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Grassroots autonomous media practices: a diversity of tactics

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A participatory action research study of anti-authoritarian activist media practices in Quebec, Canada was carried out by the Collectif de Recherche sur l'Autonomie Collective. Analysing interviews from 117 participants in nine activist groups and networks, we have found that grassroots anti-authoritarian and anarchist activists engage in a diversity of media tactics, choosing tools consistent with their desired goals and audiences. These goals can be grouped into four categories: developing affinity, creating social movement spaces, mass mobilizations and global solidarity. These communicative tactics in the activist 'repertoire of communication' are informed by several important commitments to alternative content and processes, including collective self-representation, prefigurative politics and accessibility. We conclude that grassroots autonomous activists sometimes limit the reach of their media to create safer spaces, or to deepen and extend their political analysis, and they sometimes produce media for wider audiences, for local mass mobilizations or to develop global relationships of solidarity. This deepens our understanding of the specific diversity of tactics developed by grassroots autonomous media activists in their repertoires of communicative action, challenging received notions that anarchist or anti-authoritarian media only ever reach a limited audience.

I have always loved the idea of freedom and equality, and even as a kid, I just had great empathy and love for people and so that's the motivation, and that's the inspiration. And the belief that things can change, and knowing that we've seen little changes along the way, and referring back to victories and beautiful moments in my time as a political activist in Montréal. (Victoria, *profeminists* organizing in anti-racist and anti-colonial networks)¹

1. Introduction

This article presents an empirical study of the uses of alternative social movement media by self-identified *profeminist* anti-authoritarians in Quebec, Canada. These results emerge from a larger participatory action research study undertaken by the Montreal-based Collectif de Recherche sur l'Autonomie Collective (Research Group on Collective Autonomy; CRAC). The CRAC is comprised of bilingual (English/French) activist-researchers involved in a range of anti-authoritarian projects that include (im)migrant and refugee support work, radical queer organizing, autonomous gardening, art projects, free spaces and indigenous solidarity.

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We worked with participants who self-identified as feminist (male, female or trans) and anti-authoritarian (or anarchist). We define anti-authoritarian as against all forms of illegitimate authority, including systemic interlocking forms of oppression such as capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, heterosexism, racism and anthropocentrism. In addition, anti-authoritarians attempt to create microcosms of a better world in the here and now based on principles of freedom, solidarity, collective autonomy, direct democracy, spontaneity and mutual aid.

We define *profeminist* (used in italics), following Breton et al., as activists ‘who self-identify and organize as radical feminist, pro-feminist, radical queer, [trans], anti-racist and/or anti-colonialist (the ‘and/or’ indicates that many of our research participants identify with more than one of these terms)’ (2012a, 148). The concept *profeminism* is derived from feminist intersectionality theory, which is put into practice in activist organizing through grassroots anti-oppression practices (Breton et al. 2012b). It is precisely these practices with regard to media production and dissemination that are the focus of this article.

2. Theoretical framework

This study situates *profeminist* anti-authoritarian media within a media practices framework (Mattoni 2013), using intersectionality theory and anti-oppression practice (Breton et al. 2012a). We aim to fill three gaps in the alternative media literature. First, there is a gap in the media practice literature between organization and structure (Cammaerts 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Jeppesen 2012b; Owens and Palmer 2003; *inter alia*) and content (Atton 2002; Sandoval and Fuchs 2010; Bennett 2003; Opel and Pompper 2003; *inter alia*). Second, there is a gap between studies of anti-authoritarian social movements (Gordon 2008; Graeber 2002; Shantz 2011, 2012; Sarrasin et al. 2012) and anti-authoritarian media practices (Uzelman 2005; Shantz 2003; Atton 1999; Jeppesen 2012a). A key exception is Indymedia, an explicitly anti-authoritarian² initiative (Lievrouw 2011; Hanke 2005; Pickard 2006a, 2006b; Pickerill 2007; Platon and Deuze 2003; Atton 2007; *inter alia*). Third, few studies have theorized issues of accessibility to alternative media using intersectionality theory, or have examined activist practices that address these exclusions (Kaltfleiter 2009).

While some theorists emphasize alternative content, and others focus on horizontal production processes, few have theorized how process might influence content. Christian Fuchs emphasizes the importance of critical content in alternative media (2010, 178), by which he means that alternative media must have an explicitly anti-capitalist, counter-hegemonic position. Similarly, Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier argue that alternative media tends to present content that is ‘an alternative to the mainstream’ (2011, 31). Fuchs raises concerns about the limited distribution of alternative media, arguing that counter-hegemonic media must reach a broad audience to be effective. He argues that ‘Anarchist notions of alternative media are insufficient because they tend to idealize small-scale production and tend to neglect orientation towards the political public’ (2010, 174). He postulates that ‘[t]here is the danger that small-scale local alternative projects will develop into psychological self-help initiatives without political relevance that are more bourgeois individualist self-expressions than political change projects’ (2010, 189). Similarly, Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier caution that one of the threats to alternative

media is their ‘Lack of financial and organizational stability, being small-scale, independent and horizontally structured organizations’ (2011, 32), although the cause and effect delineated here are not established; for example, that horizontalism causes instability.

