

Reflections on Media
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What does an “Alternative Media Conference” entail? I’d like to start by reviewing the first two words of the conference title.

Alternative. One might ask, alternative to what, exactly? In 1970, it was clear that the revolution of the late 1960s had found its voice in the form of “underground” newspapers, “alternative” FM radio stations, posters, flyers, and other fledgling “new media.” These were alternative to information streams produced by “the media,” a term meaning specifically businesses, large and small, such as television, radio, movies, newspapers, magazines, and the like, engaged in information dissemination. Now, in 2022, over 50 years later, the entire world of communication has changed, having added numerous new media to those traditional and alternative ones.

Media. A medium is, at its most basic definition, an environment through which information flows or is stored. This might include an oil painting, a family discussion around the dinner table, a person sitting quietly reading a book, or a 30 second Tiktok video watched by millions.

What follows here are a variety of perspectives on the nature of these media and the surrounding culture in which they function.

History

Let’s review what existed in 1970. Print media ranged from that produced by major publishers, including books, newspapers, magazines, all the way down to small works published with mimeograph or spirit duplicator machines, where only a dozen to a few hundred copies could be made and distributed. Telephone systems and postal mail were still essentially one-to-one means of communication, although mass mailings from businesses and non-profit organizations had been developed over the previous decades.

The opportunity for individuals or small groups to produce and distribute sound or video recordings was in its infancy. Cable television was barely 20 years old by 1970 and “public access” community TV was still a relatively new idea. Low cost portable sound recorders were very recent,¹ and portable video recorders and cameras were still in their infancy, cumbersome to use, and so expensive that only institutions or those with high discretionary means could afford them. College radio stations and a handful of commercial or non-profit stations had started broadcasting, but there again, they were a relatively recent phenomenon.

There were no pocket calculators, no cell phones, no personal computers, no world wide web, and no virtual meeting technology. The Bell System was still a government sanctioned monopoly. Long distance calls were expensive, three way calling was rare and costly, and its Picturephone® service was a market failure. Computer timesharing had been developed at Dartmouth College in the mid 1960s and caught on rapidly in some schools and colleges, but one needed a \$1200 teletypewriter² and dedicated telephone line to use it, so service for individuals was virtually inaccessible.

Democracy

Information is often called the lifeblood of democracy. Citizens cannot exert their influence through voting or communication with elected representatives without access to quality information regarding the issues at hand. The very impetus for alternative media in 1970 stemmed from limitations imposed by traditional broadcast (including print) information channels of the time. These limitations carried a bias towards supporting traditional societal norms as well as political and economic structures. They limited or ignored those who held points of view contrary to those norms, thus seeming to defy the very principle of democracy - i.e. to allow a complete spectrum of voices and opinions to shape the course of government.

This situation was exacerbated by the limitations of communication channels and technology. Widespread dissemination of news and current

¹ The Compact Cassette was first developed in 1964 for dictation by Phillips in Europe.

² Over \$11,000 in 2022 dollars

events required huge printing presses, radio and television studios, with their networks and transmission towers, or an expensive mass mailing apparatus, requiring significant postage costs.

An added factor was the limited number of channels or frequencies available in the electromagnetic spectrum for radio and television broadcasts (as managed by the FCC to avoid interference, etc.), as well as the cost of distributing physical media, such as newspapers, magazines, newsletters, or books, either by postal mail, or by a network of wholesalers, retailers, etc.

As a result, a significant capital investment was needed to build and operate these organizations. Because of that, they faced an inherent conflict of interest present in all large organizations. That is, the original mission, on one hand (to provide information to support an informed public, empowered to participate in democracy), versus self preservation and growth on the other (to avoid bankruptcy, and instead generate revenue and expand capabilities in competition with each other).

The 1970 Alternative Media Conference at Goddard provided a forum for people who were highly interested in communicating ideas and opinions that were otherwise omitted or suppressed by traditional media organizations and culture. They were also people who typically had limited capital and means by which to create and develop new channels for this content.

Population

In 1970, US population was 205 million. Now it's more than 330 million. In the first census, taken in 1790, the US had between 3 and 4 million people.³ Now it's almost 100 times as many. The US is now the third most populous nation on the planet.

³ <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade.1790.html>

Meanwhile, world population was 3 billion in 1960.⁴ It had grown to 6 billion by 1999, having doubled in a mere 39 years! In 2022, it's estimated to be 7.8 billion, more than double what it was in 1970.

