nicaragua build their own alternative radio information system.

My initial interest in alternative media was inspired by the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) and its hopes to balance the flow of information and communication. This UNESCO project sought to reach this goal by putting electronic media in the hands of citizens and communities who traditionally had been denied access to the production and distribution of media messages. According NWICO, alternative media then would alter the old power equation between powerful transnational media corporations and powerless audiences.

What I found during my journeys with alternative media

producers was far more complex than what NWICO predicted. I saw that men and women in these projects undergo compelling transformations in which established sociological, psychological, and even existential "givens" suddenly are questioned. I could see how producing alternative media messages implies much more than simply challenging the mainstream media with *campesino* correspondents as new communication and information sources. It implies having the opportunity to create one's own images of self and environment; it implies being able to recodify one's own identity with the signs and codes that one chooses, thereby disrupting the traditional acceptance of those imposed by outside sources; it implies becoming one's own story teller, regaining one's own voice; it implies reconstructing the self-portrait of one's own community and one's own culture; it implies exploring the infinite possibilities of one's own body, one's own face, to create facial expressions (a new codification of the face) and non-verbal languages (a new codification of the body) never seen before; it implies taking one's own languages out of their usual hiding place and throwing them out there, into the public sphere and seeing how they do, how they defeat other languages, or how they are defeated by other languages . . . what matters is that for the first time, one's shy languages, languages used to remain within the familiar and the private, take part in the public arena of languages and discourse.

I could also see how dramatically pre-established cultural codes and traditional power relations were disrupted. Men and

women who had always and only seen themselves as audiences had to reconstruct their self-perspective and social context as they became message producers and senders. Their point of view shifted from one of passive receivers with little control to that of messengers responsible for seeking and filtering information.

Women, accustomed to having men "guide" them and considering this natural, had to reframe their whole outlook on gender relations as they directed male actors for their own alternative soap operas. In some cases, where a woman's subordination to men is the main source of her identity, revising one's convictions about gender relationships implies a complete reformulation of one's entire world view.

As I tried to conceptualize all these experiences, I found myself in a vacuum. I realized that the theoretical frameworks and concepts we communication scholars have used to explore and understand alternative communication and media are in a different realm. Our theorizing uses categories too narrow to encompass the lived experiences of those involved with alternative media. Communication academics and media activists began looking at alternative media as a hopeful option to counterbalance the unequal distribution of communication resources that came with the growth of big media corporations. This origin has located the debate in rigid categories of power and binary conceptions of domination and subordination that elude the fluidity and complexity of alternative media as a social, political, and cultural phenomenon. It's like trying to capture the beauty of

dancers' movements with one photograph. I then embarked on a journey toward finding a new route to conceptualize alternative media; my goal was to break away from the traditional static and essentialist definitions of democracy, citizenship, and democratic communicative action, concepts that necessarily inform our theorizing alternative media. Also, this new theoretical framework had to be powerful enough to capture all the richness of the lived experiences I had witnessed so closely. Although I intended to break away from static and essentialist definitions, I was also well aware of the risk of arriving at the postmodern cul-de-sac of a social reality and a social subject mutating ad infinitum. Consequently, I needed a theoretical proposal that while formulating non-essentialist and dynamic conceptualizations, managed to avoid the political paralysis of drastic postmodernism. My explorations in the fields of communication studies and cultural studies did not offer a satisfying answer. The communication studies perspective from which the politics of alternative media and participatory communication are interpreted is still trapped in traditional concepts of oppositional politics; that is, politics of resistance are still thought of exclusively in terms of subversive action. Cultural studies also failed to provide a satisfying theoretical base because as Douglas Kellner (1995) has poignantly stated,

[t]he failure of cultural studies today to engage the issue of alternative media is more puzzling and less excusable since there are today a variety of venues for alternative film and video production, community radio, computer

bulletin boards and discussion forums, and other forms of communications in which citizens and activists can readily intervene. (336)

While cultural studies seem to be concerned with the media texts of the dominant and how audiences interact with them, the media texts of ordinary citizens have not achieved status as objects of study. My search was finally rewarded by the inspiring theorization of democracy and politics of change developed by two feminist scholars, Chantal Mouffe and Kristie McClure. From a feminist perspective Mouffe and McClure have formulated new theoretical visions of the political subject, the political action, and the citizen. Mouffe's and McClure's theory of radical democracy is an attempt to develop non-essentialist and dynamic conceptualizations to re-think politics and social change. This chapter explains how their theory of radical democracy offers a rich and original theoretical framework to capture the lived experiences of alternative media.

Point of Departure: The MacBride Report

Without doubt the 1970s was a decade of intense turmoil in the world of international communication. On the floor of the United Nations, and particularly of the UNESCO, representatives from Third World countries exposed a scenario of communication injustices. They protested a situation where the flow of information and communication from First World countries into Third World countries was tens of times stronger than from Third

World countries into First World countries.¹ Also, what was then called South-to-South communication—that is, communication and information traveling directly from one Third World country to another—was practically non-existent. Of equal or more importance was the fact that most of the globe's media traffic was controlled by a few transnational communication corporations (TNCCs), all located in the United States, Western Europe, and Japan (Mattelart 1974, 1977, 1983).

