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A Descriptive Look At The Public Role Of Australian Independent Alternative Press

This article presents selected findings of an ongoing study of perceived public role of the alternative press in Australia. Interviews with journalists show an overwhelming perception that they are more inclined to provide context to news already covered in the mainstream press; they motivate readers to take political action or to engage in political discussion; and they provide a forum for minority groups overlooked by the mainstream media. These perceived roles fit neatly within the description of public journalism which represents a general commitment by journalists to foster critical political debate and revive public life.

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The dominant theme running through much of the research into the alternative press, both in Australia and abroad, is that two of its primary roles are to engage readers in political issues — either by directly advocating political action or stimulating some form of milder citizen action, such as letters to politicians (Stanfield and Lemert, 1987; Kessler, 1984; Ross, 1982); and providing a forum for minority groups (Malyon, 1995; Jakubowicz, 1992). Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman (1976), and Louw and Tomaselli (1991) also identified the function of providing depth and context to news as an important role of the counter-culture press in America and South Africa respectively. These functions have much in common with the notion of public journalism, which has questioned the value of objectivity, standard news values, and accused the mainstream media of failing to connect the public with participatory democracy (Gunaratne, 1996: 64).

One of the early proponents of the public journalism notion, 'Buzz' Merritt, argued that journalism's tendency to "merely provide information — simply telling news in a detached way" was not helpful to public life or to journalism (in Merritt and Rosen, 1995: 11). He says newspapers have to start seeing people not as readers, customers or an audience, but "as a public, citizens capable of action".
Rosen similarly asserts that public journalists should present themselves as advocates, and attempt to connect with citizens and engage them in politics by recognising readers as actors in the public process (1992: 376). The components of public journalism are clearly reflected in the functions of providing context to news, motivating readers to engage in the political process through action or dialogue, and providing access for those unrepresented in the mainstream media.

This paper will show that those working in the alternative and independent press have a very strong notion of their public role, and of the function of their publications within the community and the media industry generally. The major functions identified by journalists in the alternative press will be examined -- specifically the role of providing context to the news, establishing a forum for minority groups, and motivating the readers to take political action.

The alternative press fulfils a unique niche in the media industry. Some have links back to the radical working class press of the early 20th century (Turner, 1969; Kessler, 1984), while others grew out of the counter-culture movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Cock, 1977; Perry, 1977). Many have arisen from the current concentrated media ownership environment, and remain committed to providing an alternative to the shrinking mainstream market.

Editors of two alternative publications studied in the United States during the 1980s believed the function of their publications was primarily to encourage readers to act against perceived wrongs and to participate in political action. The editor of the Willamette Valley Observer believed this could be achieved principally by printing information which would allow readers to act on their convictions, such as the times of protest rallies, public meetings, and contact names for campaigns.

“I wanted to show [readers] how things really worked. If you believe in democracy and local control, then people have to make decisions ... We really believed people could participate and change things ... We’re not saying that you should be on this side or that side, we’re just saying you should do something.” (Stanfield and Lemert, 1987:606).

The editor of a second alternative publication from the same town, Willamette Week, felt his paper’s aim was not to create direct action, but to simply inform his readership so they may participate better in the political process. He clarified: “You hope people will act on the information you give them...we were not writing to
create direct action...Journalism should be concerned with the 'why' of issues...Asking 'why' is not the same thing as saying when the next stupid city council meeting is...I think the more people there are involved in the political process, the better...[but] the basic thing is to have informed participation.” (Stanfield and Lemert, 1987:606).

Stanfield and Lemert defined mobilising information as "information that helps people act on the attitudes they already have” (1987:604). Stanfield and Lemert’s interviews “confirmed that the editors regarded their content — not their audience — as the primary difference between them and the dominant mainstream daily in their circulation area” (1987:605).

A content analysis by the authors generally found that while almost 40 percent of the information in an ‘activist’ alternative newspaper could be categorised as mobilising information, only 13 to 17 percent of information in the mainstream daily could be categorised as mobilising. Interestingly, when compared with an issue-based alternative publication (as opposed to an activist alternative publication), Stanfield and Lemert found the mainstream publication carried slightly more mobilising information (1987: 606).

