

# Direct-Action Journalism: Resilience in grassroots autonomous media

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*Situating grassroots autonomous media within complex contemporary media ecologies and protest movements, this article uses resilience theory to critically analyse the characteristics generative of adaptive capacity in alternative media. The organizing structures, decision-making processes and social movement strategies of two case studies – Concordia University TV (CUTV) and the Montreal Media Co-op – are analysed using online self-produced media materials and participant observation during the 2012 Quebec Student Strike. Both groups have existed for more than ten years, achieving a balance between anti-authoritarian militant activist culture and formal organizational structure. We find they are open to remediation and reconfiguration as needed, including adapting new technologies and organizing journalism teams and peer-to-peer training of volunteers. In addition, these forms of ‘direct action journalism’ exhibit professionalism beyond the basic amateurism of most citizen journalism. Some of the characteristics of grassroots autonomous media production in which resilience may be cultivated include anti-authoritarian militant spaces such as CUTV’s media lab, formalized organizational structures with mixed funding models such as the Media Co-op’s multi-stakeholder cooperative, and deeper relationships and networks with social movements exhibited by both, including reconfigured horizontal relationships among media producers and users.*

*Keywords: autonomous media; political economy of media; citizen journalism; alternative media; media activism; direct action journalism*

## I. Introduction

Scholars often claim that alternative media encounter difficulties with sustainability, resulting in the fact that they remain largely locked out of media power. In the context of alternative media, David Skinner defines sustainability as

facilitating media organizations' ongoing operation, improving their abilities to report on events and circumstances salient to public life and engage in public discussion and debate. More specifically, sustainability is about having the resources to acquire staff, technologies of production, and avenues of distribution, and to develop audiences. (2012: 26)

Some theorists suggest that sustainability in alternative media is at risk due to the horizontal anti-capitalist practices that limit their scale. Sandoval and Fuchs, for example, argue that 'under capitalism non-commercial, participatory, and collective organization can often only be sustained at the cost of public visibility and political effectiveness' (2010: 146). They suggest that media activist groups focused on anti-authoritarian participatory culture seldom achieve broader audiences and therefore lack the power to assert counter-hegemonic anti-capitalist positions in the broader public sphere. On the other hand, Chris Atton argues that activist media or 'grassroots journalism seeks to empower local people' as the 'reporter gains self-respect and moral and political strength through self-representation, thereby drawing power away from the mainstream back to the disenfranchised and marginalized groups' (2002: 115). In both instances there is a struggle for greater visibility and effectiveness of activist messages, which some grassroots media organizations achieve.

We must remark on the contradiction: grassroots autonomous media are portrayed as potentially important spaces for empowerment of excluded groups who are able to claim media power, and at the same time they risk being unsustainable projects with little impact. The truth must lie somewhere between these two poles. Thus, it is important to further study successful grassroots autonomous media cases to better understand how they achieve sustainability.

Autonomous media shape, articulate and reflect on social movement strategies. To delimit the scope of this article we must first develop a working definition of grassroots autonomous media. Langlois and Dubois define autonomous media as 'the vehicles of social movements', providing activists access to media production while maintaining collective autonomy and fostering participation (2005: 9). As Michael Albert argues, 'Being alternative as an institution must have to do with how the institution is organized'. Atton further notes that alternative media should be self-managed, horizontal or anti-hierarchical in form, and prefigurative, creating alternative social forms by which to produce media with alternative content (2003: 9).

The rootedness of autonomous media within anti-authoritarian social movements forms the basis of their political content and organizational forms, including participatory horizontal structures that facilitate the development of a shared

sense of collective autonomy. While autonomy is typically conceived of as individual independence, the notion of collective autonomy is somewhat different, understood as a group or network independent from corporate or state control with collectively organized decision-making and an orientation toward the public good. This collective focus differentiates autonomous media from other forms of independent or alternative media such as personal blogs, social media sites or zines, which may be important sites of self-representation but lack collective consciousness and organizational forms.

Autonomous media must also be differentiated from right-wing alternative media, which tend to replicate mainstream power hierarchies rooted in inequities of class, race and colonialism, disability, gender and sexuality, both in their organizational forms and content. Moreover, a focus on anti-capitalism in autonomous media both links it to and distinguishes it from 'critical media', as defined by Sandoval and Fuchs. Critical media and autonomous media are similar in their anti-capitalist content and social movement networks, but differentiated in that critical media allow for advertising and other capitalist funding models and structures, whereas autonomous media explicitly reject them. Furthermore, an emphasis on strategic longevity differentiates autonomous media from often short-lived alternative 'tactical media' (Raley 2009) that include interventions such as culture jamming.

We therefore define 'grassroots autonomous media' as follows. First, they are part of broader *grassroots* anti-authoritarian, militant or autonomous social movements. Second, they are *anti-capitalist* not just in content but also in funding models, which are both anti-corporate and not for profit. This anti-capitalism is often linked to an anarchist, left libertarian, Marxist or socialist political perspective. And third, they exercise *collective autonomy* in their political, cultural and decision-making models, structures and practices, which are prefigurative, directly democratic, horizontal and rooted in anti-oppression politics on issues of race and colonialism, class, gender, sexuality and disability.

Having specified the scope of autonomous media, within this category we are specifically analysing 'direct action media', which we define as protest media produced from within direct action mobilizations and protests by social movement participants who are media activists. More succinctly, direct-action media reports on and supports direct-action protest movements.