Fuchs suggests that an anti-capitalist counter-public sphere may be developed, as ‘[c]ritical media can be seen as the communicative dimension of the counter-public sphere’ (2010, 184), which must take a stance against economic domination, arguing that ‘all non-economic domination is based on and articulated with economic domination’ (2010, 181). Fuchs’ conception of critical media neglects the importance of queer and trans, feminist, anti-colonial and antiracist counter-publics in anti-capitalist social movements that emphasize people’s immediate struggles which are not always economic (e.g. detention in deportation centres, police brutality, gay or trans bashing, missing and murdered indigenous women, or pervasive rape culture). Counter-hegemonic media content thus need not be primarily anti-capitalist; however, anti-authoritarian media forms almost always are:

The economic is disavowed by anarchists through explicitly anti-capitalist modes of cultural production, for example: lo-fi inexpensive productions such as zines, resource and skill sharing, trading or giving away texts, selling texts at cost, anti-copyrighting, free downloadable PDF’s, and pirating. (Jeppesen 2010, 475)

These modes of production and dissemination, on a small or large scale, are crucial to understanding the multiplicities of collective autonomy produced through social relationships generated by processes of media production, dissemination and interpretation – the symbolic and interactive circulation of anti-authoritarian values. Small-scale production can be re-interpreted as a strength of anarchist media: their practices become the means through which media activism articulates with the broader social movements they support and emerge from, practices that influence and determine content.

While economics may play a role in anti-authoritarian media, the disavowal of the economic renders capitalist sustainability secondary; rather, media collectives establish alternative economic and organizational forms that prefigure cooperative futures and build strong relationships with broader social movements while simultaneously creating counter-hegemonic content and counter-publics around interlocking issues of poverty, race, gender, colonialism and sexuality. In our study, media activists themselves theorize this key relationship between content and organizational structures using intersectionality theory.

To address the second gap, between social movement and alternative media theory, Alice Mattoni’s work on protest media is useful as it integrates social movement scholarship with theories of media practices. She explores political commitments of media activists that inform media practices, arguing that: ‘Individual activists and social movement groups are aware that they can use a variety of communication channels for different purposes: from internal organization activities to the diffusion of alternative systems of meanings beyond the social movement milieu’ (Mattoni 2013, 46). She argues that ‘social movement actors develop *repertoires of communication* from which they can choose and then employ specific sets of *activist media practices*’ (2013, 46; original emphasis), with two specific imagined audiences – internal and external. Extending this theory, we have found that anti-authoritarians

use alternative media in at least four modes that cannot be accounted for by the binary internal/external, but rather by a spectrum of practices from hyper-local to global.

Focusing on protest media, Mattoni argues that activist media practices are engaged ‘in both the latent and visible stages of mobilization’ (2013, 47). Anarchists produce media between mass convergences for a range of purposes including: building local campaigns; responding to current events; organizing cultural events; developing political analysis; creating testimonies on political experiences such as sexual abuse, racial profiling or gay/trans-bashing; supporting each other’s organizing and media efforts; and facilitating dialogues. These ongoing media practices can be better understood by critically analysing relationships between social movements and media activism.

The third gap in alternative media theory is a failure to examine ‘internal oppression’ or the domination of alternative media movements by dominant sub-groups within the dominated group (Jeppesen 2010, 479), replicating forms of oppression from the broader heteronormative, racist, sexist and colonial-capitalist society. Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier introduce a cultural studies framework that emphasizes ‘the political significance of constructing class, ethnic, racial, gender or sexual identities through the development of images and narratives’ (2011, 17), focusing on story-telling and self-representation by marginalized groups. Building on Mouffe, they argue that directly democratic media can counter daily experiences of racism, capitalism, sexism and the like (2011, 29). However, they do not introduce intersectionality theory to examine relationships among interlocking oppressions in alternative media practices and organizational forms.

Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier consider media activists’ political commitments in their study of *Radio Favela*, noting that radio producers wanted ‘to denounce violence, racism, poverty, police brutality and social injustice’ (2011, 37), interrelated issues they were facing day to day. At the same time, contributors to the radio show are predominantly male, so, although they are marginalized, within their community they occupy a dominant position within the dominated group on the axis of gender. However, the role of gender in community radio is subsumed under an undifferentiated diasporic identity (Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2011, 69), with ‘women’s liberation’ (2011, 71) being reduced to a second-wave feminist term that does not form any deeper part of the analytical framework. Similarly in the chapter on the Brazilian landless movement, ‘the exploitation of women in Brazilian society’ (2011, 117) is mentioned but gender oppression is not integrated into an analysis of the landless movement, leaving questions such as whether women take on leadership roles in the movement or its media production unanswered. A note on the Working Group on Internet Governance internal mailing list observes that ‘More than three-quarters (N=80) of participants are male. This dominance is also reflected in the number of postings, where male participants accounted for more than 80 per cent (N=2462) of messages’ (2011, 101). These statistics are emblematic of male dominance in alternative media, particularly on the tech side. ‘From this perspective those actively involved in the IG [Working Group on Internet Governance] process are just another elite acting in the name of a larger constituency’ (2011, 101). This issue has borne little attention in the alternative media scholarship.

3. Research methodology

We interviewed 127 participants from 10 different groups and networks that emerged in Quebec from 1995 to 2010 (see Table 1). By groups we mean autonomous collectives organizing around a common issue, meeting regularly, putting on events and organizing actions. The six groups explicitly identified as both anti-authoritarian and *profeminist*. By networks we mean loose-knit individuals who share a similar political focus in their activist organizing work. Participants in the three networks self-identified as *profeminist* and anti-authoritarian, although the groups they organized with might not.

The research took place in three phases: interviews, monographs and transverse analysis. In the interview phase, researchers within the CRAC worked with groups to develop interview questions, which were posed to participants in one-on-one interviews that were recorded, transcribed and coded in NVivo. Questions were framed initially around collective autonomy and self-management, including questions about relation to the state, media strategies and internal power dynamics. As additional groups joined the project, new sets of questions were introduced regarding queer, anti-racist and anti-colonial organizing. One researcher dropped out of the CRAC collective for personal reasons, so those interviews were excluded (Queer People of Colour, $n = 10$). The primary dataset thus consists of 117 semi-structured interviews of approximately two hours in French and/or English.

In phase two, continuing the collaboration, results were compiled into a monograph or case study, with images, flyers, posters and other ephemera produced by the group, followed by a focus group workshop³ to validate and extend the findings. These seven published monographs and case studies form a second dataset (CRAC 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, Breton 2013, Eslami and Maynard 2013, Leblanc 2013).

The third phase encompassed a transverse analysis on specific themes across the nine groups and networks. A research participant and media activist joined our collective to work on the transverse analysis of media with us. The data were coded under two categories – alternative and mainstream media. A working document

Table 1. Number of participants (n) per group and the network researched with.

Collectives	Networks
<i>Convergence des Luttes Anti-Capitalistes</i> (Convergence of Anti-Capitalist Struggles, CLAC) ($n = 22$)	<i>Féministes Radicales</i> (Radical Feminists) ($n = 15$)
<i>Les Panthères roses</i> (The Pink Panthers; queer anarchist direct action collective) ($n = 8$)	Autonomous Gardens (anti- authoritarian farm collectives) ($n = 15$)
<i>Ainsi Squattent-elles!</i> (Thus she squats! Anarchist-feminist radio program) ($n = 9$)	<i>Profeminists</i> organizing in anti-colonial and anti-racist networks ($n = 23$)
Ste-Emilie SkillShare (queer and trans people of colour arts collective space) ($n = 9$)	
QTeam (radical queer collective) ($n = 10$)	
<i>Collectif Libérterre</i> (Free Earth Collective; green anarchist collective) ($n = 6$)	

explaining preliminary findings was disseminated to anti-authoritarian media activists who were invited to participate in a workshop to discuss results, validate findings and deepen the analysis. The workshop was recorded and transcribed, and thus forms the third dataset.

4. Findings: a diversity of tactics

During the consultas or general assemblies leading up to the Quebec anti-Free Trade Area of the Americas protests in 2001, activists and organizers agreed to accept the principle of ‘a diversity of tactics’ (Shantz 2012, 199–200). This principle acknowledges that not everyone wants to use the same protest tactics, and that activists would accept the autonomy of all groups and individuals to freely decide on the tactics that they themselves felt might be most effective and which they had the capacity to carry out. For example, one group may organize a blockade, willing to go to jail for their principles, whereas another group might organize a direct action flying squad hoping to avoid arrest, and yet another might organize a protestival (St John 2008) using theatre. While the tactics have contradictory specifics (e.g. willingness to be arrested, targeted participants), the goal to disrupt the Free Trade Area of the Americas meeting was a shared commitment, with a respect for the diversity of tactics people chose.