Lauren Kessler found similar aims ran strongly throughout the American radical press of the early 20th century, when groups published alternative publications to reach people with ideas, organise their movement and promote what they believed in: “Publishing a newspaper or magazine was not the path to wealth; it was the path to a better world.” (1984: 42)

The early radical press in Australia similarly had a strong mobilising function, continually encouraging readers to agitate, demonstrate, and motivate fellow workers. It had much in common with its successors -- Socialist Worker and Green Left Weekly -- contemporary alternative publications that have maintained a strong link to a political cause. Ross, an advocate of the mobilising function of the early Australian radical press, and editor of many socialist, communist and labour publications since the 1920s, summarises the function of the early socialist press, thus: “The party press has the job of exposing the lies of the so-called ‘free’ press of the capitalist monopolies...The Party press is indispensable as an educator, agitator and organiser and building its circulation is one of the most important tasks confronting the Party (Ross, 1982:142).

The editor of a more recent Australian alternative publication, Nation Review, also identified the mobilising function as important to the publication, although perhaps in a more subtle way than the overt information provided in publications such as those edited by Edgar Ross. In 1971, the Nation Review had
established itself as a left-of-centre weekly with an estimated readership of 149,000 (Walsh, 1993: 162). Walsh described Nation Review as a voice of support for those readers looking for critical analysis of the conservative politics of the day, while also showing support for progressive issues such as women's rights, environmental pollution, land rights and gay rights (Walsh, 1993:203).

In his 1993 collection of the best of the Nation Review, he reminisced that the aim of Nation Review was to create a 'more stimulating, more complex, more sophisticated and more passionate Australia' (1993: 230). This implies a subtle attempt to engage the readership in political thought, and to encourage them to contemplate and debate social issues.

The principles adhered to by contemporary British alternative newspaper Squall also flags the idea of the alternative press as a forum for minority groups. Squall's statement of principles sends a clear message of advocacy, mobilisation, and diversity. It reads:

*Information is your weapon.*

*The purpose of this magazine is to tool you up.*

*With accurate information and positive inspiration.*

*To expose hidden agendas and highlight new initiatives.*

*Standing for cultural diversity, community and respect.*

*To give fair voice to those who have none, have gone hoarse, or are frightened to speak.*

*To battle for a better environment — countryside, urban and psychological.*

*With no book, no badge, no flag and no anchoring affiliations other than the truth.*

*... Arm yourself (Malyon, 1995).*

Jakubowicz carries on this theme of the alternative press with his study of mainstream media and cultural minorities. He points out the need for an alternative press to accurately represent minority groups and interests. He says the mainstream media "continue(s) to hurt minority groups in repeated and systematic ways" (1992:69-70). The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody has also recognised the mainstream media's crucial role in "reproducing aggressively anti-Aboriginal stereotypes and sustaining patterns of communal ignorance and prejudice" (Jakubowicz, 1992:70).

Mathes and Pfetsch's study of the German alternative press found that mainstream media often picked up issues already raised in the alternative media. This "spill-over effect" was caused by the dual function of the alternative press, which was to articulate
the opinions of marginal and outspoken "single-issue groups", while also supplying the established media with information (1991:53). Louw and Tomaselli identified community participation and involvement as one of the primary strengths in the South African alternative press of the anti-apartheid movement (1991:7). Tomaselli also argued that popular access was 'fundamental' to the functioning of the alternative press (1991:168).

Johnstone et al's sociological survey of American newspeople in 1976 further identified journalistic roles which were important to the alternative press. Due to the strength of contemporary counter-culture press the authors added a participant observation study of workers in the alternative press to their larger work. They found that alternative press journalists had a strong commitment to participating in social change (1976:178). Alternative press journalists were critical of the mainstream for failing to provide in-depth analytical news on important social issues (1976:175).

Louw et al found the progressive-alternative papers in South Africa were also defined by their commitment to "advocacy and contextualised writing" (1991:9). Tomaselli argued the South African alternative press considered that news should "enable the reader to make a diagnosis, with a view to taking action". The emphasis is on contextualising issues, not events or 'dead-in-a-day' news (1991:169).