According to data gathered at the time by international communication scholars, most of the news media circulating around the world was produced by a handful of press agencies mostly from First World countries: AP and UPI from the United States, Reuter from Germany, Agence France Press from France, and TASS from the former Soviet Union. Several negative consequences arising from this situation were emphasized. First, most information from Third World countries was gathered by First World international reporters who "objectively reported" the underdeveloped world from a very limited, First-World-perspective; conceived in terms of its backwardness, wilderness, and poverty, the Third World, as a result, became an array of images of violence, poverty, and natural disasters in the world's information media.

¹ According to the MacBride Report: while Europe produces an average of 12,000 new book titles every year, African nations produce less than 350 (Hamelink 1995, 296); the flow of telephone, telex, and telegraph data among Third World countries is less than 10% of the globe's total; the flow of news from First World countries to Third World countries is 100 times more than the flow of news from the Third World to the First World; while Europe broadcasts 855 hours of television programming to Africa, only 70 hours of African television reach European

Second, even Third World countries themselves were consuming those same one-sided images of themselves, which was particularly ironic given their geographic, social, and political nearness. Thus, the establishment of direct information and communication channels between Third World countries, also called South-to-South communication, became a priority.

Third, not only was the information about the Third World limited in its perspective, it was also restricted in terms of its quantity. The amount of circulating news items about the First World was incomparably greater than the number of items about the Third World. Thus, almost 40% of all foreign reporting in American newspapers is about Western Europe and North America, while Latin America is "conspicuously underreported" (Frederick 1993, 132).

As a way to shift this state of things, Third World communication scholars and policy makers recommended the establishment of Third World press agencies. These enterprises would favor local reporters to gather information about their own societies, from their own point of view; also, the information would be distributed directly from one Third World country to the rest, therefore bypassing the influence of First World information producers. The most salient example of a Third World press agency that resulted from all of this is InterPress Service (IPS); although many journalists and other communication professionals have invested enormous efforts in making this

countries (Hamelink 1995, 298).

project a reality IPS has never been able to compete with First World press agencies. Thus, while "the average daily news production of the world agencies ranges from an output of 17 million words a day by AP to 3.3 million words by Agence France Press . . . InterPress Service puts out 150,000 words a day" (Hamelink 1995, 300).

The entertainment media did not fare better. The data gathered at the time exposed a situation in which a disproportionate number of television shows, films, and magazine items was produced and distributed by ubiquitous communication corporations. Located in the United States, most of these corporations exported their products to the rest of the world, and particularly to Third World countries, where many domestic television and film industries were still in their infancy and could not produce comparable high technical quality programming.²

As a result, Third World populations were consuming a daily ration of media products that reflected the culture and values of the country of origin, the United States. The implications were soon voiced by Third World scholars and policy makers. The constant consumption of foreign values and cultural forms would eventually erode local cultures, undermine national identities, and limit the advancement of national communication industries. Instead of strengthening its own forces in order to shape its own identities and destinies, Third World countries were becoming

² However, this is not true for all cases. In Latin America, for example, Argentina and Mexico had very strong film industries. Argentinean and Mexican films were exported and viewed in many

alienated entities without a clear idea of who they were and where they wanted to go.

In this case too the recommendations were clear: national communication policies and media regulations had to be formulated by each Third World nation in order to protect its "electronic sovereignty." Also, the UNESCO stated that a more balanced (and fair) world information and communication order would require the diversification of sources. A monopoly of a few TNCCs controlling the global flow of communication products should be replaced by a scenario where many diverse social subjects could have access to the media, not only as audiences, but also as producers.

Many of these issues concerning the democratization of communication were first exposed by UNESCO in the MacBride Report (UNESCO 1980).³ The debate around processes of democratization of communication and redistribution of communicative power evolved around a macro and international approach to democracy. The controversy focused mainly around issues of inequality in information flows between rich countries (the North, the core, or the First World) and the poor countries of the South (the periphery, or Third World). From this perspective, solutions proposed by those striving for more democratic communication

other countries in the region.

³ In 1976 Amadou Mathar M'Bow, Director of UNESCO, appointed a commission of sixteen experts; their assignment was to examine global communication problems. Chaired by Sean MacBride, the commission gathered data for two years (1977-1979); the commission's final report, which painted a shocking scenario in terms of information inequalities between First and Third World

practices included national communication policies, South-to-South communication and information channels, and a code of ethics for the mass media. All these solutions were supposed to foster a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO).⁴

Almost two decades later, however, evidence of the NWICO's failure is overwhelming. Not only do the information and communication flows remain unbalanced, but the mass media are controlled by fewer and fewer owners. The late 1980s and early 1990s—the Reagan/Thatcher era—brought a climate of deregulation and privatization that resulted in the mergers of already powerful transnational corporations (Mohammadi 1997). Called by Bagdikian (1997) “the new communications cartel,” less than twenty giants, most of them US or Western European based, have gained control over the great majority of global communications.⁵

Meanwhile, the developing countries control even less of the information and communication global traffic; although tightly integrated to the telecommunications flow as important markets for TNCCs, these countries possess “a mere 7% of the existing stock of telecommunications resources” (Mohammadi 1997, 69). In terms of the news media, the number of international press

countries, is known as the MacBride Report.

⁴ For a detailed history of the NWICO see Hamelink 1997b; for bibliography on NWICO see Roach.