This principle applies to media as much as it does to protest movements. The repertoires of communicative action of anti-authoritarian *profeminist* activists fulfil a range of needs and desires, and although some may seem contradictory (e.g. closed versus open media collectives), they emerge out of and serve to support a shared set of political commitments. Specific tactics of communicative action were used for developing affinity, creating social movement spaces, mobilizing mass protests and building global solidarity.

4.1 Affinity groups and overlapping social–political circles

The first tactic appears to target a small audience based on affinities. QTeam member Abby mentioned that ‘Within the group it’s usually in person and it’s not a friend group but there are different groups who overlap within it so it circulates in that way for events and stuff too.’ In other words, some media are disseminated through overlapping social circles, such as activist groups, student groups, housing collectives and the like. Media produced to promote events such as radical queer dance parties circulate from group to overlapping group. Grounded in socializing and relationship-building, this tactic creates the sense of an anarchist-feminist ‘scene’, a radical queer ‘scene’ or a queer people of colour ‘scene’, all three of which are strong social movement micro-cohorts in Montreal (Breton et al. 2012b). As DeeDee from QTeam mentioned:

I’ve been interviewed on CKUT and I know people who were doing Perversité were interviewed, so we definitely use alternative media sources to promote and as a source of outreach or whatever for a lot of the specific events that we do.

This tactic focuses on promoting local events for specific audiences and allies, organizing legal activist actions and mobilizing slowly in the arena of everyday life

by a process of affinity of identities, interests or values. It is used for communicating with people within or close to anti-authoritarian social movements, but it can also serve as outreach beyond the milieu, which is an open space not shut off from society. Posters can be seen by anyone in the neighbourhoods where they are posted; friends visit friends and read their zines; people bump into each other and share pamphlets or flyers; Facebook events are shared among online friends. This tactic provides social space for discussion of political issues, where analysis is deepened, and strong relationship formations can emerge beyond kinship families, such as intimate friendships, polyamorous relationships and intentional families.

Ste-Émilie Skillshare serves as an important example. Monique said: 'I totally have a chosen family, Ste. Émilie is my chosen family. That's actually how Ste. Émilie got started. The family decided to open up an art space, where we can make stuff, and you know, do our thing.' And as Martine puts it: 'our personal connections do play a large role in our membership. But at the same time, our personal connections are part of our political networks, right?' The connection between organizing, art, activism and everyday life is strong, as Simone explained:

Organizing is part of who I am, so sure it affects all my life. My politics are totally incorporated in my life, my organizing affects everything in my life: my job, my art, my couple, my decisions, my desires, my friend circles, where I go out, where I spend my money, what to do with my free time, the music I listen to, the places I discover, the food I eat, how I deal with public and social relationships, how I vision my life. I really cannot think of any aspect of my life that is not affected by my organizing.

Therefore, while these may seem like the small-scale media tactics Fuchs was sceptical of, they play a key role in developing relationships that ground and strengthen the fabric of movements by providing alternative social structures. This media tactic, the way it is lived, offers a profound challenge to the social system, beyond superficial 'bourgeois self-help'; indeed, rather than the bourgeois, it is often the most marginalized groups who engage in this tactic, expressing ideas, experiences and ways of life that garner little to no representation in the mainstream, and that are largely missing in alternative media such as Indymedia as well, which can be dominated by straight white males (or other dominant positions within a dominated group).

4.2 Spaces, or anchor points for sowing the seeds of dissent

Media spaces such as Ste-Émilie or ASE were likened to anchor points for disseminating a radical analysis and inviting in participants with similar interests or identities. Sasha, a participant in ASE, observed that their radio show was an activist strategy 'because it reaches people, it stirs up ideas, it provides an anchor point for reflection.' It does so by connecting those on the show with listeners in a dialogic relationship. Sasha goes on to explain that the radio show had the power:

to create an informal network of—well, there was ASE which is a small collective of women who reflect and who want to deepen their understanding of questions, of current topics, and it reaches a large network of women who also reflect on it and who also want to deepen their analysis so it becomes a dialectic.

Dialogues opened up within the broader Quebec feminist movement, with a core group of anarchist-feminists producing the show, and a larger group of female or feminist listeners. There were a broad range of topics, as Nathalie explains: ‘themes that were discussed on the show were: Mohamed Cherfi, menstruation, the keeper, literature, music, films that the women in the collective had seen, it was a thousand and one issues, [even] social economy.’ Participants said the radio show made anarchists more aware of feminism, and feminists more aware of anti-authoritarian ideas. Similarly, participants in *Les Panthères roses* said they were ‘queering anarchism’ and ‘anarchizing queer’ movements (CRAC 2010a, 41).