A much-studied example of direct-action media is Indymedia, the protest media website started in Seattle in 1999 to militate against the World Trade Organization (WTO) protests (Pickard 2006; Platon and Deuze 2003; Hanke 2005; Lievrouw 2011; Levi and Olson 2000; among others). Indymedia is a 'radical democratic network' of autonomous media sites (Pickard 2006: 315) fostering shared political and communicative commitments across a global movement of anti-authoritarian anti-globalization or counter-globalization activists. Indymedia is structured as a semi-formalized network of autonomous but connected collectives, a structure that fosters participatory direct democracy. Indymedia networks are particularly active during 'quantitative' or mass mobilizations (Rucht 2004) against global economic

summits such as the G20 meetings, and international free trade meetings involving the WTO, IMF and World Bank.

Taking Concordia University TV (CUTV) and the Montreal Media Co-op as case studies of media activist sites, which were active during the mass mobilizations of the 2012 Quebec Student Strike, we will critically analyse their organizational structures, decision-making processes and social movement strategies (Kavada 2013) to consider how these factors may contribute to their resilience or the capacity to withstand crisis.

## **2. From sustainability to resilience**

Many scholars argue that alternative media are not economically sustainable. Pickard, for example, argues that Indymedia's sustainability was threatened when the global network collectively decided to refuse a \$50,000 grant from the Ford Foundation (2006: 316). The influx of funds, championed by some activists for its potential to increase economic sustainability, was interpreted by others as a threat to the sustainability of the network's autonomy, principles and processes.

The experience of the Montreal Indymedia site (CMAQ) in this regard was that a small number of people received temporary funding, creating a hierarchy of activity around those individuals who were responsible for doing the bulk of the work simply because they were paid. This demobilized very active but unpaid members who no longer knew their roles in the collective, as the foundational horizontal social relations had shifted (King et al. 2012). For autonomous media, equally as important as economic sustainability is the notion of social sustainability. Pickard argues that autonomous media activism is supported by 'enduring relationships and exchanges based on trust, legitimacy and ethical behavior' (2006: 319). These social relationships are therefore important to consider in our analysis.

We must remark on a second contradiction: many media activist groups need basic funds to survive economically, and yet an infusion of capital can risk generating negative impacts for social sustainability through the creation or deepening of inequities.

While activist media sustainability is based on long-term work by media makers who depend on access to resources, technologies, distribution networks and audiences, 'resilience' may be defined as the capacity to continue to function during and after a severe shock or stress, or at times of increasing instability. Walker et al. (2002) argue that studying the resilience of complex systems allows us to focus on strategies for 'maintaining the capacity of the system to cope with whatever the future brings, without the system changing in undesirable ways' (2002). They seek to discover how a complex social ecology 'might be made more resilient to shocks, and more able to renew or reorganize itself should large shocks occur' (2002). As Walker further explains, resilience 'depends on the system being able to cope with external shocks in the face of irreducible uncertainty. In turn, this requires understanding where resilience resides in the system, and when and how it can be lost or gained' (2002).

This research indicates that the ‘adaptive capacity’ (2002) of groups in times of instability bears further analysis. The objective of this article therefore is to understand where resilience and adaptive capacity can be found in autonomous media groups and networks by studying a moment of crisis, rather than examining the achievement of stability during extended periods of regular operation.

Instabilities and crises in the mediascape arise in several ways. First, crisis can result from rapid technological change. Media activists must constantly learn new media software and hardware, adapting to technological advances; grassroots autonomous organizations lend themselves well to this kind of fluid adaptability, often finding ways to access new technologies despite scarce resources. Second, changes in the way people produce media, including new journalism forms, affect autonomous media producers. Grassroots media activists often adopt and adapt innovative journalistic practices, as they are located somewhere between the professionalized public media journalist and the amateur citizen journalist, with the skills to use new forms of technology, and the flexibility to adapt them to their own ends. Third, changes in the way people consume media need to be accounted for by media producers, with the explosion of online media opportunities. Media activists develop horizontal relationships with a wide variety of audiences, online or otherwise, whereby the relational nature of media is emphasized (Jeppesen et al. 2014) in that both journalistic and audience media practices often develop through reciprocity of political and personal commitments. Fourth, specific to protest media, a mass mobilization helps to build autonomous media through skill sharing, hands-on opportunities and growth in membership as activists organize to support and report on the protest itself; however, this may also throw autonomous media into crisis, as it can be a drain on resources, time and energy, and can lead to burn-out or exodus of the most experienced and committed members.

Resilience to these types of crises may be a result of modes of change and adaptation in organizational and technological media forms. Leah Lievrouw (2011) argues that alternative and activist new media movements are ‘remediating’ and ‘reconfiguring’ traditional forms of media to put counter-hegemonic messages into public debate.

‘Remediation is the process by which people construct new meanings and expressions out of existing and novel forms of interaction, social and institutional relationships, and cultural works’ (Lievrouw 2011: 217). Remediation applies to construction and interpretation of media debates; it implies the transfer or incorporation of one form of media into another; and it encompasses the types of social relationships created through practices of collective autonomy.