These are numbers inconceivable to us; human beings did not evolve to be able to grasp such large numbers in any real way. We are also typically very poor at understanding exponential growth. Instead, we are much more likely to think of growth in a linear fashion. And yet, this astounding growth in population has certainly been exponential.

When quantities become this great, we tend to revert to speaking of percentages, ratios, or use scientific notation in an attempt to make sense of them. However, try as we might, a direct experience of them remains elusive.

One important aspect of media, and democracy in general, is the inability of organizations to scale up without undergoing a fundamental change in nature. In other words, no organization can continue to function as it has, once the number of individuals involved increases substantially. Yet this phenomenon is frequently ignored when debating the health of democracy or impact of communication media.

For example, in 1911, Congress voted to increase its own size to 435 seats, which it hasn't changed since. By now, each seat represents an average of 760,000 people (nearly 600,000 of which are of voting age).⁵ To try to get a sense of this, consider Michigan Stadium, which holds 107,000 people when full (the largest in the US and 3rd largest in the world).⁶ Each seat in Congress is now supposed to represent 7 Michigan stadiums full of people! Such representation is likely well beyond the scope of the intentions of those who drafted the constitution.

More than ever, citizens have lost their individuality in the eyes of government, as they are now studied and conceived of as roughly defined

⁴ See <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/world-population-by-year/>

⁵ Divide 330,000,000 by 435 = 768,620, of which 77.8% are over 18. See <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/POP010221>

⁶ See <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/50-largest-stadiums-in-the-world.html>

groups of statistics, based on studies, polls and surveys. Going door to door to visit constituents in person, if even practiced, can only touch an infinitesimally small fraction of the total population in a given district. As we turn to virtual communication, such as e-mail, faxes, phone calls, or online surveys, the flood of messages easily overwhelms the staffers in congressional offices, who must deal with the information in summary, if at all. The questions become limited to: 1. Are they in our district, 2. What issue are they communicating about, and 3. Are they for it or against it? They barely have time to tabulate the totals.

We have a government of 545 elected or appointed people in the three branches (435 in the house, 100 in the senate, 9 on the Supreme Court, and 1 President) trying to run a country of well over 300 million people, covering an entire continent, including multiple climates and terrain. Clearly, there are state and local governments to add to the assemblage of elected officials, but many functions are still held by the federal government alone, the most important of which is arguably control of the money supply and management of monetary policy.

With this extreme ratio of government to those governed, we have stretched government operations well beyond the breaking point. We are witnessing a malfunctioning of this arrangement more and more, regardless of the political party affiliations of the individuals appointed or elected. For example, "congressional gridlock" has become a very familiar term in the nation today. It is inevitable that we must, and are now, moving away from such an unwieldy centralization of management, regardless of the evolution of communication media.

New Media & Challenges

The last 50 years have seen a continued revolution in media technology. Between 1920 and 1970, radio, television, and satellite communication were all developed and established, as well as travel by air. Since 1970, we have brought communications & information storage to individuals at levels unimaginable at the time. A typical high speed internet connection provides enough bandwidth to watch motion picture content (movies, TV programs, live streamed events) in real time as well as interactive games in 3D. As for storage, one can purchase a storage device (a hard drive) for well

under \$100 with one or more terabytes of capacity⁷ (That's one Trillion bytes, able to store *500 million* single spaced typewritten pages.⁸)

We now carry "smart phones" in our pockets which serve as portable high speed computers, able to communicate with video, sound, images, or text throughout a world wide network, as well as store thousands of photographs and video recordings. What's amazing is how rapidly these devices, unknown in their current form before 2007, are now indispensable to anyone who owns one.⁹

Meanwhile, large press runs of books have now been supplemented by print-on-demand services as well as eBook publishing. E-mail and text messaging have exceeded the volume of traditional postal mail and telephone calls, many times over.

Finally, social media has evolved from primitive "bulletin board" servers to massive worldwide systems, such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and others. They now have literally billions of subscribers, world wide, all sharing information of all kinds. Perhaps social media are now the dominant "mass media," of the current age, based on the sheer numbers of people interacting with them.

If anything, these developments might have been looked at by those who attended the 1970 conference as a great alternative media panacea! Individuals and small groups now have access to the creation end of vast media networks. We can now get information out to millions of others at little or no cost. And yet, as we have seen, this vast revolution in communication has now also posed challenges that were unanticipated back then.