To achieve this kind of cross-pollination, activist groups will invite allied groups to table at their events, distributing pamphlets, flyers, zines, T-shirts, patches, buttons or videos. Activist organizations with physical spaces, such as Quebec Public Interest Research Group, CKUT radio, the Gender Advocacy Centre or Ste-Émilie, have media tables with free material, serving as a kind of infoshop. Jonathan mentioned that, ‘Next to general assemblies, groups engaged in specific projects held information tables. It was great because these projects that were linked to the CLAC could give information to people’ attending the general assemblies. Media activist Evelyne mentioned tabling as well:

Things that have most inspired me in the last few years have been the tables of diffusion in events, at dance parties, during the student strike, whatever, because it gives the potential to distribute [material], it critiques the system of organizing through social media, the internet and all that, you can meet people face to face, it gives us a chance to meet other activists in the struggle, like, directly.

Tabling and other direct media exchanges are important to activists who are critical of organizing through social media because it is inadequate for building social-political relationships. It also opens up activists and their social-political relationships to state surveillance. Anchor points where people can engage in dialogues were seen as more appropriate to developing a political analysis and nurturing long-term social relationships, two key actions in sowing the seeds of radical transformation.

4.3 Mobilizations using the snowball effect

Media activists mobilize mass protest convergences by slowly building momentum. Michael, a participant in the CLAC, said their ‘propaganda’ and ‘culture’ committees used ‘a snowball effect. People who were mobilized were mobilized by other means as well, and in my opinion the snowball effect really worked.’ Mobilization materials included critical information about globalization for a wider audience, inspiring them to participate in the Quebec City anti-Free Trade Area of the Americas protests, a campaign that was highly effective as over 200,000 people from across Canada and the United States took to the streets.

Activist media draws connections among single-issue groups to bring them together into larger coalitions. For example, the CLAC’s media addressed issues with neoliberal globalization, proposing radical alternatives that showed how systemic oppressions are related in their root causes, rather than being disconnected problems. To reach a general audience, some activists suggested they needed to simplify language for people who might be uneasy with specific terminology:

In the Gardens of Resistance, discussion took place regarding the use of certain words, such as anarchist, anti-capitalist or libertarian to define the project in itself. In fact, these debates did not touch as much on the values associated with these terms as much as the fact that they produced a certain inquietude ‘at the level of propaganda’, because the terms might be perceived in a negative light, seen as pejorative, by people who know little or nothing about their profound significance (CRAC 2010b, 38).

The goal, nonetheless, for both the CLAC and the Gardens was to render anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian politics comprehensible to a mainstream audience. Messages thus had to do double duty in accurately representing anti-authoritarian perspectives, which are typically absent in mainstream media, and simultaneously appealing to the broader audience being mobilized. The CLAC’s decision to put explicitly anti-capitalist messages in all of their media marked the beginning of anti-capitalist discourse in mainstream Canadian media. The snowball effect thus works by connecting groups and networks to each other, providing opportunities to explore common ground, and sometimes even getting coverage in mainstream media through ‘spillover effects’ from alternative media (Mathes and Pfetsch 1991). Moreover, this media tactic can be used to build momentum in a campaign that is not a protest or convergence, such as the anti-pipeline, Tar Sands, indigenous sovereignty movement building across Canada and the United States today.

4.4 Solidarity or global dialogues

The fourth media tactic was to build global networks through mediatized dialogues. A participant in *Les Panthères roses*, Nancy mentioned dialogues with global queer anarchist communities that took place through sharing media:

The direct actions that we did, the texts we put on the website are also political, on free love, for example, the fanzine part as well. We took fanzines to Europe and distributed them in certain places. On trans identities, on transphobia, sex worker phobia. In short, I think that there are a lot of documents, videos and written texts that were very political.

Other global radical queer groups found information on their website and got in touch. Participants in the CLAC also found that their media outreach was effective in gaining the interest of people beyond Montreal, specifically in the United States and Europe. For example, Jonathan mentioned he was contacted by an activist-researcher in the United Kingdom to talk about the CLAC. Nancy goes on to mention that:

Other than what happened in Montreal by having the website in English, there were some people in Europe, among other places, who had access. When we went to Europe, to have a base in English, it facilitated dialogues and exchanges on an international level.

These mediatized exchanges among global queer anarchist direct-action groups are paramount.

Evelyne, a media activist who preferred face-to-face opportunities to share media locally, suggested that the Internet was a better tool for creating global solidarity:

with the internet today, there is a way to be connected with other people who are doing the same thing elsewhere, who have the same political ideas or whatever. For example, La Mitrailleuse, there are people who are also doing this elsewhere, so these people send texts to each other, they create links through their projects, each in their local space.