Reconfiguration, on the other hand, ‘is the ongoing process by which people adapt, reinvent, reorganize, or rebuild media technologies’ as these ‘new media technologies are *recombinant*’ (Lievrouw 2011: 216, original emphasis). Spaces of reconfiguration are also process oriented, and the technological modes reconfigured by media activists are implicated in a prefigurative method of working, making decisions and making technologies available to a broad spectrum of users. Both remediation and reconfiguration are important in the resilience of autonomous media.

In order to analyse strategies for reconfiguration and remediation, it is useful to consider Anastasia Kavada's analysis of three additional key factors in assessing media activism: organizational forms, decision-making processes, and strategizing (2013: 79). These three factors can be used as indicators of where resilience in media activist collectives emerges. First, the organizing principles will be evaluated in relation to structure and funding. Second, the decision-making processes will be evaluated in relation to the group's organizational processes and capacities. Third, media strategies will be evaluated on the basis of the group's political and operational mandate as it pertains to their relationship to social movements. The two data sets used to analyse these three factors include: first, their publicly available online materials, and second, information gleaned through participant observation in the Quebec Student Strike in 2012 including informal conversations with media and other activists.

### 3. Case Study I: The Media Co-op

#### a. Organizational structure

For Kavada, in media activism, organizational structures can be defined thus:

the formality with which roles and tasks are defined and the degree of hierarchy in the movement, meaning the number of strata in the organizational structure. They also include the degree of centralization, the professionalization of skills and resources, and the direction of leadership and lines of control, which can be top-down or bottom-up. (2013: 79–80)

The Media Co-op, a Canada-wide network of grassroots autonomous media chapters, has undergone a process of restructuring since their early formation. We suggest that this new structure, and the process through which it emerged, is key to their resilience. Emerging from the Indymedia network in Canada, the Media Co-op started in 2003 with a newspaper called *The Dominion*. 'The activists and thinkers behind *The Dominion* had in some cases been involved in the Indymedia network, but wanted to develop a more journalistic model while taking inspiration from Indymedia radical democracy' (Paley 2011: 3). Some of these early Indymedia organizers collaborated on the first issue of *The Dominion*, which Skinner calls 'one of the most innovative alternative media organizations in Canada' (2012: 42). He draws attention to their broad readership, 'between thirty and fifty thousand page hits a month' (2012: 42), and their innovative approach to generating community participation.

In 2007, *The Dominion* restructured to become a multi-stakeholder solidarity media cooperative called the Media Co-op (Paley 2011: 6), which Skinner calls 'one of the most innovative alternative media organizations in Canada' (2012: 42). He draws attention to its broad readership, garnering 'between thirty and fifty thousand page hits a month' (2012: 42), and its innovative approach to generating community participation. It consists of a national Editorial Collective; four chapters in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal and Halifax, each with their own editorial collective; and a Board of Directors



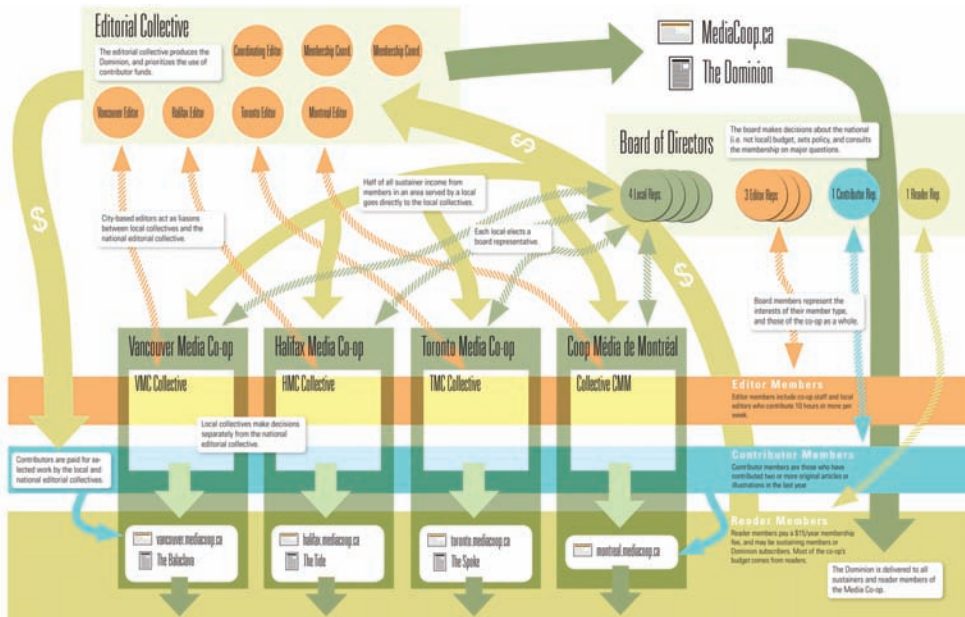


Figure 1: Organizational structure of the Media Co-op (Media Co-op n.d.).

with representation from each of these five editorial collectives as well as a contributor representative and a reader representative (see Figure 1).

They run an activist-oriented news website ([mediacoop.ca](http://mediacoop.ca)) as well as four mutually linked chapter-specific websites. They continue to produce *The Dominion* magazine, which is available in print and online. *The Dominion* and the Media Co-op websites both report on grassroots social movements and other political issues, from real-time protest news to in-depth investigative journalism, all focused on anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist content.