I will now examine these themes identified by previous research as prominent in the alternative press, and which clearly fulfil the major requirements of public journalism, in light of results from a recent study into the Australian independent and alternative press industry. I interviewed 73 journalists from 28 independent alternative publications. As part of this broad study, I asked editors and journalists a series of questions about what they perceived to be the role of their publication in society. They were also questioned about their role as journalists, and news values that they applied in the story selection process.

Clearly, the function of motivating readers to engage in the political process and take political action was a high priority for the radical, left-wing and/or socialist papers, while the function of providing a forum for minority groups and others unrepresented in the mainstream was more important to community publications such as indigenous newspapers and small-scale social justice papers.

It is interesting to note, however, that while these two functions were highly important, one function which outranked both of these was providing context to the news. This role was identified more frequently than the previous two, although together, the three functions fairly accurately summarise the stated
role of the contemporary Australian alternative and independent press. Identification of the contextualising news function was not limited to any particular sector of the alternative press — publications from all political sides generally saw this as an important part of their role.

The journalists generally saw it as their primary function to provide in-depth analysis of news that had already been reported in the mainstream, or to put daily news into a proper context for their readers. More than 90 percent of respondents said it was “extremely” or “fairly” important that they provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems at their publication, and this result is supported by comments about the contextualising role of the alternative press.

One editor of a community publication which focused on peace and nuclear disarmament issues commented: “We bring out the points behind the news...it’s what the mainstream doesn’t say that intrigues us.” Another editor of a monthly glossy journal with a social justice bent also believed her publication offered depth and context that the mainstream did not: “Well, we’re a monthly so we look at some things in-depth that the [mainstream] media has neither the time or inclination to observe. We use writers who know what they’re writing about. We also cover Aboriginal and religious issues with expertise and depth.”

A journalist from another left-wing newspaper identified context as the main difference between his publication and the mainstream. He said his publication “gives analysis, we explain why things are happening, and we draw connections with other things that are happening and other issues”. This notion of the alternative press contextualising the news for readers also arose in the series of questions on standard news values of timeliness, proximity and so on. Asked if there were any other news values that they regularly adhered to in the story selection process. All but two respondents provided another set of news values apart from the standard mainstream values.

One freelance journalist who contributed regularly to a national independent weekly publication (left-leaning) saw the news values for his publication in terms of adding context to the news. He responded: “We’re interested more in something that sheds light on an issue, from a different angle than the mainstream press. A story that encapsulates the broader issues within itself — so you can write about bigger issues than the event actually is.”

A journalist from a left-wing monthly magazine overtly stated the importance of putting news in context, and said a “good
story" for his publication involved information that was already in the mainstream, but "someone comes out and shows there’s a completely different angle to what we’ve seen...We want to contextualise events for readers.”

A former mainstream journalist now working for a monthly conservative political opinion magazine said he chose stories that the mainstream had not covered "in sufficient detail or with sufficient intelligence. A story which requires more space than the mainstream can summon.” He said the advantages of writing for such a publication were the lack of constraints on space, which meant he could regularly deal with issues "which need more than a cursory reading”.

The theme of contextualising the news was also extremely prominent when interviewees were asked to identify what they did differently to the mainstream media. The socialist or workers’ papers were particularly strong on providing context to the news, and "giving meaning" to political events for their readers. Political comment magazines such as Quadrant, Eureka Street, and Adelaide Review also strongly felt that they provided depth and context to news that had already been covered in the mainstream.

A former subeditor of a mainstream regional daily, now working for a conservative political comment magazine said his publication allowed journalists to “step back a bit from the here and now — look at things from an overall viewpoint, by looking at the background and its implications”.

The editor of another conservative publication said his publication did not simply report “who did what to whom. We’re trying to put key national issues into context...Our business is to try to make sense of what is happening”. The principal journalist from a communist weekly also saw the main differentiation between his publication and the mainstream as a matter of context — his publication drew connections between the event being reported, and other events and issues that were also occurring. Further along these lines, some saw a need for their publications to play an “educative” role, to help their readers better understand current political events and issues.