This tactic was not used for protest mobilization but for information sharing and coalition-building. As Bob Hanke argues: ‘What has emerged is a new environment: the same ‘real time’ hypermedia environment that is a precondition for the transpolitical empire of speed has also given rise to transnational campaigns, [and] alliances of activists across borders’ (2005, 44). These dialogues are also created through other media, such as video. As Max mentioned:

We did an action among ourselves, for ourselves [a gay marriage intervention] but there is a camera! Very postmodern: we are filmed therefore we exist. Afterward we screened the film, suddenly there was some press attention. The action didn’t exist because there were people who experienced it, but because it was circulated in the media that we had made a film. Wow! It’s really a stupid paradox.

Like the snowball effect, global media dialogues in which alternative media (the video in this case) are covered in mainstream media (news of the video) can increase visibility of a movement through complex media flows in emerging media ecologies. Mediatized global dialogues, however, like the other three media tactics, were augmented by face-to-face meetings such as the film screening, which were crucial to both alternative media and social movement-building.

5. Discussion

Three key issues, related to the theoretical gaps identified above, were discussed by media activists in relation to their repertoire of communication.

5.1 *Self-representation: processes influence content*

Media activists argued that self-representation is crucial in giving voice to marginalized groups and correcting mainstream misrepresentations of anarchists. In both instances, horizontal processes play a role in determining eventual content.

In giving rise to marginalized voices, the ‘anchor point’ tactic risks consolidating power among a small group of activists. Media activist Xavier preferred the metaphor of the kitchen table:

with the media projects we do we’re opening up a space in society that doesn’t exist to empower people that have been marginalized, and I think whatever visions of the world that we have, the beautiful visions of a society free of oppression, we can definitely have those debates, but I think, for me it’s always been the first step is you create a space within the media context where these people can come to the table, share ideas, and then you go from there.

However, Gilles countered that media spaces have to emerge from the people or groups themselves; that an anarchist space is not necessarily a place everyone will feel comfortable:

it is necessary that the space comes from oneself. If I choose to mediatize something, I do not want—I want to have full control over what I do, so to feel that a media space, that I actually have to want to express myself within it.

Gilles felt that some alternative media spaces would not necessarily make people from marginalized groups feel comfortable or in control of their representations. He warned of a charity model embedded in the kitchen-table metaphor, because the owner of the table is in a position of power, and is ‘helping’ the invitees to self-express, having already set the media frame; for example, introducing someone as a homeless person when they might think of themselves as a couch-surfing videographer. On the other hand, it was suggested that being supportive of each other in the process of self-representation was very important, as Andrea mentioned:

at CKUT [radio] ... there’s a group of adults with physical and intellectual disabilities that put their own shows on, and so in that case it’s more about understanding how to work with people and support them where they need support, but also let them really decide their own stories and be the authors of those stories.

Nurturing a sense of mutual understanding and respect, and avoiding the replication of power hierarchies are key principles, illustrating how horizontal organizational forms can facilitate the production of specific content when individuals speak about themselves in media.

Correcting for mainstream media misrepresentations is also key. The direct link between process and media content is articulated by CLAC member Emma, regarding media representations of the ‘diversity of tactics’ principle:

It was the media committee who said [things in the media], but who was mandated to do so. For example, ... when the media says, it’s violence, you are doing violence. ... We defined among ourselves how we would respond, but it had to respect the principles of unity. We would not say, yes, we are violent, but rather, well, [we would call into question the concept of] violence, economic violence, diverse [forms of systemic violence]. I don’t know. But the principles of unity had been adopted in the general assembly.

Negotiating media principles in general assemblies demonstrates that horizontal forms of social movement and media organizing directly impact self-representations in media content, which can correct the tendency of anti-authoritarians to be misrepresented.

5.2 Prefiguration: linking media activism to social movements

Media activists believe that the process of producing media is as important as the final product. This is based on ‘prefigurative politics’ where media activists create anti-hierarchical organizations in the here and now, prefiguring a better world by putting their values into practice (Jeppesen 2010). Three important prefigurative practices were debated: skill-sharing; empowerment through organizing; and non-hierarchical leadership.

Skill-sharing is an important form of knowledge circulation, which reflects an emphasis on learning by doing with a simultaneous disregard for expert knowledge produced by a university education, corporate training or the culture industry. For

example, CLAC member Jonathan said: ‘You can’t underestimate how important it was for many people, also in terms of skills and skill sharing, in terms of learning how to organize protests and work with the media.’ The relationship between prefigurative organizing and media work is clear. Media activists learn from each other to produce media, from the design of zines, flyers and posters, to writing articles, to shooting and editing video, to web design; and simultaneously they learn to organize horizontally using consensus decision-making, feminist check-ins and check-outs, and other prefigurative practices that foster anti-oppressive social relationships. All of these practices are learned from more experienced activists through direct experience in collectives.