There is a striking parallel between these new media in 2022 and what was dominant in 1970. As with any business that operates a public media system, the same conflict of interest mentioned above still exists. Thus,

⁷ <https://www.newegg.com/p/pl?d=1+tb+portable+hard+drive&N=100167526&isdeptsrh=1>

⁸ <https://profound-answers.com/how-many-bytes-does-it-take-to-store-a-word/>

⁹ Steve Jobs introduces the iPhone - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lyx_va6f10s

their goal is to retain and grow the number of users, and entice users to spend more and more time interacting with the system. This is done to maximize revenue from advertisements placed in the feed.¹⁰ Many social media companies have added a new twist: Gather personal information from users and sell it to vendors who will then feed targeted advertising back to users. Again, the more users, the higher the volume of revenue from advertisers.

The irony is that this is much the same motivation to “hook” users that television and even radio had at their inception, decades earlier. That is, their revenue is based on advertising fees, as there are no paid subscriptions from users. Television, especially, was engineered to be as “addictive” as possible. The more hours viewers watched, the greater price was paid by advertisers trying to reach the largest audience possible.

Let’s take Twitter as a modern example. Twitter is primarily a text medium. Participants can reply to the posts of others, to create a thread, or just react by clicking a “Like” icon. Once submitted, posts cannot be edited, only deleted. One characteristic of Twitter that’s hidden from view, as with most social media networks, are the algorithms that determine which posts are “fed” to which other users.

What Twitter management discovered was that posts that are highly controversial or upsetting are likely to garner more engagement (views and reactions) from users. (Television channels, such as Fox News and MSNBC also use this appeal.) In some ways, the medium of Twitter itself carries a bias for this because it tempts users to respond quickly with short, easy-to-write messages when their emotions are stimulated by what they are seeing.

The result of all this is to provoke controversy, divisiveness, and polarization among users, both because of the inherent nature of the medium, as well as the algorithms employed by Twitter and other social media.

¹⁰ Even non-profits, such as NPR, have a similar goal. The more listeners, the more exposure for their sponsor’s messages. Of course, they are also trying to attract and retain listeners who are likely to donate.

This response has become legendary. The level of rancor and vilification among users has reached a level so intense, that Twitter has received an increasing amount of criticism for enhancing the intensity of these acerbic posts. As misinformation typically engenders a highly emotional response among users, it has also increased user engagement, and thus resulted in increased revenue for Twitter.

Eventually, complaints about increasingly vicious content and the spread of misinformation became overwhelming. Twitter's response has been to remove some posts, block some users, and have their system generate occasional warning messages reminding users to maintain a more civilized tone.

However, looking back, alternative media in the 1970s also appealed to listeners, viewers, and readers on an emotional level. Controversy and confrontation were common at the time. There was a lot of passion among those whose voices had been suppressed for so long. And at the same time, there was a lot of fear among traditionalists, that all this change was destabilizing society in general. That fear is again reflected today in conservative political movements, where people are motivated to push for a return to older cultural norms.

So, in some ways, we find ourselves with some of the same challenges we had back then. Instead of a paucity of communication channels, we have an overabundance of them. But the difficulty in finding ways to heal differences and work to face society's challenges remains. Organizations which naturally prioritize their own survival and growth have often done so by furthering discord in the population.

Decentralization

In the past, hierarchical "networks" focused on the dissemination of information from a few sources to many listeners, viewers, or readers, aka broadcasting. Now, vast numbers of the public (for the price of a cell phone or laptop computer) can each originate information and disseminate it to anyone. If this is indeed the "alternative" media hoped for 50 years ago, we have now found that these media are as good at propagating *misinformation* as they are at communicating *verifiable* information.

The sheer volume of information accessible to anyone has overwhelmed our minds and exceeded the time most of us have available to sort, filter, and verify what we're seeing. Our hopes for individual "access" by individuals and small groups (e.g. public access cable TV, back then) is now as much a threat to democracy as it is a support of it because traditionalists are using the very same access progressives had hoped for.

The result has been an enhancement of political polarization to the extent that millions of people have decided to select only information streams that reinforce their existing opinions. The "complete spectrum of voices" on which democracy depends is thus fractured.

Rapid change and a new purpose

There is another parallel between 1970 and 2022. Overall, the pace of change and challenge to existing norms seems similar. Within less than a decade, the 1960s exploded with political and social turmoil. Now, again, it seems that issues are piling up with an urgency seldom seen since.