A journalist from a bi-monthly anarchist publication produced in Queensland said his publication was interested in stories “that can play an educative role — which can educate in understanding a world that is quite incomprehensible to a lot of people.” He paralleled the function of the contemporary alternative press with that of the old workers’ movements, which he said “provided a way to comprehend the world...it’s the role of the alternative media to give comprehensibility to society about complex issues”.

The editor of a monthly social justice publication said the
main news values that determined story selection in her publication were stories that had “an outward-looking quality. Anything that makes people learn, and raises awareness”. She said it was important that her publication provided “an expansion of our readers horizons”. Comments such as these highlight the importance that some in the alternative press place on the educational role of their publication.

Although providing context to the news was the most frequently cited role for the alternative and independent press, many considered it was an important part of their existence to provide information that would encourage readers to take political action. These responses were almost entirely from the left-wing sector of the independent press industry which makes up more than two-thirds of the industry. When asked what they considered to be the role of their publication in society, almost 70 percent said it was important that they politically motivate their readers.

In response to the open-ended question about news values, a journalist from a left-wing publication which focused on peace issues (his editor answered more in the “contextualising news” framework) said his publication was “dedicated to the elimination of poverty and for world development”. For this reason, he said any story that would “prompt people to take action, or motivate people” would be an important story in his paper.

A member of the editorial collective from a weekly left-wing newspaper believed his paper wrote stories for the majority — “Everything written in the mainstream is written in the interests of the minority.” He said any story “with an element of exposure, and encouragement of activity” was a high priority for his publication. A journalist from a fortnightly socialist publication who works full-time in another occupation (he is a qualified medical practitioner) said a primary function of his newspaper was to expose the “realities of society”, and provide information that “leads to conclusions about what can be done to change things”.

Another journalist from the same publication, who has also worked as a sub-editor on mainstream newspapers, said the publication had a dual function — it reported on issues which lifted the confidence of readers “to take action for themselves”, and dealt with political questions “which are of pivotal importance in terms of public debate.” These responses which fell within the category of motivating readers to take political action arose throughout many of the interviews with editors and journalists from the left-sector of the industry.
Another section of the survey required interviewees to nominate the importance of certain aspects of their role of journalists. The responses to this section also clearly show the greater importance of the activist role of journalism to the alternative press when compared with the mainstream. The aspects of 'influencing the public', 'influencing public policy decisions' and 'championing particular values and ideas' were rated as less important in the mainstream (Schultz, 1992: 7). More than three-quarters of the independent press sample felt it was important to influence the public, where only 49 percent of the mainstream sample considered this important.

The same numbers of independent press journalists thought it was important to influence public policy decisions, where just over half of mainstream respondents said it was important. And an overwhelming majority of the alternative press — 91.8 percent — felt it was very or quite important to champion particular ideas, where only one-third of the mainstream sample felt the same. This indicates alternative journalists see their role in a more proactive way, in that they attempt to influence the direction of discussion and debate in the public sphere more so than mainstream journalists. These responses are consistent with the differences also found in approaches to objectivity and impartiality, which are dealt with in the broader study. In general, however, the importance that previous research has placed on the motivating or mobilising function of the alternative press industry has been reinforced by the results from this study.

The third function which was consistently identified by workers from the Australian alternative press was “providing a voice for the voiceless”, which is perhaps more consistent with the popular perception of the alternative press — providing minority and disadvantaged groups with access to the media, and specialised information on their communities. This theme arose during the interviews, although perhaps not as often as may have been anticipated. The news values of providing context to news, and seeking to motivate readers to participate politically appeared more regularly than this news value, although it was still important.

On what I have called the “empowerment” theme, the editor of a 10,000-circulation fortnightly in Sydney (social justice/soft left focus) said that “uniqueness” was an important news value for his publication. He elaborated: “We’re giving voice to people who don’t have a voice — homeless, long-term unemployed and youth. We’re also covering stuff not dictated by
commercial interests. We’re catering to markets that aren’t the target of most commercial publications.”

The editor of a monthly social justice publication felt the main difference between his publication and the mainstream was that it highlighted the public policy-making process “and we provide the opportunity for readers to have input”. The same editor said the main news values in place at his publication involved stories with a “balance between real-life experiences and policy issues that arise from those experiences.” As an example he nominated “stories from the grassroots and the real side of politics” as a good story for his publication.