Many participants found these processes empowering, opening space for a new sense of the possible. Jonathan, an activist and grassroots journalist, said: ‘I think that not only myself but many people grew tremendously as social activists by the experience of CLAC. ... Many young people were empowered by the idea of the possibility of political change at a grassroots level.’ Nicole from Ste-Émilie also mentioned empowerment through media production:

Whether they use our space to hold an event or whether they use the materials to create the things that you need, whether it is posters or you use the space to distribute your information, for parties, really anything, doing workshops, for individuals to be empowered, to create art, to come and learn and get ideas from the zine distro, to meet people. I think it’s definitely a social centre.

Although informal power dynamics or internal oppression within activist groups can be racialized, gendered, heteronormative and/or able-bodied, these dynamics were acknowledged and spoken about openly, shifting who participates, developing agency to take part in decision-making meetings and inspiring people to take on informal, non-hierarchical leadership roles.

Prefigurative leadership is an important question – how do media activists take on responsibility without assuming control? People who speak to the media, produce alternative media or write media releases are often seen internally and externally to have more power within the group. To combat this, some groups intentionally delegate women and/or people of colour (POCs) for these roles. This, however, is not without its complications. For example, POCs in predominantly white activist groups were sometimes figure-headed as media spokespeople and felt tokenized by the group. At the same time, there might be good reasons for having a POC spokesperson, as anti-racist activist Stéphanie articulates:

There’s times when I’m in a group and we’re like, ‘okay, we’ve got to make this speech at this rally, or we’ve got to send someone to do this workshop, or we’ve got to pick our media spokesperson.’ And we actively say this would be a stronger message coming from a person of colour, because it’s not always using [white] privilege to access spaces, it’s also sometimes mixing up how things are going to be read, depending on who’s the person standing in front of a group.

The racialization of the spokesperson is perceived to impact how a message is represented or understood. Some POC spokespeople, however, became the target of audience racism or of intensified police repression and violence. Other times, leadership by POC media activists was held up as evidence of a group’s success at

anti-racist organizing (e.g. ‘we have a POC in our group, therefore we’re not racist’), although this success might be seen by POCs themselves to be somewhat limited. On the other hand, some activists mentioned that seeing another POC take on leadership roles in media work motivated them to do so as well. Media activist groups use these three strategies, among others, to prefigure a queer, anti-racist, feminist, anti-colonial future in which all people can participate equally.

5.3 Overcoming mechanisms of exclusion

Anti-authoritarian *profeminist* media activists have several ways of facilitating access, including fostering open dialogues and creating ‘non-mixt’ spaces.

Exclusion can be caused by the use of specialized discourses where some people might be unfamiliar with terms such as capitalism, intersectionality theory or neoliberalism. As Frank from the CLAC said:

It was really a problem, the discourse and the vocabulary we used. We were often critiqued by people who were less educated who said, ‘Speak like me, for fuck sake. I don’t understand what you are telling me.’ It was too academic.

This is sometimes a critique of media representing complex issues, particularly when produced by people with many years of experience and/or education. However, media groups who had spent a lot of time and energy developing a complex analysis did not want to ‘water down’ these ideas. Groups addressed this by providing time for discussion of media content. For example, autonomous garden activists working on rural farms provided an extended discussion period at a rural community workshop where they distributed pamphlets on capitalism and food security. The discussion period facilitated their ability to reach common ground with local farmers who discovered they wanted the same types of things, once both sides clarified their terms.

Not watering down the discourse might be a problem if the space and time for discussion is not provided. But there were also positive experiences. Gabe from *Les Panthères roses* explained their experience:

two women did an interview with us, and they eat in the gay Village, alongside machismo, the tribute to the penis, see that it is superficial, that there is over-consumption. Over the years there is a kind of growing disgust, and to give us the space to discuss this, it allows them to vent this increasing annoyance that has built up over the years.

Anti-capitalist, anti-sexist discourses related to queer culture were happily taken up by people outside the anarchist-queer milieu, showing how critical discourses can provoke positive dialogues.

Accessibility of discourses is closely related to the emotional accessibility of media and spaces. As Monique from Ste-Émilie explains:

I think there’s a huge part of our work that is emotionally accessible or whatever. We’ve done – there’s gonna be, like we helped put out the ‘Nailbiter Anxiety Zine’, and there’s another coming out and we do talk a lot about mental health and what that means in terms of the collective, and as part of Perverscité there’s a workshop happening for

queer and trans people of colour to talk about mental health and survival issues in the real world. So, in terms of mental health I feel like – we are all pretty cagey and we've all gone through stuff and we feel pretty comfortable talking about it and we are supportive of people going through things like that, respect them.