According to Paley, restructuring to involve ‘readers, contributors and editors in decision-making processes has required the creation of innovative methods of group communication and interaction. It has also meant intensive work to bring local coverage into the fold’ (Paley 2011: 6–7). This restructuring is a key part of the remediation of Indymedia into a second generation of on-the-ground activist media focusing on local news and campaigns. At the same time, they are committed to developing cross-Canada networks and decision-making structures that serve to create an autonomous institution – a more formal network through which media activists can coordinate their efforts, share resources and work together with social movements. ‘A decentralized model based on cooperating locals and a national administrative and editorial collective allows for a potent combination of coordinated projects’ (Paley 2011: 7). This structure is more resilient than a loose-knit grassroots media initiative because it is a remediation of a successful older organizational form restructured to facilitate improvements not just in communication, participation and horizontalism, but also through the coordinated production of in-depth journalism from local to global.

The reconfiguration process prioritized the need for a network with a range of defined specific participants in order to have economic and structural continuity and accountability. The Media Co-op found a balance between centralization and autonomy, with representation on the somewhat centralizing Board of Directors and the Editorial Collective from various participating groups (chapters, editor-members, contributor-members and reader-members) that are themselves autonomous. Leadership comes from the members as they are involved in decision-making through Annual General Meetings, in what Kavada calls a 'bottom-up' structure. This organizational model codifies many of the original principles of solidarity and horizontalism developed by Indymedia while establishing a more formalized, reproducible and stable structure.

The Media Co-op uses a sustaining-membership funding model that provides for a range of levels of participation. A membership drive in the spring uses social media to bring in members and encourage existing members to renew. Funding is acquired through these membership contributions, supplemented by modest ethical grants (Paley 2011).

### **b. Decision-making processes**

Kavada argues that 'cultures of decision making ... can be considered an element of organizing' (2013: 80), which can be analysed across two dimensions, 'degree of participation' (2013: 80) from highly participatory to delegation models and 'the value that activists attach to the principles of majoritarian versus participatory democracy' (2013: 80).

The Media Co-op uses participatory decision-making in the Editorial Collective, the chapters and the Board of Directors. This is meant to foster the involvement of all participants by developing mutual non-hierarchical relationships among media activists. Decisions range from financial, such as the development of budgets, whether to pay journalists and how much, to editorial policies, including which stories should be featured and who should produce them. General Assemblies are held to facilitate broad participation, where people can call in from across Canada. Thus, their decision-making processes are highly participatory according to the first dimension analysed by Kavada, stressing inclusiveness and engagement among media activists of all kinds at various levels in the organizational structure. According to Kavada's second dimension, the Media Co-op attaches value to participatory democracy, also valuing public discourse, consensus decisions and the common good.

During the Quebec 2012 Student Strike, which took place from March through to August 2012, protesting a proposed '75 percent tuition hike' (Kostrich et al. 2012), these processes and values continued to be enacted by the Montreal Media Co-op as a key participant in the mass mobilization. As the strike developed, participatory processes were put into practice by the student-led General Assemblies, with hundreds and thousands of students participating in student organization meetings across Quebec. Moreover, the same processes were carried over into community-organizing, which mobilized support for the Student Strike in the neighbourhoods, including the well-publicized casserole marches. In addition the many neighbourhood assemblies engaged in bottom-up participatory decision-making where students and community



members came together to discuss issues related to the common good, student debt and austerity specific to the context of each local neighbourhood, including gentrification and housing. The Media Co-op thus can be seen to share the same decision-making processes and values as the Student Strike and community organizing in which they are rooted.

### **c. Strategizing: From vision to action**

Kavada defines strategizing for social movements as decisions taken regarding ‘the efforts of social movements to transform society’ (2013: 79). She argues that ‘Although all movements strive for social transformation, activists differ in how they define social change and in what they consider to be movement success. This, in turn, influences the goals they set and the ways in which they try to achieve them’ (2013: 79).

The Media Co-op’s strategic mandate is to meet the common needs of readers, editors and writers, which include producing and consuming high-quality coverage of social movements from a perspective rooted within the social movement itself, and other political issues from a counter-hegemonic perspective. Because of the position of the Media Co-op members *within* social movements, they can write from an insider perspective, they have social relationships with activists who may be interviewed as sources, and they tend to write using activist discourses, framing issues differently than mainstream media, including providing a systemic analysis of power.

Paley quotes one of *The Dominion* founders Dru Oja Jay: ‘The idea of a media co-operative is that you’re not just a consumer or a customer, but you’re actually someone who is involved in every aspect of the Co-op, and there’s a sense that we’re all in this together’ (Paley 2011: 7). While there is a strong basis of unity, it does not include an explicit anti-oppression statement, and some members find this to be an on-going issue resulting in inadequate participation by some oppressed groups, particularly people of colour.