⁵ The “communications cartel” consists of world communication giants Time Warner (United States), Disney (United States), Bertelsmann (Germany), News Corp. (Australia), Capital Cities/ABC (United States), Hachette (France), CBS (United States), Gannet (United States), Fininvest (Italy), Paramount (United States), Sony (Japan), Pearson PLC (England), Qintex (Australia), Maxwell (England), Globo (Brazil), and Televisa (Mexico) (Hamelink 1997a).

agencies has shrunk since the early 1980s. Today, most of the flow of international news is carried by only three major players: Associated Press, Reuter, and Agence France Press; the global flow of visual news is dominated by Reuters Television and World Television Network (WTN) and rumors of a merger between these two would lead to the world's visual news coming out of one single source (Hamelink 1997a, 92-94).

In a recent diagnosis of the current state of the MacBride recommendations Cees Hamelink (1997b) finds that not only did these proposals never become realities, but also "even the acronyms NIIO [New International Information Order] and later NWICO have practically disappeared from the multilateral debate" (84). Under pressure to modernize their communication infrastructures Third World countries were urged to privatize media industries in fear of being "left out" of the communication revolution. In an attempt to join the newly labeled "informational society" Third World countries opened the gates to TNCCs and shifted away from national communication policies and regulation.

In view of the failure of national governments and international agencies to balance the global flows of information and communication, several scholars have suggested that the debate on the democratization of communication should take a different course. During the late 1970s and early 1980s several international conferences became forums for a novel approach to the democratization of communication; among these stand the

People's Alternatives to Mass Communication held in Barcelona in 1978 and the Twelfth Conference of the International Association for Mass Communication held in Caracas in 1980 (Reyes Matta 1986).

The new perspective visualized social movements and grassroots organizations and their alternative media as the new key players in the processes of democratization of communication. In 1981, *Comunicación Alternativa y Cambio Social*, a landmark volume on alternative communication in Latin America was published in Mexico (Simpson Grinberg 1981b). Here, some of the most prominent Latin American communication scholars stated the potential of alternative media to counterbalance the trend toward transnational communication and cultural imperialism (Capriles 1981, Simpson Grinberg 1981a, Reyes Matta 1981, Portales 1981). The hope was now for these newly politicized social subjects (social movements, grassroots organizations, *grupos populares*) to establish their own small scale media outlets and to spin their own communication and information networks, therefore bypassing the TNCCs (Servaes 1992). Apart from providing their audiences with alternative information, these new media-labeled alternative media-were expected to divert from the top-down vertical mode of communication characteristic of the mainstream mass media. While the big media function on the basis of a hierarchy between media producers and media audiences, where the latter have no voice and are restricted to a passive role of receiving media messages, alternative media were thought of as the panacea of horizontal

communication, whereby senders and receivers share equal access to communicative power.

In their article entitled "Farewell to NWICO?," Sparks and Roach (1990) exclaimed that "[i]t is not in the corridors of power that the new order will be forged but in the little experiments in which workers and peasants attempt to find new ways of communicating their ideas and their experiences to each other" (280). In the same vein, Mattelart and Mattelart (1992) called for "[t]he local dimension as opposed to centralism, the ordinary as opposed to the sensational, and experience as opposed to ideas" (168). Antonio Pasquali (1992) favored "even modest actions, as part of a coherent plan, and a 'leap-frog strategy' as opposed to Pharaonic and unfeasible theories" (7).

Even the MacBride Round Table, held in Prague in September of 1990, concluded:

[t]he debate around the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) has thus returned to where it started. It is now in the arena of professional organizations, of communication researchers and most importantly, in the arena of grassroots movements, representing ordinary men, women and children who are directly affected by our current cultural and communication environments. (quoted in Roncagliolo 1992, 10)

Bruck and Raboy (1989) advanced this approach to the NWICO debate by bringing to the fore much needed questions concerning the alternativity of alternative media:

[alternative media] oblige us to ask serious political questions such as: Who is to control them? Autonomous collectives? If so, responsible to whom? Political organizations? If so, how can they avoid being mere propaganda sheets? The issue of media control is a microcosm of the issue of democracy in social life

generally, and poses the same difficult questions. Are alternative media to produce the sender-receiver communication model of the mass media, or are they to be two-way means of communication? And how are they to be sustained? These questions have not yet been resolved, and are too rarely asked by alternative media activists. (12)

Also, as the overwhelming power of TNCCs is perceived as a force affecting all societies and cultures, grassroots organizations and their alternative media are thought to have an important role not only in the poor countries, but in all regions of the world, including post-industrial societies (Lewis 1984b, Stangelaar 1983). In the wealthier societies of North America and Western Europe, alternative media were seen as a movement to defend a quality of life under siege by the transnational expansion of capitalism. Issues such as the arms race, nuclear war, state control of everyday life, and the creative use of free time defined "a common platform on which people from many social groups ask[ed] whether life could not be lived differently, beyond the order defined by the market and the laws of cost and benefit" (Reyes Matta 1986, 196).

Within this new framework alternative media were conceived as the new battle ground from which the new communication order would emerge. As communication scholars and activists, we were inspired with a vision, a new mediascape where alternative media would have hegemonic power; in 1986 Reyes Matta stated, "[T]hus, the alternative spiral builds a dynamic of progress toward a time when the social and popular movements that are disadvantaged today will have hegemony" (203).