A journalist from a monthly indigenous publication similarly felt that his publication was “giving voice to groups that don’t normally have a voice.” In fact five out of the six respondents who worked for indigenous publications had elements of this function in their answers. A journalist from a fortnightly Indigenous publication felt his publication’s close connections with the indigenous community provided access to better stories, and also enabled community members to come forward about stories: “...some community members are too shy to approach the mainstream.” This comment highlights the difference that a small-scale, approachable publication which employs Aboriginal journalists can make to ordinary Aboriginal community members who may want to publicise an issue or event.

The editor of a monthly indigenous publication said it was important that his publication decipher current events and summarise important Aboriginal issues for their readership, while one of his journalists recognised the unique role the publication played in presenting Aboriginal issues in a sensitive way. She responded: “We’re sensitive to our audience’s needs...we’re trying to give them a source of news that’s not covered by the mainstream.” These final two imply a general commitment to providing news which is responsive to community needs, and which is in a language and format that the community can appreciate. In this sense the publications are empowering their audience far more than the mainstream, as they are providing them with the opportunity to contribute to the newspaper, and they are presenting information in a readable and useable format for community members.

Further on the “empowerment” news value, there was also a focus on identifying stories from the grassroots and giving exposure to issues that would not normally receive coverage in the mainstream. Some of the respondents, particularly from the socialist and anarchist papers, phrased their answers in terms of providing a voice for the working-class. One said the main criteria for news stories in his publication were “issues which are
important to the working class, and [which can] bring about progressive change."

Another worker from a weekly left-wing publication said the most important difference between her paper and the mainstream was that her publication "reflect[s] the ideas and activities of people who have no say in the mainstream media." Another journalist from the same publication, also a member of the editorial collective, said the important difference was that "we go to the sources — the people who are making the news...we hope to be the voice of the social justice movement."

The publisher of a United States alternative newsweekly, who has now started up a sister publication in Australia, commented along similar lines, as did his chief reporter: "We champion social issues; we feel we have a mandate to look out for the underdog. We're not interested in playing it safe... We focus on issues the mainstream often ignores — rather than focusing on the official line we look at who it's affecting on the ground."

The youth publication from the Sunshine Coast in Queensland also felt they were providing a unique opportunity for local youth to have their views heard, and in this sense were providing an important public forum. The editor said his paper presented the "views of the youths themselves", where the mainstream media usually spoke to only the government or local shire officials. He said the youths working for the publication "take up their own issues and then try to get community support for those issues through the paper".

**Conclusion**

Clearly, the Australian independent and alternative press believes it is fulfilling a similar function to other independent press industries in other parts of the world. It has much in common with the stated aims of the German alternative press (Mathes and Pfetsch, 1991), the United States (Johnstone et.al 1976; Stanfield and Lemert, 1987), the South African alternative press (Louw et al, 1991; Tomaselli, 1991) and with the early radical working-class press in both Australia and the United States (Kessler, 1984; Turner, 1969).

Essentially, alternative press journalists and editors identify giving context to the news, motivating readers to take political action and/or to engage in political discussion, and providing a forum for minority groups and other 'voiceless' members of society as their major functions. They perceive that these three functions remain unfulfilled by the mainstream media.

Based on the responses from the Australian sample, it appears the alternative and independent press is strongly
committed to the notion of public journalism, well ahead of its mainstream counterparts (Merritt and Rosen, 1995: 12). While the mainstream remains constrained by traditional requirements for objectivity and detachment, the alternative press has embraced its role in encouraging a more active public discourse through contextualising news, motivating citizens, and providing access for community members.

NOTES

1. The terms “alternative” and “independent” are both used to describe this sector of the press. Some respondents to the major survey, particularly those from the conservative sector of the industry, preferred the term “independent press” to “alternative press”.
2. This study involves surveys and qualitative interviews with journalists and editors from the Australian alternative and independent press on a wide range of issues about journalism and the media industry. The study also contains current details about the backgrounds of those working in the alternative press, and has collected data about the size, scope and funding arrangements for the general alternative press industry.

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