The remediation of Indymedia into a more connective network (Bennet and Segerberg 2012) facilitated coordination of the Student Strike and protest actions in the quantitative mobilization for a province-wide tuition freeze, as students walked out of classes and picketed their colleges and universities, maintaining that education is a public good. Thus, the goal set was a tuition freeze, and the measure of the movement’s success must be whether that goal was achieved. The strategies for achieving the goal included an incredible series of nightly marches that lasted most of the summer, with themes from naked marches to anti-capitalist protests, from silent marches by lawyers against Law 78, the so-called ‘special law’ that delimited protest rights, to family friendly marches. In addition, a community-centred series of general assemblies were used to mobilize against the ‘special law’ and many communities joined the nightly marches, pinning the red square of the students on their shirts, and using the tactic of ‘casseroles’, banging on pots and pans to draw attention to their marches.<sup>1</sup>

The Montreal Media Co-op was involved in supporting and reporting on the Quebec Student Strike, as noted earlier. The Media Co-op provided space for activists to engage in

a range of strategies in what Mattoni calls ‘the repertoire of communication’ (2013: 42), including blogging, posting photos, re-posting radio shows, linking videos and producing investigative reporting. Moreover, they facilitated mobilization through the use of a diversity of media forms from posters to pamphlets and flyers, and from social media to website and blog links, specifically providing space for many of these media resources on their own websites, engaging in processes of transmedia mobilization (Costanza-Chock 2013).

Grassroots journalism on the Student Strike produced by Montreal Media Co-op has included a retrospective article by grassroots journalist Stefan Christoff, ‘Je me souviens: Police repression under the Liberals’ (Christoff 2014), which describes the protests from the perspective of a participant; ‘Why no student movement in English Canada?’ (Azadian 2012), which analyses the history of the Quebec Student Strike; and ‘Students and State Square-off on Affordable Education’ (Kostrich et al. 2012), which provides an overview of the issue of tuition hikes in Quebec. It also analyses the political and economic outcomes of the Student Strike, to wit, the fall of the provincial Liberal government and a subsequent freeze in tuition fees by the incoming Parti Quebecois. Thus, the Student Strike was widely seen as an activist victory for students in Quebec, as were the grassroots media strategies and tactics employed to achieve this goal. The strategic success of the Student Strike is closely linked to the successful grassroots journalism strategies of not just The Montreal Media Co-op but also CUTV.

#### 4. Case Study 2: Community University Television-Concordia (CUTV)

CUTV is a non-profit organization situated within a university campus structure. ‘In 1969, CUTV was established out of a need to document and record the stories and struggles of Black and Caribbean students at Concordia who stood up against institutional racism and discrimination at the university’ (CUTV 2012), and it is the ‘oldest campus television station in Canada’ (Thorburn 2014: 55). In the last five years they have engaged in a process of self-reflection and restructuring that has resulted in a new configuration in 2013 as a non-profit corporation with its own by-laws (CUTV 2013a).

During the 2012 Montreal Student Strike, they adopted 3G livestream backpack technology to produce nightly shows garnering a global audience of ‘Nearly half-a-million unique IP addresses’ (King 2012).



Figure 2: CUTV organizational structure.

### **a. Organizational structure**

As a long-running media outlet, CUTV has a board of directors, staff and a large membership (see Figure 2). There are two membership categories: ‘undergraduate students’, who contribute and are entitled to membership through a fee levy, and ‘community members’, who pay a \$20 annual membership fee (CUTV 2013a: 1).

CUTV is funded through a variety of revenue streams, including this student fee levy, limited advertising and crowd funding. The student fee levy is a 34-cent per-course levy applied to all Concordia University students, which pays CUTV’s staff salaries.

In terms of advertising, CUTV is limited to playing two minutes or less of advertising per hour, and these ads must be consistent with its mandate:

CUTV considers its advertising to be an integral part of its programming and as such reserves the right to refuse any advertising or clients which the station feels is inconsistent with the goals and objectives of its programming (e.g.: an organization which actively promotes and/or damages the environment, an organization or advertisement which promotes hatred or intolerance). (CUTV 2013b: 16)

Advertising is thus minimal, most often featuring ads for social movement events, workshops and so on.

To supplement these two revenue streams during the Student Strike, CUTV used crowd funding. According to Thorburn, ‘CUTV’s live streaming was made possible through expensive, high tech equipment leased because of CUTV’s access to funding through student levies and other donations and funding packages’ (2014: 55). The popularity of the livestream footage also meant that their website received a high number of click-throughs, and with this came a great deal of financial support from the audience. This reveals the connection between media being rooted in social movements, access to funding, technological reconfiguration and the opportunities social movements provide to nurture spaces for media activism.

The organization is an interesting hybrid of a non-hierarchical collective and a hierarchical institution. The board of directors and general membership assemblies operate non-hierarchically, but these are embedded within a hierarchical structure where member-driven committees report to the board, the Board of Directors serves as the employer for staff employees and the Board is accountable to Concordia University through the fee levy structure.

Despite its institutional location, however, operationally most participant members experience CUTV as a non-hierarchical grassroots autonomous media space, enacted through an anti-authoritarian cultural and political ethic among participants. Members receive training through peer-to-peer skill-sharing. Board members engage the everyday culture of direct democracy practised by Indymedia, the Media Co-op and other grassroots autonomous media groups. Because of their explicit anti-racist,

anti-sexist, queer, feminist, anti-colonial and anti-ableist safer space and harassment policies, and their advertising policy, CUTV has a resilient way of enacting prefigurative politics, where the content of the media produced is consistent with the organizational practices of the membership. In other words, although the Board has the power to act hierarchically, in practice it would be unusual for them to do so, as they would be quickly called to account by the members, staff and community.

