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35 Alternative and Activist New Media: A Genre Framework¹

Throughout most of the twentieth century a handful of firms and institutions dominated the media and information industries, especially in the U.S., Europe, and other affluent regions of the world. An industrial-style system of mass production and distribution delivered all kinds of cultural materials – books, newspapers, cinema, music, television and radio programs – to mass audiences, and helped generate a “mainstream” media culture in which people were viewed mainly as collective “publics,”

markets, or audiences. Small presses, alternative and underground newspapers, independent filmmakers and musicians, pirate and low-power radio struggled to provide divergent points of view and cultural choices, but their successes were often short-lived. Lacking the enormous resources needed to compete in heavily capitalized and concentrated media markets, most remained on the cultural margins, were absorbed by larger players, or disappeared altogether.

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Over the last three decades, however, the proliferation and convergence of networked media and information technologies have helped generate a renaissance of new genres and modes of communication and have redefined people's engagement with media. The big corporate actors and institutions still exist, of course, but their dominance is no longer as assured as it was, as their market prerogatives and business models come under threat from an array of rivals for people's time, money, and attention. Media *audiences* and *consumers* are now also media *users* and *participants*, immersed in complex ecologies of divides, diversities, networks, communities, and literacies. This changing landscape has created unprecedented opportunities for expression and interaction, especially among activists, artists, and other political and cultural groups around the world who have found new media to be inexpensive, powerful tools for challenging the givens of mainstream or popular culture. Websites, mobile telephones, digital photography, video, and audio, blogs, wikis, file-sharing systems, social media, and open-source software all permit social groups with diverse interests to build and sustain communities, gain visibility and voice, present alternative or marginal views, produce and share their own do-it-yourself (DIY) information sources, and resist, talk back, or otherwise confront dominant media culture, politics, and power.

At the same time, this emerging new media ecology² has posed complex problems of social equity and solidarity, privacy and security, political and economic participation, freedom and control, expert versus lay/popular knowledge, and more. In the contemporary media context, the familiar processes-and-effects perspective that has animated traditional mass communication research and scholarship, and the production-consumption dynamics of critical media studies, tell only part of the story. Today, a lively and contentious cycle of capture, co-optation, and subversion of information, content, personal interaction, and system architecture characterizes the relationship between the institutionalized, mainstream center and the increasingly interactive, participatory, and expanding edges of media culture (a relationship that media designer and critic Peter Lunenfeld [2011] has aptly called "the secret war between downloading and uploading").

From the days of the pre-browser internet of the 1970s and 1980s to today's Web 2.0, a tension has

grown up between what I have called the competing *pipeline* and *frontier* visions of the internet and other new media systems (Lievrouw, 2008). On one hand, the pipeline or center view sees traditional and new media alike as just so many "factories" for the manufacture and distribution of cultural products intended for consumption on an industrial scale. On the other hand, the frontier or edge view regards media more as venues for participation, speech, interaction, and creativity, and considers the vast and growing archive of media products and content as a trove of resources to be re-fashioned and re-presented by users "rummaging in the universal media archive . . . [where] all the data in the world . . . make up one lovely big amusement park" (Lovink, 1997, p. 59). The pipeline view tends to see media technologies and content in terms of property and gatekeeping, production and consumption; the frontier view is more likely to value reputation, credibility, creativity, reciprocity, voice, and trust as well as ownership, and to see media and information technologies as opportunities to create and communicate as well as consume. These contrasting views have helped to shape the popular understanding of the proper cultural and economic role of new media over the last three decades, as well as the technical design of the systems themselves. Disputes about what new media are for, who gets to use them, and who decides have set the stage for the current rise of alternative and activist new media projects.

Here, I explore these contending views by outlining a framework comprised of several major families or *genres* of contemporary new media projects that have adopted an explicitly alternative, activist, or oppositional perspective. I begin the discussion by laying out a definition of new media that brings together technical artifacts, communicative practices, and institutional arrangements, including the characteristics that make new media "new," and apply the definition to the alternative/activist new media context. I then consider the relationship between genre theory and alternative and activist new media projects, and suggest some key generic features of such projects. The chapter closes with brief discussions and illustrations of each genre, to demonstrate how the creators of particular alternative and activist projects have employed the capabilities and features of new media to enlist support and participation, or to achieve their aims for social, political, or cultural change.

