
Chris Atton is the author of Alternative Literature: A Practical Guide to Librarians (1996) and Alternative Media (2002). Atton notes that although Alternative Literature was largely promotional (p. 157), Alternative Media was a more nuanced and critical attempt at exploring the meaning and possibilities of alternative media. Atton attributes this to the fact that Alternative Media was published in the wake of John Downing’s Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements (2000), a work that challenged the binary opposition of alternative versus mainstream media, clearing the way for a more critical scholarly engagement with alternative media. It is from within this tradition that Atton proposes to study the Internet.

In An Alternative Internet, Atton considers a number of Internet case studies from a cultural studies approach (p. xiii). Chapters 2 and 3 examine case studies in politics and the representation of social movements on the Internet (Radical Online Journalism; Far-Right Media on the Internet). Chapters 4, 5, and 6 consider case studies in popular cultural activity and creativity on the Internet (Radical Creativity and Distribution: Sampling, Copyright and P2P; Alternative Radio on the Internet; Fan Culture on the Internet). Chapter 1 examines methodological considerations and pitfalls. On this score Atton informs us that his cultural studies approach will be informed by three imperatives: First, an acknowledgement of historical resonances with previous alternative media practices. Second, a recognition of the banality of Internet practice, that is, of its embedding in everyday life, and pre-existing social practices. Third, the problematization—rather than either the acceptance or erosion—of binary oppositions such as alternative/mainstream and producer/consumer (p. 4).

The case study approach dictates the book’s structure. For the most part, the analyses in Chapters 2 through 6 stand alone; they are unrelated to one another. Moreover, each case study begins with its own theory-laden review of the state of research relevant to the case at hand. As a result, Atton expends considerable effort at the beginning of each case study framing the case and establishing his theoretical bearings. For the selective reader with an interest in a particular case study, this review may not be burdensome. However, for the average reader with a general interest in the topic of alternative media, the theoretical recalibration that introduces each case study will probably seem tedious and overdrawn.

Having situated his approach, both theoretically and methodologically, Atton then proceeds with the case study. This work is hardly engaged when Atton introduces an additional conceptual frame based on Stuart Hall’s critical essay on Caribbean cinema (Hall, 1990). Moreover, Hall’s work, which has not been expounded in the previous review, becomes a key to Atton’s analysis of BNP on the Internet.

In his essay, Hall identifies three “presences” that come to define Caribbean cultural identity: *présence Africaine, présence Européenne*, and *présence Américaine*. (Only the first two are applicable to BNP discourse on the Internet.) *Présence Africaine* refers to identity discourse that evokes an ideal, imagined community associated with timeless origins. *Présence Européenne* is the discourse of colonizing power that is “endlessly speaking—and endlessly speaking us” (Hall, p. 232). In a similar fashion, BNP discourse recalls an imaginary identity associated with a timeless, collective history of White Britain. This is opposed by the power of an emerging Other associated with immigrant groups who seek to displace, “to speak to and for” the White cultural identity. Atton is keen to note the contradiction of the colonizer as colonized, whereby the former colonizers construct themselves as repressed by the Other. We learn that the new racism has been constructed as a response to the imputed racism of the Other.

Although the discourse of the new racism is evident on the BNP’s website, one would be hard-pressed to assert that it has been shaped in a definitive manner by the Internet as media. More relevant from a perspective of Internet practice is the hierarchic, authoritarian organization of the BNP website. Although the technology allows for engagement with the party’s members, collaborative participation is effectively discouraged by the BNP leadership responsible for controlling the website. The closed, constructed nature of the website undermines any pretension the BNP may have to being a populist (albeit racist) movement.

Atton’s analysis of the BNP on the Internet is insightful and his use of Hall’s work on identity discourse is extremely judicious. I found the analysis of the other case studies to be timely and illuminating. The theory-heavy review that precedes the individual case studies is overdrawn and in many cases not relevant to the analysis that follows. In the example cited above, the same analysis could have been accomplished with references to Foucault, Hall, and Brophy, et al.

In the conclusion, Atton takes up the larger issue of transformed media cultures and the extent to which the concept of alternative media may be still deployed to understand them. As studies have moved beyond the binary divide, and barely concealed attempts to valorize alternative media, a mature stage of research has emerged that is less normative, less judgmental, and less inclined to view new media according to “an ideal of a set of media practices” (p. 159). At first regard, the Internet would appear to be fertile ground for alternative media praxis and its analysis. But Atton, working in the post-binary period, is keen to note that today’s alternative media entail “hybrid practices” that embody “continuation as well as reform and rupture” (p. 159).

The study of alternative media appears to have come full circle as it attempts to analyze new media that are so fundamentally hybrid that they may embody as much continuity as reform and rupture. Rather than usher in a new phase in alternative media studies, this reader came away from Atton’s *An Alternative Internet* with the distinct impression of a “last hurrah.” When a concept such as alternative media loses its explanatory power, the impulse to reconceptualize through the use of fine-grained distinctions is understandable. The alternative is to accept closure. Although the case studies represent an important contribution to our understanding of the Internet, the attempt to reconceptualize the notion of alternative media as a basis for continuing study is more problematic than propitious.
Reviews

Reference

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