A key aspect of CUTV is the campus lab space that houses several computers with video-editing suites, a large meeting room and space for storage and other needs. This space serves as a media activist organizing hub during, before, after and between direct actions and mobilizations. Starr et al. argue that

Space is of course geographic: assemblies require public territories, and groups require rooms to meet, construct art, provide services, and so on. ... [It also has] particular institutional qualities that nurture social movements, such as privacy, independence, and undirectedness (so as to be open to experiment). And there is a third meaning to space, which is yet more subtle. It is the possibility of finding networks through which to ask questions and to propose, define, practice and develop identities, cosmologies, cultures, and codes. (2011: 92)

The CUTV media lab fits these three definitions of an activist space. It is a permanent space that resembles the temporary Alternative Media Centers (AMCs) assembled during mass mobilizations – with computer stations, editing software, activist-journalists milling about, a meeting space and other alternative media resources; it also embodies the shared anti-authoritarian culture, practices and politics supported by openness and experimentation in style, process and technology. The ability of CUTV media activists to use the lab to edit videos, hold meetings and develop a shared anti-authoritarian political culture (Kruzynski et al. 2012) was key to their coverage of the Student Strike:

CUTV put together live-stream teams: groups of media activists who worked in unison at every demo and march, and most major events of the Student Strike. These teams were constructed of several people: one person wore the backpack (the technical operator) and another the camera (the camera operator). The team also consisted of reporters – sometimes two – a director, a researcher, and often times a spotter. (Thorburn 2014: 55)

This reconfiguration of livestream teams to suit the needs of covering the nightly protest marches, and their ability to work with other media activists and social movement participants in a vibrant open-access video editing space, are both structural elements that are crucial to the resilience of CUTV.

To return to Kavada's media dimensions, in terms of structure, CUTV thus finds a balance between well-defined roles and responsibilities in structure (directors, staff, members) and policies (safe space, advertising) on the one hand, and on the other hand,

an organic fluidity or experimentation among media activist members in reconfiguring their journalistic practices according to new technologies, skill-sharing, a bottom-up newsroom, and the current needs of social movements. Both the fixed structure and the organic fluidity are undergirded by anti-authoritarian commitments within a broader social movement. It is this combination, we argue, that offers resilience in times of crisis.

### **b. Decision-making processes**

CUTV uses direct democratic processes that include participatory decision-making, both on the Board of Directors and among staff and members at general assemblies. Power is decentralized as much as possible, and informal power hierarchies are monitored through self-facilitation, as well as through the safe(r) space and anti-harassment policies.

The Board of Directors, according to the new bylaws, consists of seven directors, comprised of four students and three community members. There is also a non-voting employee or staff representative on the Board (CUTV 2013a: 4). Among these directors, they delegate a Chair, Secretary and Treasurer (2013a: 5), and '[a]ll questions at meetings of the board of directors will be decided by a majority vote' (2013a: 6).

Decision-making of the membership takes place at General Meetings, which are 'open to the public' (CUTV 2013a: 3) and 'all questions at meetings of members shall be decided by a majority in number of the votes cast' (2013a: 3). There are also provisions for an Annual General Meeting in April of each year.

Using Kavada's criteria for decision-making, we can see that while CUTV is quite autonomous in its use of highly participatory processes such as general meetings, town halls general assemblies, nonetheless it has a partially hierarchical structure, and favours a majoritarian model. At the same time, they are committed to 'working towards a more transparent and horizontal structure at the station' (CUTV 2013b) through the use of open spaces such as the Town Hall meeting or 'Refoundation General Assembly' held in January 2013, which was open to all members and the general public (CUTV 2012, 2013b), with the minutes available online (CUTV 2013c). Thus, the participatory nature of the station depends on openness, transparency and horizontalism within the membership, and social movement integration by opening meetings to the public. However, a majority voting process, combined with the hierarchical structure that has the Board overseeing the staff and membership, does open itself to abuses of power, which many autonomous media spaces try to address through consensus decision-making and other horizontal processes. Resilience can be located, we argue, in this balance between a highly formalized structure including a voting system, and the anti-authoritarian cultural norms and practices of everyday media production.

### **c. Strategizing: From vision to action**

CUTV is mandated to offer perspectives that provide 'a counterweight to other media', '[in-depth] coverage of issues and events not given adequate attention by commercial or other media', 'more viewpoints [that] surface in the community or at the grassroots' (CUTV 2013c: 14) and coverage that 'promotes community involvement

and activism' (2013c: 15). Their explicit mandate, therefore, is to be a grassroots media outlet that provides counter-hegemonic perspectives and also encourages activism.

Following this mandate, CUTV engaged in the direct action of the strike, providing a direct report from the streets and offering alternative discursive regimes for evaluating the politics of the Quebec Student Strike and the broader anti-austerity social struggles that emerged. CUTV reporters also became mainstream media subjects, interviewed on camera by corporate media such as CTV, and public media such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Here we see the spillover effects from autonomous or third-sector media to first and second-sector mainstream media, demonstrating how autonomous media need not remain marginalized, as per the risk noted by Sandoval and Fuchs, but can be effective in spreading anti-capitalist messages on a broader scale.

Early adoption of livestream technologies can also reconfigure internal collective relationships into horizontal, interactive relationships among media users, activists and the broader society, fostering a shared sociopolitical project. Critical in these projects is the creation of shared physical spaces for media production and skill sharing, workshops, mobilizations and so on. Technologies cannot be separated from media practices or cultures of democratic participation, but rather their adoption is driven by these cultures and practices. We see this in CUTV by the reconfiguration of individual media activists into livestream video journalism teams.