The affective nature of media work plays a key role in accessibility, not just in terms of how audiences might relate to the widely distributed *Nailbiter* zine, but also in terms of how inviting or comfortable the space or 'kitchen table' is.

Emotional accessibility can impact accessibility of the means of media production. Some participants felt it was easy to get involved. Specifically, radio participants liked that it was 'just talking'. ASE member Marguerite said that 'it's more dynamic, less heavy than writing articles, it's more convivial, in a group, and it helps' to have an established listenership. However there may be limitations to access based on gender, sexuality, race and colonialism, as Nicole from Ste-Émilie mentions:

I think we struggle very hard to create a space that is accessible to racialized and indigenous people and we try as much as we can that people in the collective feel that they are represented and that they can work on the projects that they want to work on and take part and never have to explain themselves.

The problem of power in anti-authoritarian collectives is sometimes addressed by the formation of 'non-mixt' spaces. For example, LPR and QTeam were queer anarchist activist groups; Ste-Émilie is a queer and trans POC collective; and ASE was a women-only group. Non-mixt groups seem to be better at horizontality and creating safer spaces for particular forms of media activism. Ste-Émilie is a closed collective that offers an open creative art space to groups or individuals with whom they share anti-racist political commitments, as Monique explains:

Presently, the biggest way that we implement our politics is through who we align ourselves with, so we do lots of immigrant solidarity groups and other anti-racist groups like Project X, No One Is Illegal, SAB (Solidarity Across Borders), these are the kind of people that we love having in the space and they make all the hard work and bullshit worthwhile.

Ste-Émilie also serves as an anchor point for queer and trans anti-racist organizing, as Nicole says: 'people hassle us a lot for having such an identity-based organization, and then, so many people, especially from smaller places, they come here looking for spaces on the basis of being anti-racist, of being trans inclusive.'

Evelyne observes that there is a tension in making decisions about how to constitute particular media groups or spaces:

I think that one of the questions for debate, in fact, is to determine if we want to have closed spaces to allow groups who have a particular identity to be able to express themselves according to their own point of view or to establish open spaces where many groups can interact and engage on a particular question or issue, for example.

This was seen as key to the types of interactivity facilitated within and across media production spaces. Building on Evelyne's analysis, Alain argued that listening was key:

What is the most important in independent or alternative media, is interaction, but more in the anarchist or antiauthoritarian milieu. If not, we become an avant-gardist media. If we do not have the means to develop mutual understandings with the broader public, our messages become avant-gardist, because—What, it's us who knows the truth? That—those are authoritarian values, they are not anti-authoritarian values. We are obliged as anti-authoritarians and anarchists to give voice to others, to make an effort to listen to others, if not, it is a contradiction. Anarchists who don't listen to others, this is a total contradiction.

Anti-authoritarian media activists thus attempt to correct for exclusions based on intersecting oppressions that impact self-representation of marginalized communities, by creating horizontal open collectives or non-mixt closed collectives to address different aspects of this issue.

6. Conclusion

Affinity group media, including non-mixt spaces, invite people into safer spaces, such as radical queer sex parties, queer and trans POC art spaces or anti-racist art and activism shows. This media tactic links sociality, culture, politics and everyday life, producing spaces for friendships, alliances, intimacies and mutual understanding to develop that will ground and motivate social movement organizing. Similarly, media activist spaces such as radio stations or video collectives provide anchors within which activists discuss and deepen their analysis, circulating ideas beyond their immediate spheres. Mass mobilization media reach out to the general public to see whether there is a possibility of motivating them to participate in a protest, attend a talk or get involved in the social movement, including 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, while engaging in interactive dialogues to integrate intersectional issues into anti-authoritarian conceptions of freedom, self-expression and anti-oppression politics beyond the economic or anti-capitalist concerns of dominant group(s) within the anti-authoritarian milieu.

Notes

1. All quotes from participants are anonymized. Names have been changed, although activist group and network names are given for context. Some quotes have been translated from French to English by the authors
2. According to Principle 6 from the Indymedia or the IndyMedia Centre Principles of Unity: 'All IMC's [IndyMedia Centre Principles] recognize the importance of process to social change and are committed to the development of non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian relationships, from interpersonal relationships to group dynamics' (Indymedia [n.d.](#)). Principle 1 states that they are based on the 'self-organization of autonomous collectives' (Indymedia [n.d.](#)), an anti-authoritarian organizational form.
3. We shift between academic and activist discourses. Activists would use the term 'workshop' but academics might call it a 'focus group'. The difference in terminology also encodes a different view of power relations within the group discussion. A focus group implies that participants are discussing the questions while researchers take notes, whereas a workshop implies a participatory non-hierarchical discussion. We use the term 'workshop' from here onward.

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