New Developments in Anarchist Studies

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Published by Punctum Books

lilley, pj and Jeff Shantz.
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Sandra Jeppesen, Anna Kruzynski, Aaron Lakoff and Rachel Sarrasin—Collectif de recherche sur l’autonomie collective (CRAC)

Sandra: I’m going to talk about my work in an anarchist-feminist activist-researcher collective, on social movement media activism in Montreal Canada.¹

* A larger version including some of this material appeared as: Jeppesen, Sandra, Anna Kruzynski. Aaron Lakoff and Rachel Serrasin. 2014. “Grassroots Autonomous Media Practices: A Diversity of Tactics.” Journal of Media Practice 1–18

¹ Presentation at NAASN5 by Sandra Jeppesen
Introduction — Theoretical Framework

Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier suggest that “the existing genealogy of alternative media relies on an unsustainable set of distinctions such as that between non-commercial and commercial or radical and non-radical alternative media,” and that the characteristics and uses of “alternative media should be articulated as relational and contingent on the particularities of the contexts of production, distribution and consumption” (xii). This chapter analyzes autonomous grassroots media activists rooted in anarchist and anti-authoritarian social movements. According to Scott Uzelman (2005), autonomous media activists are “fostering new forms of participatory and democratic communication” (17), creating alternative institutions independent of corporations and the state. Their anti-authoritarian horizontal structures for organizing production are consistent with the politics of their content. How do these politics influence what Alice Mattoni (2013) calls, “repertoires of communication,” or the strategies engaged to create media? We have found the strategy, a ‘diversity of tactics’, first agreed to during the consultas and spokescouncils of the Quebec FTAA protests in 2001, applies to social movement media as well as it does to social movements they are rooted within.

Methodology - Participatory Action Research (PAR)

We used a Participatory Action Research methodology from 2005-2012, as members of CRAC are all rooted
with the anti-authoritarian movement in Quebec.

In phase one, anti-authoritarian feminist researchers collaborated with activist groups to develop interview questions, and conduct one-on-one interviews that were recorded, transcribed and coded in NVivo. In phase two, still collaborating with the groups, results were compiled into a monograph, along with images, flyers, posters and other ephemera. An iterative validation process included workshops, and a participatory launch. The third and final phase was a transverse analysis across all groups on specific themes.

We interviewed 127 participants from ten Quebec anti-authoritarian pro-feminist groups and networks. This paper is a transverse analysis of the theme 'alternative media'.

**Findings—Grassroots Autonomous Media in Montreal**

We found that anti-authoritarian activists use the term ‘alternative media’ to refer to a specific type of *social movement media* produced within, by, for and about grassroots autonomous social movements, what we are therefore calling “grassroots autonomous media”. Four specific tactics emerged.

**Affinities: overlapping social circles**

The first tactic targets a small subcultural audience. A par-
participant in the radical queer collective QTeam mentioned that some alternative media are disseminated through overlapping circles of friend groups, such as activist groups, student groups, housing collectives, etc. Media produced to promote events such as anarchist-feminist workshops or radical queer dance parties circulated from person to person or group to group. This tactic creates the sense of an anarchist-feminist ‘scene’, a radical queer ‘scene’, or a queer people of colour (QPOC) ‘scene’, all three of which are strong social movement micro-cohorts in Montreal.

**Spaces: anchor points for sowing the seeds of dissent**

Engaging slightly larger audiences, activist media spaces serve as anchor points for sowing the seeds of dissent. A participant in Ainsi Squat-Elles mentioned that their radio show seemed to be an “anchor point” within the Quebec feminist movement, with a core group of anarchist-feminists producing the show, and a larger group of generally feminist listeners. The ‘seeds of dissent’ from the show were ‘sown’ by listeners through subsequent informal discussions of each broadcast within the broader feminist movement. This tactic is used within a specific milieu to deepen and extend their analysis. Participants said they were trying to ‘anarchize feminism’. In workshop discussions, some were concerned that the ‘anchor point’ tactic risks consolidating power among a small group. It was
noted that spaces use skill-sharing and open collectives to better horizontalize communicative power, fostering what Starhawk, Uri Gordon and others have called, ‘power-with’ or empowerment of communities of shared interest.

Both affinity and anchor tactics are based on the principle Chanan calls “we talk to each other about us” (Alt Med Hbook 42), intentionally opening spaces of limited reach to foster safe spaces and develop political analysis among individuals who are like-minded based on identities or political commitments.

**Mass Mobilizations: the snowball effect**

Activists mobilizing mass protest convergences will use ‘the snowball effect’ to build momentum. A participant in the *Convergence des Luttes Anti-Capitalistes* or the CLAC (Convergence of anti-capitalist struggles) mentioned this media tactic was used to inform and mobilize the general public to participate in the Quebec City anti-FTAA protests in 2001. Their media committee debated the need to simplify language for a general audience who might be unfamiliar or uneasy with anti-capitalist ideas, the goal nonetheless being to render anti-capitalism comprehensible to a mainstream audience, and build relationships among single-issue groups into a mass mobilization. Some were concerned that simplifying language would water down their revolutionary politics, risking cooptation by reformists.
Solidarity: global dialogues

The fourth tactic, expanding beyond local or regional mobilizations, was to reach out across global networks. A participant in the anarcha-queer collective, Les Panthères roses, (pink panthers), mentioned dialogues with global queer anarchist communities, as zines on transphobia and sex-worker-phobia were shared, and other global radical queer groups found information on the bilingual (English/French) website and got in touch with the Panthères. The tactic of global media dialogues is used to share and co-produce knowledge in solidarity with global struggles, establishing relationships based on the anarchist concept of mutual aid.