CUTV's livestreaming was a success in terms of the support it generated for the Student Strike, growth in membership and fundraising. On the other hand, the station suffered an intense crisis once the strike was over, with crowd-funding being severely reduced, one or more staff members being controversially suspended, the fee levy account being frozen and all but one board member resigning (CUTV 2013c). Nonetheless, the members of the broader social movement who were active in the Student Strike were able to step up and join the Board of Directors, shepherding the station through some very difficult decisions and restructuring. The structures (roles, policies), fluidity (openness to reconfiguration) and anti-authoritarian political commitments (including direct democracy and community participation) guided this process so that CUTV would stick to its mandate and vision. In a more loose-knit organization, with no openness to community participation, a group experiencing such a crisis would likely have simply folded. While there are many divergent opinions on what this process was like for the various people involved, as some lost jobs, and others were seen to be 'taking over', the station's assets were finally unfrozen, the Town Hall meeting took place, new bylaws were adopted and the media activism of CUTV continues.

## **5. From citizen journalism to direct-action journalism**

Although their structures, funding models, and specific mandates are somewhat different, similarities between these two media activist outlets emerge (see Figure 3).

First, both have an established, clearly delineated structure with explicit roles that people can take on, some of which are paid. Second, both have clear decision-making



Dimension	Criteria	Media Co-op	CUTV
Organizing	Structure	Multi-stakeholder media co-operative (print and online) – four chapters, board of directors, editorial collective	Campus-community TV station (online video) – board of directors, staff, members
	Funding	Sustainer members, donations, ethical grants; Some paid journalists and editors & unpaid directors	Concordia University student fee levy, ethical ads, crowd funding; Paid staff and unpaid members and directors
	Decision making	Participatory decision-making in editorial collectives	Majoritarian voting on Board of Directors and at general assemblies
Strategies	Vision or mandate	Journalism that is rooted within grassroots organizing, provide in-depth analysis and reflection spaces for transformative social movements	Provide video production and editing equipment, space and training for students and community members as voice of the voiceless
	Social movement actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Olympics Resistance, Vancouver 2010</li> <li>• G20 Resistance, Toronto 2010</li> <li>• Quebec Student Strike, Montreal, 2012</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quebec Student Strike, Montreal, 2012</li> </ul>

Figure 3: Comparison of the Media Co-op and CUTV.

processes grounded in directly democratic media practices. As Dahlgren argues, ‘An important factor is the degree to which there are taken-for-granted cultures of democracy among various groups of the population, with established values and practices; the presence of what we might call “democratic reflexes” can have significant impact’ (2013: viii). Third, both have the capacity for and commitment to supporting and reporting on mass protest mobilizations from a grassroots perspective. Fourth, they are both rooted within and have horizontal social relationships with networks of broader social justice movements, which can support their media practices, and in turn are also supported by them; people move easily between the two on the basis of shared strategic, political and personal interests and affinities.

### **a. Remediation and reconfiguration**

These two grassroots autonomous media initiatives demonstrate a remediation of the media ecology in which social movements are reporting on issues, recombining old media forms such as Indymedia, investigative journalism or TV news with new

media technologies and collectivist-oriented structures, funding models and editorial perspectives. These types of grassroots remediations and reconfigurations of autonomous media are arguably transforming the alternative media ecology with respect to at least two specific media practices related to technological adaptations: relationship building with media audiences, and alternative journalism or direct – action reporting. We see both practices in the reporting that took place *from* the streets via livestream and other technologies and in how this same reporting took *to* the streets via smartphones as protesters followed CUTV's livestream protest coverage on their handheld devices.

### **b. Reconfiguring relationships with media users**

Users or audiences of grassroots autonomous media engage a diversity of media sources through the same channel – the Internet – both viewing and sharing radical perspectives on corporate social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as well as on activist media sites such as the Media Co-op and CUTV. They are in fact becoming the channel itself, joining protesters by using what Bennett and Segerberg call 'connective action', a mode of protest organizing that involves two forms of communicative actions, the first being 'political content in the form of easily personalized ideas' (2012: 744) and the second being 'personal communication technologies that enable sharing these themes' (2012: 744). Through these two modes of connective action, users become engaged in organizing and participating in social movements, without the need to join traditional top-down organizations such as unions or NGOs.

This leads to a change in user or audience demands of protest and political media. Nick Couldry argues that

out of media-related practice may emerge not just new sources of news and mobilization but *a new type of media user* who demands comment and information from a social pool extending far beyond institutions. Such media users may become part of the media infrastructure not only through demands on other producers but through acts [...] exchanging stores of injustice; collectively building toolkits for resistance and media archives for common use; or simply communicating across borders the experience of common struggle. (2012: 130, original emphasis)

In other words, we see a move towards direct-action media users as well as producers. Protest media audiences desire forms of media internal to the action that include subjective, rooted reporting as well as options for connection to others. These connective opportunities emerge through the capacity to tell their own stories, and to share, in terms of reading, re-posting and aggregating stories by and about people with whom they share an affinity. People using grassroots media thereby reconfigure their own viewing and production practices, and influence those of others in their social networks. Social movement audiences thus become indistinguishable from participants. They demand livestream direct-action narratives from activists in the streets who are participants in the social movement and can therefore explain motivations,

capture actions and interactions with police, and offer in-depth analysis. These are the personal-political perspectives Bennett and Segerberg have mapped out, and that CUTV and The Media Co-op provide. Media users can thereby contribute to direct-action narratives through connective action.