It is clear that the debate around alternative media implied a relocation of the debate on the democratization of communication—a relocation from international organizations, national governments, and large media conglomerates, to citizen groups and grassroots organizations, and their attempts to use the media in their own different way. But a relocation of the debate on democratization of communication should go beyond a mere re-accommodation of the same old concepts to a local scale. The new direction for a debate on the democratization of communication should imply finding a new conceptual framework that can capture how democratic communication **happens** within alternative media. And although the debate has shifted gears, I believe our theorizing the democratization of communication has remained trapped within a vision of politics and democracy rooted in "grand narratives of emancipation" (Kellner 1995, 45) and essentialist concepts of power, citizenship, and political action.

Theorizing Alternative Media

Academic literature on alternative media includes two types of works: first, descriptive pieces where a case of alternative media is explained in detail, from its origin, to its funding sources, and types of programming. Chapter 2 consists of a review of this type of material, which allows us to grasp the rich complexity of alternative media as a communicative phenomenon.

The second type of work develops a theoretical analysis that attempts to capture the essence of alternative media and/or to explain the importance of these media as processes of communication and democracy. It is this second type of work that I address here.

Framed within the ideas of the NWICO as explained above, much of the academic literature on alternative media emanates from specific concepts of power and democracy (Esteinou Madrid 1986; Fox and Schmucler 1982; Kaplún 1986; Reyes Matta 1983, 1986; Simpson Grinberg 1981a, 1986). Power is conceived as a binary opposition between the powerful versus the powerless. In this all-or-nothing conceptualization of power, social subjects are historically located in one or the other side of the power dichotomy. Thus, mass media corporations are conceived as historically located in the camp of the powerful, while indigenous groups, ethnic minorities, Third World peoples, and other groups of ordinary people are deemed on the side of the powerless. In other words, a historical subject (a big media corporation, or a grassroots organization) is thought to be either powerful or powerless; once the subject has been positioned in one of these camps, the corresponding element of the binary becomes an innate characteristic; that is, being powerful or powerless becomes an essential trait of the subject's nature (thus, big media corporations become essentially powerful while grassroots organizations become essentially powerless).

Framing their analyses with these types of categories,

several academics study alternative media in terms of their success or their failure in balancing the power equation between TNCCs and powerless communities. In this David versus Goliath scenario alternative media are frequently declared a failure (Portales 1983). In this line of thought Pradip Thomas (1997) maintains that alternative media initiatives are undergoing "a severe crisis of credibility," and Geoffrey Reeves (1993) points out that one of the salient characteristics of alternative media is their vulnerability. In their distinctively cynical voice and based on their study of French and Belgian alternative media, Mattelart and Piemme (1980a) pronounce alternative video a failed illusion: "Against those laggards who still believed that socialism was Soviets plus electricity, [community video activists] dreamt of a Babel-like explosion in which the cry of protest from the base, transmitted by the new technologies, would act to check the unequal linguistic distribution within society and thus its system of power. The hope was a noble one; its only failing was that it was impregnated by myth" (321; see also Mattelart and Piemme 1980b).

Dorothy Kidd (1998) has pointed out how even the political economists of the media (Vincent Mosco, Herbert Schiller, Ben Bagdikian) have relegated alternative media to a footnote, always limited to the end of their "gloomy truth-telling" (8). Similarly, in an interesting study of diverse discourses on access television in the United States, Robert Devine (1995) has

shown how communication academics⁶ have marginalized access TV as nothing but an amateurish, illusory, and ineffective attempt to democratize the media. Their critique, writes Devine, is based on the expectation that alternative media should deliver the same democratizing potential as the mass media, in terms of circulating professionally packaged ideas among wide audiences; against this standard, of course, alternative media are always doomed to fail.

Several authors point at the difficulty of imposing one label—alternative media—to very diverse media experiences that in some cases have little in common (Paiva 1983, Portales 1983). For example Alfredo Paiva (1983) confesses that “we had to accept that what we call alternative communication is a heterogeneous set of media practices developed by very diverse groups and organizations, in specific and different contexts, and employing a great variety of media” (29). In examining the heterogeneity of media experiments grouped under the category of alternative media, authors such as Paiva barely touch on the complexity of this communicative phenomenon and how this complexity is hardly contained by their binary categories. For a case in point, Paiva observes that in Latin America alternative media are carried out by the most varied social groups, such as women’s groups, ethnic minorities, neighborhood associations, etc. However, his assumption of a concept of power as a binary opposition forces

⁶ The following scholars' critiques of alternative media are included in Devine's (1995) study: Janine Marchessault, Pat Aufderheide, David Trend, David Sholle, Andrew Blau, Laurie

him to overlook the rich potential of such diversity and to articulate it as a limitation. On the basis of similar analyses, alternative media have been accused of being "dispersed," "fragmented," or "shattered" (Paiva 1983, Portales 1983). Moreover, alternative media were seen as a promising political venue only as long as they succeeded in overcoming their fragmentation. Alternative media's potential was recognized only if the array of small scale and diverse media experiences could organize and join forces around a unified project for social change at a national level (Paiva 1983, Portales 1983, Schulein and Robina 1983). Following this line of thought Paiva (1983) declares that the ultimate goal of alternative media is "the construction of a new hegemony" (52), and Portales (1983) says that "alternative media are meaningful only in view of a global process of democratization" (60). Similarly, after studying twenty-two participatory communication projects in Latin America, O'Sullivan-Ryan and Kaplún (1978) conclude that "[they] have no real impact on the prevailing national communication system" (88).