New Media Defined

In order to understand alternative and activist new media projects, we should first decide what we mean by the term “new media.” The phrase has become something of a cultural placeholder—people often use it without having a clear or specific idea what it means or includes (and doesn’t). In everyday use, the boundaries of the term are uncertain. By new media, do we mean the latest technical gadgets, novel forms of entertainment, sophisticated ways to find information, or (by far the most common usage) just anything having to do with the internet?

In the communication field, scholars have taken several approaches to defining media and communication technologies over time. One common method categorizes media according to their technical *features* or capabilities, especially those that correspond to human senses and behavior: for example, still versus moving images, sound or silent, one-way versus two- (or more) way transmission, text versus pictures, signals sent through wires or over-the-air (broadcasting), paper or screen (e.g., Durlak, 1987; Pool, 1983; Schramm, 1977; Steuer, 1995). In recent decades the features approach most often has been seen in the distinction made between digital and analog communication technologies and media, where systems are classified according to the types of signal or data processing involved.

Another approach, widely used in introductory communication textbooks, defines communication technologies according to the *content* they produce, how that content is perceived by people who receive or consume it, and how the content affects them—whether in the form of television programs, printed newspapers or books, feature-length movies, computer games, or other forms. This perspective underpins the long tradition of *media effects* research in the field that dates back to the 1920s and 30s (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; McQuail, 2005; Schramm & Roberts, 1971).

A third approach considers different media systems (i.e., the technologies and the organizations that own and operate them) as *institutions* or industries that may be regulated and governed to achieve various social, cultural, or economic objectives (such as return on shareholder investment, speech and press freedoms, universal service obligations, political participation, or the maintenance of public culture or morals), as well as the transmission of content.

The institutional view is a fundamental premise of the *critical media studies* tradition in communication research (Curran et al., 1977; Fiske, 1982).

Whatever the approach, communication scholars historically have tended to view the communication process itself as a separate matter from the devices and methods that people use to do it. That is, they have defined media and communication technologies instrumentally, as the means to an end or an intervention in an otherwise undistorted and transparent process of “real” human expression and interaction, rather than an essential and integrated aspect of communication itself. With new media, however, it is not so easy to make these simple distinctions. Not only do new media combine and remix features and capabilities from all types of media and information technologies and content (a characteristic that is often attributed to the uniformity and substitutability of digital data formats and streams); many observers also contend that new media blur the usual divisions between media producers and consumers, and between those who design systems and those who use them. Indeed, one of the most striking things about new media—why we can keep calling them “new”—is that they are the product of the continuous interweaving of innovative activities, services, systems, and uses that blend or even eliminate familiar distinctions between telephone calls, movies, letters, newspapers, television, photography, or music, for example.

Some object that in recent years, incremental refinements and optimization (such as the delivery of services and content on devices offering relatively small upgrades, features or “apps” built to work with existing platforms) have overshadowed the “disruptive” or breakthrough innovations that were associated with earlier stages of internet development (such as radical miniaturization, packet switching, the end-to-end principle, or peer-to-peer file sharing architectures). For example, Jonathan Zittrain (2008) warns that the recent proliferation of purpose-built digital devices and “walled garden” subscription models, such as internet-enabled mobile phones or “readers” like Amazon’s Kindle or Apple’s iPad that restrict content choices via closed subscription models, is a deliberate strategy that allows manufacturers to restrict users’ abilities to adapt devices to new uses or applications and thus inhibits innovation. Nonetheless, the sense of “newness” of new media continues to emerge, sometimes from surprising quarters. Indeed, the most disruptive future innovations may be more

likely to come from the developing world than from established industries in wealthy regions that value stable markets and revenues over risky technological change (*Economist*, 2010).

Sonia Livingstone and I have proposed a different kind of definition for new media that may be particularly useful for analyzing alternative and activist media projects (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002, 2006). We define new media as information and communication technologies and their social contexts, which include three main components:

- the material *artifacts* or devices that enable and extend people's abilities to communicate and share meaning;
- the communication activities or *practices* that people engage in as they develop and use those devices; and
- the larger social *arrangements* and organizational forms that people create and build around the artifacts and practices.