Christian Fuchs argues that alternative media offer audiences an opportunity to become producers (2010: 178), and while this may be true, he establishes a priori relationship that the reconfiguration of autonomous media users belies. Autonomous media does not assume that political subjects are readers first and producers second; rather, as we have found in this study, political subjects are media users who produce, consume, share knowledge, narrate, make decisions about media organization and participate in social movements through media.

### **c. Direct-action journalism**

Activists reporting directly from the streets, in the midst of the social movement (rather than where most mainstream reporters typically are – at the line between protesters and police) is similar to ‘cinema direct’, an experimental mode of filmmaking where documentary film directors follow people around in their daily lives, recording their activities. We are calling this type of protest media coverage ‘direct-action journalism’ as it combines the shooting style of ‘cinema direct’ with the direct-action social movement activism of protesters. In addition, this term draws attention to the fact that the creation of media is itself a direct action whose production can play an active role in social protest.

Direct-action journalists are both counter-journalists, reporting from a counter-hegemonic critical media perspective, and conduits of social movement participant voices, engaging social movement actors on their own turf and terms from their own location within the movement. Often alternative media are criticized for this kind of subjectivity, whereas mainstream media are considered objective. However, ‘direct-action journalists’ intentionally avoid an impossible objectivity, reporting from within and as participants in the action. They argue that the mainstream media present a subjective hegemonic view, and that they themselves are simply being more explicit about their subjectivity (King et al. 2012).

‘Direct-action journalists’ are differently skilled than citizen journalists. Their skills range from partial skill-share knowledge to in-depth hands-on experience to extensive professional journalism training. For example, several members of CUTV and the Media Co-op have university degrees in Journalism or Communication Studies, sometimes even a graduate degree. Members may also have years of experience in skill-share training and have themselves become trainers. Moreover, members need to participate in skill-share training, whether they are new or seasoned direct-action journalists to learn the decision-making practices and horizontal methodologies in place. Therefore, what is developed in autonomous media is a profound set of communicative skills based in anti-authoritarian, horizontal forms of training and reporting. Thus, ‘direct-action journalists’ are not inexperienced ‘citizen journalists’ casually picking up a cell phone to record and upload personal videos or major events they have happened

upon. Rather, they use professional technologies, are explicit in their reporting aims and follow journalistic principles from their collective's mandate. Indeed, CUTV has now produced its own code of journalistic ethics akin to those of major mainstream media outlets (CUTV 2013d).

## 6. Conclusions

The resilience of grassroots autonomous media depends on multiple remediations and reconfigurations. The broader social movement community supports media groups facing perturbations, allowing them to maintain their function and mediate or reconfigure collectives under stress. The Media Co-op restructured their organization to be connective across Canada, drawing support from social movement sustainers, readers, writers and other people engaged in a range of activist practices. CUTV, after a period of intense growth during the 2012 Student Strike that included intense perturbation caused by police attacks against CUTV's direct-action journalists, and interpersonal political conflicts and burn-out due to the intensity of the Strike itself, was able to reorganize and regroup after the intense crisis precipitated by the strike. Key to this adaptive or resilient capacity demonstrated by both media outlets are the mandates of the autonomous media groups, which were successfully integrated into remediated and reconfigured media practices and forms.

The role of autonomous media in the contemporary media ecology also bears an interesting shift in the new reliance of mainstream media on alternative media for news content. Mainstream journalists followed the Twitter feed of the Toronto G20 protest AMC and hung around outside the AMC looking for stories (Kellar 2011: 76–77); and mainstream media interviewed CUTV journalists as sources during the Quebec Student Strike (King et al. 2012). This problem was also identified long ago by *Green Anarchist* media activists who used 'anti-copyright' on their materials, but found that sometimes professional journalists would steal their stories and sell them to mainstream media under their own by-lines (Atton 1999). We might want to further consider the consequences of these spillover effects for the resilience of autonomous media. What happens when well-funded, highly professionalized hegemonically ideological media are exploiting the mostly volunteer, under-funded labour of activists producing counter-ideological perspectives?

This raises several further questions. Are media activists, in this gap between citizen and professional journalists, contributing as volunteers or underpaid writers despite having a great deal of education, training and experience? Why does a commitment to social transformation mean that direct-action journalists must work in exploitative labour conditions? Is the resilience of autonomous media perhaps at the expense of the sustainability of the livelihood of individual direct-action journalists? We might also want to investigate whether these types of structured autonomous media groups are able to offer the accessibility they claim to, or the types of spaces that are open and welcoming to a wide diversity of media activists (e.g., women, people of colour, queer and trans people, indigenous people, people with disabilities, etc.). Furthermore, if

reconfiguration depends on adapting or adopting new, often quite expensive technologies, and learning how to use them rapidly, how might the digital divide, within Canada as well as globally, affect who is able to participate? These two case studies and the findings they support, as well as the questions they raise, reveal profound shifts in the political economies and ecologies of contemporary media and the role of autonomous media within them.

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## Note

1. See the *wi Journal of Mobile Media* two special issues on the topic at: <http://wi.mobilities.ca/category/past-issues/spring-2012-i/>.

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