Confronted with such heterogeneity, communication scholars defined alternative media by what-they-were-not, instead of by what-they-were. This analytic strategy entrapped these analyses into oppositional thinking and binary categories. Thus, within Latin American communication scholarship, for example, alternative media were thought as "the other media," as opposed

to the big mainstream mass media (Paiva 1983); another label frequently used is "marginal media" as opposed to, again, the "central" mass media (Portales 1983); or, "confrontational media" as opposed to the complaisant mass media (Reyes Matta 1982).

Although the vast majority of academic analyses of alternative media have been framed within the binary categories explained above, a few attempts have been made to transcend this restrictive understanding.

Buried under a rigid orthodox Marxist framework is Simpson Grinberg's (1986) observation on the rich potential of alternative media to disrupt the established social order and to spin novel social processes: "Alternative communication thus forms outposts for new social relationships and, specifically, establishes constitutive practices in a wide variety of processes that often—because their 'heterodox' characteristics—fall outside the limits of orthodox vanguard perception and theory" (179). Although Simpson Grinberg insinuates here the limitations of what he calls "vanguard theory" (meaning an analysis founded on Marxist concepts of class struggle and ideology), his own exploration of alternative media remains trapped in these same categories.

In an attempt to free alternative media from the David-versus-Goliath framework, Mario Kaplún suggests that their real goal is not to solve the world unbalanced information flows, but to strengthen popular organization and mobilization. Quoting Maria Cristina Mata, Kaplún (1983) goes as far as stating that

what gives meaning to alternative media is indeed "external to communication issues" (41 my translation). In the same line of thought, Ana María Nethol refers to the rich potential of alternative communication in its capacity to transform the human subject (Nethol 1983). However, Kaplún's and Nethol's voices were marginalized at the time by an overwhelming articulation of the debate in terms of the small media versus the big media.

An interesting exception to the type of analyses of alternative media based on binary categories is John Downing's *Radical Media* (1984, 17-24). Drawing from Emma Goldman's feminist anarchism and Sheila Rowbotham's Marxist feminism, Downing sketches four guiding principles to re-think media democracy. These are first, the need to acknowledge oppression as a heterogeneous and fragmented reality; second, the need to build lateral links between fragmented movements against oppression(s); third, the need to visualize the struggle against oppression in terms of movements and not as institutions; and fourth, the need to think of liberation as an everyday process that disrupts immediate realities. Principles one and three are particularly poignant because they attempt to break away from a concept of oppression as a static reality with an immutable essence. While principle one suggests that as a social phenomenon oppression lacks continuity, principle three evokes the idea of resistance as movement, a phenomenon in flux, that escapes our attempts to trap it into a specific social subject (a class, an ethnic minority, a gender, etc.). Downing's analysis

reminds us of the urgency of revising and rescuing feminist anarchism as a potential contributor to the development of contemporary explorations of issues of power.

The second edition of *Radical Media* (forthcoming 1999) offers a still more stimulating theoretical proposal. Here, Downing integrates a wide variety of promising concepts and theories into a rich theoretical palette. Expanding way beyond anarchism, Downing brings together schools of thought as diverse as popular culture theories (Horkheimer and Adorno, Martín Barbero), audience studies (Janice Radaway, John Fiske), theories of hegemony and resistance (Antonio Gramsci, James C. Scott), Marxist class analyses, social movements theories (Alain Touraine), Paulo Freire's theory of conscientization, Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas on quotidian discourses, theories of communication and democracy (Raymond Williams, James Carey, and Michael Schudson among others), Walter Benjamin's and Bertold Brecht's exploration of interactive media, and dada and surrealist vanguards. The result is a powerful conceptual "tool box" available to scholars and media activists in our attempts to explore and understand alternative media.

Another important attempt to free the study of alternative media from binary essentialist categories is Robert Huesca and Brenda Dervin's critical examination of Latin American literature on alternative media (Dervin and Huesca 1997; Huesca and Dervin 1994). In their 1994 study these authors identify the main dualisms that prevail in Latin American studies of alternative

communication. They find that categories such as vertical communication versus horizontal communication, communication for domination versus communication for liberation, and communication as information versus communication as dialogue⁷ entrap this literature into a legacy of dualisms that "has led to theoretical confusion and truncated alternative possibilities" (Huesca and Dervin 1994, 55). Remaining within Latin American communication scholarship, Huesca and Dervin find a few convincing guiding posts to liberate the study of alternative communication from rigid dualisms; particularly novel ideas such as García Canclini's "hybrid cultures," Jesús Martín Barbero's "mestizaje," and "popular culture"⁸ seem to suggest a promising theoretical path. However, Huesca and Dervin conclude that "[N]o theories of alternative practice as such have emerged" (Huesca and Dervin 1994, 66); that is, although the guiding posts are there, no one has systematically used them to develop a different theory of alternative communication.

In a more recent piece Dervin and Huesca (1997) propose a novel paradigmatic move to the study of participatory communication. Baptized as "Verbing," (also known as Sense-

⁷ These authors link the works of particular communication scholars with each of these three dualisms; thus, the ideas of Luis Ramiro Beltrán, Paulo Freire, Elizabeth Fox, Jesús Martín Barbero, and Fernando Reyes Matta reflect the vertical/horizontal dualism; the works of Máximo Simpson Grinberg, Fernando Reyes Matta, J. Martínez Terrero, Alan O'Connor, and Alfonso Paiva are linked to the domination/liberation category; and the scholarship of Antonio Pasquali, Mario Kaplún, and Oswaldo Capriles is seen as building on the information/dialogue dichotomy (Huesca and Dervin 1994).