For example, in the case of mobile telephones, this definition would include the system's hardware and software components (handsets, relay towers, satellites, undersea cables, switching systems, and computers that track calls and generate bills each month), how people use them (voice calls, texting, web access, voicemail, subscribers who use long-term service contracts or pay-as-you-go, top-up cards), and the ways that systems and users are organized (private-sector corporations and their customers, government regulations on rates and competition, whether calls can be monitored by law enforcement agencies or anxious parents).

Of course, all communication systems, not just new media, include these three elements. From handwritten letters enclosed in stamped envelopes and delivered to recipients via postal mail, to massive computerized financial systems that execute instantaneous trades in global markets, we might identify the artifacts, practices, and social arrangements involved in any given system. The next step in defining new media is to say what makes their artifacts, practices, and arrangements different from those of other technological systems, including earlier types of media. Here, we can point to four key factors that distinguish new media.

Two factors have to do with the ways that new media have tended to develop over time – how they have been designed and shaped by society and their

users. One is that over time, new media have developed as *hybrid* or *recombinant* technologies – they resist stabilization or “lockdown” and change continuously as a result of combining existing, older systems (e.g., video recording) and innovations (software that makes it easy to upload videos on YouTube). The important point here is that new media are the product of people's ideas, decisions, and actions, as they merge old and new technologies, uses, and purposes. This doesn't mean that a technology will work exactly as it is “supposed” to, that we can always predict how a system might be used or redesigned later, that some institutions or interests will not attempt to block certain types of uses or designs, or that some technologies will not become entrenched, routine, and difficult to change. But it does mean that people direct and guide technological change – technologies don't just evolve by themselves, in some inevitable direction.

A famous example can be found in the history of the ARPANET, the early prototype and predecessor of today's internet (Abbate, 1999; Lievrouw, 2006). The ARPANET was designed by engineers and scientists working for the Advanced Research Project Agency of the U.S. Department of Defense, who linked long-distance telephone systems and computers to share scientific data-processing capacity across a select network of scarce, expensive, and complex mainframe computers. The system was designed to re-route data to different computers automatically if part of the system failed (e.g., by coming under military attack). Those engineers and scientists never expected that a simple program that allowed project workers to exchange, store, and forward telegraphic “electronic mail” messages would quickly become the most heavily used feature of the system (Newell & Sproull, 1982), and thus the world's first “killer application,” or that email would launch a whole new era of computer-mediated communication and pave the way for other forms of digital expression and interaction.

Certainly, some technologies and uses become stable, embedded, and routine; we can hardly imagine a world without email today. But because it is relatively easy to tinker with new media technologies (indeed, most have been designed deliberately so that they can be modified), and to create and improvise new uses and types of content, they tend not only to change more rapidly than media systems have in the past, but also to keep changing – which is why, in recent decades, we have continued

to think about new media as “new,” as a moving target.

Another factor that distinguishes new media from mass media is that newer systems have been designed and developed as continuously reorganizing, unfolding, point-to-point webs of technologies, organizations, and users – as a *network of networks*. In this respect, the architecture of new media systems is much more like the telephone and early telegraph than it is like publishing or broadcasting. This is unsurprising, given that new media have been built on the foundation of the global telecommunications system, from the ARPANET onward.

In today’s global networks, any point can connect with any other point, telephone-style; it is technically possible for any user to retrieve and exchange messages, information, or programs from any other user or site on demand. The power of networked architecture is embodied in the quintessential “coupler” or scaffolding of new media systems, the *hyperlink*. Not only do hyperlinks connect individual locations, documents, or resources; they also open wide and highly contingent paths of subsequent linking where users may move among sites, resources, and people as their interests take them, with few technological barriers. This contrasts dramatically with traditional mass media systems, in which relatively few, large creators or producers generate media “products” for mass distribution and consumption. Mass media are designed around the assumption that there is (and should be) a fairly direct and linear path from the origin of a message to its destination, from producer to consumer, from beginning to end of a program, or from one type of product to another, as in mass market publishing, cinema, or television broadcasting, for example.