Many of the top issues of the time have now returned to the forefront. Civil Rights is back as antiracism and has expanded to include indigenous peoples, now known by the acronym BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People Of Color). Feminism and gay rights have evolved into the broad identity and orientation spectrum known as LGBTQ+ and the Me Too movement. Rebellion against "the establishment" in the late 1960s has evolved through the Occupy Movement to emerge as a new effort to resolve economic inequality. Earth Day and the anti-pollution and anti-littering efforts back then are now front and center as global warming, mass extinctions, ocean pollution, soil nutrient depletion, and climate change.

The top priority

As we grapple with all these challenges, ongoing damage to the planet seems to have emerged as the most urgent of all. If your house burns down or is wiped away by storms or floods, or the bees die off and plants are no longer pollinated in order to bear fruit, most other social or economic issues are likely to pale in comparison. Our tradition of exploitation of nature (as well as exploitation of human laborers) has

reached crisis proportions. If anything, we must shift to prioritize living in harmony with all of nature and in harmony with humanity, together, instead. And we are urged to do so as quickly as possible.

Just as separate hierarchically organized national governments are not a good fit to address our world wide climate & pollution problems quickly, so neither are hierarchically organized, centralized media organizations well suited to support the communication needed for us to coordinate our efforts with each other, directly around the globe. The new social media companies have so far been a mixed blessing. Their reach is world wide and their access is more widely available than ever, but their self serving algorithms have hampered their usefulness to a certain extent.

The traditional purpose of “democracy,” as related to representative government, has changed. Now we must answer the question: What does *world wide* democracy look like? I submit that it does not look like a U.N. style centralized hierarchical organization. Rather, it looks like a vast cooperation of people in all parts of the world, sharing experience, knowledge, and ideas, *directly among each other*, to radically change how we humans live on this planet. This is not just to help each other to avoid starvation, loss of shelter, etc. as human beings, but to expand our work to include the nurturing and preservation of habitat for all of life.

Can we have enough food, water, and shelter for ourselves without decimating species after species with which we share this globe? This question extends way beyond the divisions we’ve created between political parties and national boundaries. We need not erase those boundaries in order to make these changes, however. Indeed, it is possible, and perhaps even necessary to think of ourselves as neighborhood, community, national, and global citizens, all at the same time. We can certainly express our individuality, our various group identities, and embody our sense of interdependence with the natural world on this planet as well.

Evolving Media

Our challenge is to utilize our evolving communication networks to accomplish this goal. Perhaps we are “atomizing” communication in true network fashion. That is, multiple connections between multiple nodes,

world wide, in kind of a “hive” arrangement. Such networks must be agile, adaptable, of sufficient bandwidth, and accessible to all.

I think of an analogy related to travel on water. For an ocean liner to change direction, one needs a giant rudder and plenty of time to travel in a great arc. But what if the passengers are instead traveling in thousands of smaller boats, with each one in view of the others that surround it? Can such a flotilla change course more rapidly, in a self-coordinated fashion, by working together without a central command or control? Indeed this model may be the only way to go forward as rapidly and effectively as we seem to need.

Participation

Given the bias toward controversy inherent in today’s mass media empires, what can we do to create or adapt media in general to promote harmony among such a diverse world population? After all, we need the perspectives and participation of people of all races, backgrounds, and identities. Unlike past eras of colonization, where explorers from empires carried an attitude of superiority to other lands, we now need more than ever to include everyone as equal contributors to the work ahead. Everyone, including those most marginalized in the past, has something to contribute that’s just as valuable and important as anyone else.

This philosophy stems from the original concept of democracy, where every person is valued equally, regardless of their diverse identity. But instead of participation in a traditional government hierarchy, where we elect a “man” at “the top,” we now must build new networks of sharing and mutual learning, rather than focus on power and control.

Steps

But with vast numbers of us across the globe, and a human propensity for “group cohesion” how can we achieve that goal? Where do we start? Perhaps, we begin with the “small boat” concept I spoke of above. That is, we work at a personal face-to-face local level. We work in groups small enough to have time to listen to each person and help bring out their inherent intelligence and wisdom, as well as the nature of the challenges

they face in life. At the same time, we work to build new networks of communication that favor sharing and mutual support rather than divisiveness and polarization.

And I think we also need a certain amount of time in nature, either alone or in small groups. After all, a walk in the woods, or a stroll along the seashore is a medium, an environment for information, just one of a different sort. These activities represent an experience that is non verbal, involving all the senses, and direct and immersive; without any intermediary.

In a way, there are three levels of work to do: Living in harmony with all of the natural world, living in harmony with other human beings on the planet, and finally, living in harmony within ourselves, as much as possible.