⁸ For an extensive historical account of these ideas see

Making) this new epistemological and ontological proposal is founded on the idea that the universe inhabits some intermediate place between order and chaos. In other words, our reality, our knowing that reality, and ourselves emerge from the continuous interaction between order and chaos. Assuming the Verbing paradigm implies a new understanding of reality as something always in the making, never complete, it follows, so will be our understandings of such reality; therefore, no theory or concept is ever final, and instead we should engage in a dialogue of knowledges. Also, if we acknowledge that a person exists in the juncture between order and chaos we could begin to understand "that we are sometimes unconscious, sometimes decentered, sometimes disordered; that we are in a constant state of moving between order and chaos; that it is just as much a struggle to fall in line (i.e., to make ourselves fit our surroundings, our cultures, our societies), as it is to fall out of line (i.e., to resist and challenge our surroundings, our cultures, our societies)" (Dervin and Huesca 1997, 67).

Drawing from ethnographic data gathered among alternative radio reporters in Bolivia, Huesca (1996; 1995b) articulates how alternative communicative action moves constantly between order and chaos. Huesca (1996) describes how, in their training of Bolivian peasants, alternative radio activists act upon intuition plus a deep involvement in the trainees' social and cultural environments. That is, breaking away from "detached or

predetermined positions" (Huesca 1996, 49) the trainer/teacher shapes the training sessions acting upon each specific situation, allowing for his/her preconceived notions (order) to be reshaped once and again (chaos). Further, interviewing miners' radio practitioners, Huesca (1995b) detects a mode of communication that is based on the fluidity and contingency of social reality and social change and departs from traditional ideas of sequence, causality, and continuity. Such mode of communication is "driven by sense, moment, and relationship" (Huesca 1995b, 161), in a move that pressures practitioners to seek multiple sources, to ground content in everyday life, and to anchor their communication practice in a deep commitment to the community, instead of their professional savoir-faire.

The potential of Downing's, and Dervin's and Huesca's theoretical proposals is unquestionable. What follows is my own different attempt to break the boundaries of binary thinking. While I try to remain in dialogue with the above mentioned theoretical proposals, I move this exploration in a different direction, guided by the radical democracy conceptual proposal.

What would result if we shifted the angle from which we are looking at alternative media? What would develop from a different concept of power? What would happen if we started from a different notion of what power is, how it functions, how it affects us, and what it entails? I believe that as a consequence of our entrapment in a binary notion of power we miss seeing how multiple streams of power relationships are disrupted in the

everyday lives of alternative media participants. If we were to focus our gaze in the communities that develop alternative media, we could see the myriad of power equations that involve anyone and everyone in the community; we could also appreciate how these power equations are not static but permanently shifting and changing, that is, how power relationships are permanently re-constituted. We could also recognize how not even at the individual level does power exist as a fixed essence. Within a community, men and women are not fixed in one power position; instead, their identities are permanently displaced along a continuum. Sometimes we are more powerful, other times we become powerless; access to power continually changes as people move through the landscapes of everyday life. That is, power is activated by all and each of the relationships in which we participate. Each of our everyday identities enters into games of power relationships with others' multiple identities; in some instances identities will become identities-in-conflict. It is from these everyday movements that power emerges, more as a force than an essence. It is within the realm of the quotidian where we see the clashing of rural and urban, male and female, adult and young, local and global. However, our conceptualization of alternative media producers in terms of a homogeneous political agent has blinded our capacity to capture these power dynamics.

Exploring issues of power and democracy two feminist scholars, Chantal Mouffe (1992c; 1992b; 1992a; 1988; also, Laclau and Mouffe 1985) and Kristie McKlure (1992), offer a

revolutionary perspective to think about the processes of social change. Their theory of radical democracy delves into new understandings of how power is produced, who produces power, and how processes of constitution and reconstitution of power affect democratic processes. In the following pages I intend to present their most relevant ideas in light of my search for a new way to theorize alternative media.

Power Explodes, the New Political Subject Emerges

Questioning from a feminist perspective the concept of the political subject as a unified and homogeneous identity, Mouffe (1988) conceives social subjects as having heterogeneous and multiple "identities" (90). In the case of relations involving social subordination, for example, the same individual can be dominant in one relation and subordinated in another. Mouffe (1992c) suggests: "[w]e can then conceive the social agent as constituted by an ensemble of 'subject positions' that can never be totally fixed in a closed system of differences, constructed by a diversity of discourses among which there is no necessary relation, but a constant movement of overdetermination and displacement" (372).