Debates by Media Activists

Several debates arose around these tactics, which we have grouped loosely into content and production (or process).

Content

a. Self-representation

Activists argued that self-representation is crucial to correct mainstream misrepresentations of anarchists, to give voice to marginalized groups, and to disseminate a deeper, intersectional feminist anti-capitalist political analysis. Questions arose around the possibility of speaking for a small group or a broader social movement. Writers
wondered how they should acknowledge ideas from experiences within a collective. Some noted that group self-representations did not always ring true for their own experience, as the group was romanticized or described uncritically, omitting questions of internal power, with gendered and racialized implications. We found that straight white males tended to do more writing, in effect taking credit for collectively generated ideas and actions.

b. Complexity of Issues

Media activists also spoke of the challenge of representing complex issues, such as feminist intersectionality theory, on specific campaigns where they had produced in-depth knowledge. For example, in mining justice movements, resource extraction and environmental concerns intersect with indigenous sovereignty, colonialism, racism, gender, and capitalist globalization. Activist worked hard to find strategies for articulating links among all of these issues in a straightforward and concise way for a general audience.

c. Accessibility of Discourses

Complexity of issues is also related to accessibility of discourses. Media activists are committed to keeping the media accessible. Sometimes however, discourse created an insider/outsider dynamic, where people new to activism didn’t know what specific discourses meant, and felt excluded or judged if they had questions, disagreed, or used
incorrect words. Autonomous garden activists, for example, provided a lot of time for discussion of pamphlets on autonomous gardening and food security disseminated at rural community events, to reach common ground with local organic farmers who shared an affinity with the group once they could bridge discursive gaps. Many groups mentioned that media productions were only one facet of communicative action, emphasizing face-to-face communication, particularly popular education workshops.

**Process**

**a. Access to Production**

Accessibility of access to media production is also key. Some felt it was easy to get involved in autonomous media. Specifically radio participants liked that it was just talking, and they didn’t have to be good writers, or take time to write a lengthy article. ASE members felt that producing their radio show was convivial, and the collective was easy to join because of its open structure.

There was no consensus: some activists felt autonomous media was accessible, whereas others found it less so.

**b. Prefiguration**

There was, on the other hand, a strong consensus that the **context** and **process** of producing autonomous media
were as important as the product, supporting the findings of Atton, Downing, Cammaerts, Mattoni and many others. Activists found peer-to-peer skill-sharing to be an important form of anti-authoritarian knowledge circulation, such as Ste-Emilie Skillshare’s silk-screening workshops, or CKUT radio station peer training, which prefigure horizontal knowledge production relationships.

c. Power Dynamics

As in any group, internal power dynamics can be racialized, gendered, heteronormative, able-bodied, etc. For example, people of colour in predominantly white anarchist or student activist groups were sometimes figure-headed as media spokesperson, felt tokenized, and became the target of journalists’ racism (e.g. being told ‘You speak English so well’) or of intensified police repression and violence. Others were held up as evidence of the group’s success at anti-racist politics, though this success was seen by POC themselves to be somewhat limited. On the other hand, some activists felt that seeing another POC take on the role of media spokesperson motivated and empowered them to do so.

Power hierarchies were addressed by the formation of identity-based collectives, or ‘non-mixt’ spaces (e.g. LPR and QTeam were radical queer activist groups; Ste-Emilie Skill-Share is a queer and trans people of colour art collective space, etc.). Non-mixed groups seem to be better at horizontality because of shared experiences of oppres-
sion, and the ability to create a safer space for media activism.

**Conclusions**

This understanding of the diversity of grassroots autonomous media tactics allows us to move away from genre-related interpretations of tactics such as culture jamming, and a scholarly fetishization of social media use by social movements, to understand the wide diversity of communicative action to be driven by the desired audience and actions.

Affinity group media invites people into safer spaces, such as radical queer sex parties, queer and trans people of colour art spaces, or anti-racist art and activism shows. This media links sociality, culture, politics, and everyday life, producing spaces for friendships, alliances, intimacies and understandings to develop that will ground and motivate the political organizing.

Mass mobilization media, on the other hand, reaches out to the general public to see if there is a possibility of motivating them to participate in a protest, attend a talk, or get involved in media production. Rather than creating safer spaces, this kind of media is about shifting consciousness and encouraging people to think and act beyond their comfort zone.

These diverse communicative tactics, used in a very sophisticated and nuanced way to target different audi-
ences to compel them to take action, disabuse us of the notion that autonomous media only reaches small activist audiences.

For each communicative tactic, activists spoke about the desired audience and actions, acknowledging that there are many types of relationships being developed within anti-authoritarian communities and collectives, but also in relationships being nurtured and developed with others in the broader social justice movement, the community at large, and global movements.

For anti-authoritarians, political communication is about building relationships and taking action with others. Engaging a diversity of communicative tactics is necessary for media activists to develop a range of grassroots social and political relationships in multi-issue movements with intersectional analyses of feminist, queer, anti-racist and anti-colonial politics. This diversity of media tactics is connected to a deeper understanding and acceptance of the diversity of tactics in social movements, based on mutual aid, respect and egalitarianism in practice.