Within this new approach, Mouffe (1988) suggests that social subjects can be seen as subjectivities "to use the Lacanian term, sutured at the intersection of various discourses" (90). Moreover, Mouffe's theory of radical democracy does not consider the social subject as constituted by an essence but by his/her

historical location: "We are confronted with the emergence of a plurality of subjects, whose forms of constitution and diversity **it is only possible to think if we relinquish the category of 'subject' as a unified and unifying essence**" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 181; my emphasis). In other words, the fact that a human being belongs to a historically oppressed group (i.e., an indigenous community in an Anglo-dominated society) does not make him/her part of a specific "interest group" with specific needs and demands. In contrast, each social subject will experience "being indigenous" in a different way according to other social dimensions, such as his/her gender, social class, age, etc. As political subjects we emerge out of all this; we are located in differentiated power positions, but we are not fixed in these positions; they are historical, meaning, our location on a power continuum can be altered from within or without. McClure (1992) explains:

subjectivities are socially located, temporally specific and potentially riven within a series of other relational differences. And where social subjects are complexly constituted not only through categories of gender, but of race and sexuality, ethnicity and class, and perhaps of religion and nationality as well, a position of privilege within one frame may be simultaneously and contradictorily constructed within a position of oppression within another. (122)

Mouffe declares that this new understanding of the social subject as a kaleidoscopic encounter of identities and differentiated "portions-of-power" is a necessary condition for understanding the richness of everyday political struggles. When

applying this concept to alternative media, the richness of experiencing the reappropriation of mediated communication comes to life in all its exuberance. As I intend to show in the following chapters, alternative media function as environments that facilitate the fermentation of identities and power positions. In other words, alternative media spin transformative processes that alter people's sense of self, their subjective positionings, and therefore their access to power.

From Alternative Media to Citizens' Media

The concept of multiple subjectivities serves as a basis on which Mouffe (1992b) recasts the concept of citizen. The radical democratic concept of citizenship "implies seeing citizenship not as a legal status but as a form of identification, a type of political identity: something to be constructed, not empirically given" (Mouffe 1992b, 231). Thus, citizens are not born as such; citizenship is not a status granted on the basis of some **essential** characteristic. Citizens have to enact their citizenship on a day-to-day basis, through their participation in everyday political practices: "The citizen is not, as in liberalism, someone who is the passive recipient of specific rights and who enjoys the protection of the law" (Mouffe 1992b, 235).

Along with its active nature, citizenship has to do with empowerment. As citizens actively participate in actions that reshape their own identities, the identities of others, and their

social environment, they produce power. Contributing to the radical democracy theoretical proposal, Sheldon Wolin (1992) explains the concept of power as a condition for citizenship, which is much more than simply a matter of claiming rights:

"[Citizenship] is about the capacity to generate power, for that is the only way that things get established in the world. And it is about the capacity to share in power, to cooperate in it, for that is how institutions and practices are sustained" (250).

Wolin (1992) states the importance of empowerment and the sites where empowerment and citizenship happen:

A political being is not to be defined as the citizen has been, as an abstract, disconnected bearer of rights, privileges and immunities, but as a person whose existence is located in a particular place and draws its sustenance from circumscribed relationships: family, friends, church, neighborhood, workplace, community, town, city. These relationships are the sources from which political beings draw power—symbolic, material, and psychological—and that enable them to act together. For true political power involves not only acting so as to effect decisive changes; it also means the capacity to receive power, to be acted upon, to change and to be changed. From a democratic perspective, power is not simply force that is generated; it is experience, sensibility, wisdom, even melancholy distilled from the diverse relations and circles we move within. (252)

Also, the theory of radical democracy reformulates the ways in which power is enacted and citizenship is expressed. Breaking away from a modern understanding of citizenship as expressed by voting and protesting, the theory of radical democracy advances a concept of a political subject as one who expresses his/her citizenship in multiple forms, including, for example, the collective transformation of symbolic codes, historically

legitimized identities, and traditionally established social relations (Wolin 1992, 251).⁹

In light of this novel theoretical definition of citizenship, I propose we abandon the term alternative media and coin a new marker: "citizens' media." Because "alternative media" rests on the assumption that these media are alternative to something, this definition will easily entrap us into binary thinking: mainstream media and their alternative, that is, alternative media. Also, the label "alternative media" pre-determines the type of oppositional thinking that limits the potential of these media to their ability to resist the alienating power of mainstream media. This approach blinds our understanding of all other instances of change and transformation brought about by these media.

Conversely, referring to "citizens' media" implies first that a collectivity is **enacting** its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations; and third,

⁹ On the basis of extensive ethnographic research in the AIDS community in Vancouver, Michael P. Brown (1997) explores how Mouffe's theory of radical democracy as well as her concept of citizenship apply to the politics of AIDS. His analysis clearly shows how practices such as "buddying" (where an AIDS volunteer pairs up with a person living with AIDS to offer practical and emotional support) and the AIDS quilt should be understood as quotidian politics, as political practices enacted by citizens. I believe Brown's theorizing of the emotional as political to be one of the most interesting ideas in his study. Such types of studies, where radical democratic theory is applied to everyday life attempts to reshape our lives and environments, constitutes

that these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible.

The importance of contesting social codes, identities, and social relations—that is, the "symbolic"—is explained by Mouffe as she explores the multifaceted nature of oppression. A community can be oppressed not only by exploiting its labor force, but also through the imposition of symbolic systems. Thus, democratic struggles have to be understood as processes of change that also include practices of dissent in the realm of the symbolic:

some new types of struggle must be seen as resistances to the growing uniformity of social life, a uniformity that is the result of the kind of mass culture imposed by the media. This imposition of a homogenized way of life, of a uniform cultural pattern, is being challenged by different groups that reaffirm their right to their differences, their specificity, be it through the exaltation of their regional identity or their specificity in the realm of fashion, music or language. (Mouffe 1988, 93)

According to Mouffe's proposal for a radical democracy, these practices and strategies of resistance constitute the politics of the quotidian. Within the radical democracy framework, spaces for political action expand and multiply from a political action of an interest group opposing the state to a political action within the realms of the family, the street, the workplace, the church, growing out of economic, gender, or ethnic relations (McClure 1992, 123). In other words, Mouffe's and McClure's radical democracy stretches the realm of politics from

a prolific source of new ways to think about social change.

"juridical demands upon the state" (McClure 1992, 123) to "quotidian politics—a politics which extends the terrain of political contestation to the everyday enactment of social practices and the routine reiteration of cultural representations" (McClure 1992, 123). The line demarcating the public/political and the private/non-political blurs. In quotidian politics every dimension of everyday life becomes a potential site for social contestation.

Furthermore, the nature of the political action expands to include not only demands on rights and on the quality of life, but also on the very definitions of what is culturally intelligible. That is, the transformation of legitimized cultural codes and social discourses becomes a goal of the political action. With this in mind, the alteration, through everyday life practices, of socially legitimized ideas about a group's identity is conceived as a political action (McClure 1992, 124). The permanent deconstruction of subordinate identities becomes an important task of democratic action. In short, cultural codes have become the "objects of political struggle" (McClure 1992, 124 & 236).

These concepts provide a theoretical perspective appropriate to capture the subtle and sometimes faint (but not less important or serious) movements in which individuals and their differentiated power positions coalesce when involved in citizens' media experiences. Power happens in the realm of the quotidian, and what makes citizens' media fascinating is how they

stir power in kaleidoscopic movements that fade soon after they emerge, like movements in a dance toward empowerment.

The Swamp Metaphor

Conceiving citizens' media protagonists as unified, homogenous political actors with clear, rational agendas has led us to view many of these citizens' media experiences as chaotic and politically frail. The reason? Our understanding of how democracy is built emerges from thinking about political actions and social movements as linear, continuous, and conscious processes toward a common goal. As a result, citizens' media with their often fragmented and improvised nature are dismissed for not having enough political potential to contribute significantly to the construction of democracy. In fact, citizens' media sometimes have such short life cycles that they appear and disappear leaving—what at first glance seems to be—no signature, no accomplishments, no successes. We study citizens' media with an eye for a straight line departing from point A (state of non-democracy) and heading toward point B (democracy). Instead what we find is a multitude of small forces that surface and burst like bubbles in a swamp. But in the same way that these bubbles are a clear sign that the swamp is alive, we should approach democratic communication as a live creature that contracts and expands with its own very vital rhythms—rhythms which often have very little to do with the linear, pre-planned, and rational processes that inform our scholarly inquiries. That

is, instead of thinking democracy an ultimate goal, a final state-of-things to reach, we should look at how democratic and non-democratic forces are being renegotiated constantly, and how citizens' media can strengthen the former, thus contributing to the—although sometimes ephemeral—swelling of the democratic. Inspired by Mouffe's theory of radical democracy, Kristie McClure rethinks a new possibility to conceptualize the political action in terms that account for this permanent movement of negotiations and renegotiations of power. Addressing our obsession for clinging to our theorizing the construction of democracy as a unified and straight-line project, McClure challenges us to let go of these prefabricated notions and to learn to capture the political action as a historical claim. A claim has a location in time and space.¹⁰ A claim is relevant only within a historical context and for a situated subject, and cannot be transferred to a different positioning. A claim only lasts for as long as the dominant forces remain unmoved. As the situation changes, the claim will also change. As opposed to the "platform" or the "social project," claims are not static, they are in constant flux following the movements of a changing social subject. Understanding political actions as historical claims, says McClure (1992), does not imply the negation of their political potential but on the contrary marks the opening of a new politics:

¹⁰ In a different context, Tony Bennet (1992) has intelligently articulated the concept of claims.

[T]o deny the uniqueness of the national state both as a site and as an object of political struggle, then, is not to eviscerate the potential for a transformative politics, but rather to resist its recuperation within the reductive and unifying mechanisms of interest group liberalism. And in this respect, it suggests the possibility of a politics that begins not with the object of constructing similarities to address rights claims to the state, **but opens rather with the object of addressing such claims to each other, and to each 'other', whoever and wherever they may be.** (123; my emphasis)

McClure (1992) recognizes that politicizing this multiple social subject, enacted in everyday life as social identities, codes, and relationships are renegotiated again and again, will have an ephemeral consistency: "It is here, then, that the possibility of direct address politicizes these postmodern subjects yet further, by recognizing their agency in such contingent reconfigurations, however local or transitory they may be" (124).

Moreover, it is our responsibility as intellectuals trying to conceptualize the construction of democracy to assume in full force the real texture of power negotiations, their fluid consistency that escapes the traps of our ineffective essentialist and static concepts. The apparent lightweight quality of the political action should not lead us into a "black hole" of political pessimism, but on the contrary, should convince us of the necessity to create new conceptual ways to capture this politics in flux.

On this basis, our explorations of citizens' media with theories and concepts that expect power struggles and the

democratization of communication¹¹ to have a hard consistency will systematically miss the political potential of these media experiments. As it is unlikely that the texture of the political action mutates, what needs changing is our perspective as communication scholars and activists trying to understand citizens' media.

¹¹ I no way am I suggesting that a struggle for more democratic communication leaves the big media off the hook. Indeed, I believe academic and activist efforts for more democratic communication should maintain multiple fronts such as political economy-type of explorations of the cultural industries, deconstruction of media texts, audiences' and consumers' organizations activism, media literacy projects, media regulation, national communication policies, and support of citizens' media.