The networked architecture of new media is also designed to allow a variety of technologies (telephone, video, recorded sound, text documents, databases) and users to connect and disconnect from the network, as different uses and purposes require. Again, this is mainly a function of the ability to represent and distribute/share all types of content and expression in standardized, roughly compatible digital formats. Such standardization has been an important key to the “openness” and flexibility of digital systems and platforms, as users have adopted and adapted those standards for a variety of applications.

There is no question that some elements of networked new media have become relatively more

centralized and stable over time; even legacy media industries have reformatted many of their products and programs to fit new media platforms. However, the persistent openness of the system to innovation (including sabotage or work-arounds) from any place in the network marks a crucial difference from more traditional systems (indeed, this tension between control and openness is at the heart of the contending pipeline and frontier perspectives noted above; elsewhere, I have also characterized it as a tension between determination and contingency [Lievrouw, 2006]). The word “network” has become a commonplace – even clichéd – way to describe both interlinked technological systems and the patterns of social relationships and organizing that they reflect and support. Again, this constitutes a significant change from mass media systems and industries, which are structured mainly around hierarchical, top-down forms of organization, to ensure centralized control, to facilitate the reliable mass production and distribution of media products to mass audiences, and to capture and return steady streams of revenue back to the producers.

The two other factors that make new media new have to do with their consequences or outcomes for society and culture. The first is the sense of *ubiquity* that they encourage – the seeming presence of new media everywhere, all the time, which affects everyone in societies where they are used, whether or not every individual uses them directly.³ Of course, new media are *not* available everywhere, for everyone, to anything like the same degree. Indeed, the serious and persistent unevenness and inequity of access across geographic areas and social groups is the subject of numerous studies and enduring debates surrounding various “digital divides” (Bucy & Newhagen, 2004; Compaine, 2001; Jansen, 2010; Norris, 2001; Warschauer, 2004). But over the last few decades, and especially since the introduction of web browsers in the early 1990s (which made more diverse sources of online information accessible to more people than ever before), many people have come to assume, rightly or wrongly, that new media technologies and applications will eventually be accessible for everyone – that they should be regarded as public goods on a par with electricity, water, a telephone service, or other necessities of life in developed societies.⁴ Whether and how this assumption will actually be realized in the form of greater access for people in less developed areas or disadvantaged groups is still an open question.

However, as one example, the privately-owned Google search engine nonetheless has many characteristics of a “natural monopoly” with what economists call high barriers to entry; i.e., the costs of creating the “next Google” are so prohibitive that real competition is unlikely to arise. It also has pronounced public goods qualities – in economic terms, it is non-rival in consumption and non-excludable. That is, no matter how many people use Google at a given time, the search algorithm cannot be “used up” – it is always available for the next user, and the next. And it is available to any online user for free; Google does not exclude any searcher or search from the service.

The fourth factor that distinguishes new media from other communication systems is that they are fundamentally *interactive*. They give users an unprecedented degree of selectivity and reach in their choices of information and cultural resources, and their personal interactions and expressions. To some extent the sense of interactivity derives from the networked, point-to-point architecture of new media systems mentioned previously – an infrastructure modeled on telephone systems rather than broadcasting. The immediacy, responsiveness, and social presence of information and other people that new media users experience constitute a qualitatively different experience of engagement with media, and create different expectations about what new media can and should be for, when compared with conventional mass media systems. At the same time, interactive and highly selective systems can promote a sense of solipsism and self-centeredness, cultural fragmentation and pastiche, and the belief that immediate access to quick information that fits one’s personal interests and preferences is more valuable or desirable than the in-depth knowledge of the expert – what some critics have called the “Daily Me” (Negroponte, 1995; Sunstein, 2007; see also the parody documentary *EPIC 2015*, see <http://www.albino-blacksheep.com/flash/epic2015>).

Interactivity has long been acknowledged as a distinguishing characteristic of new media and information technologies, and indeed has been the focus of a large body of literature in communication studies (for example, treatments of the concept in early new media studies include those by Rafaeli [1988], Rice & Associates [1984], and Rogers [1986]). However, it is particularly important in the process of social/political change because it supports or provides conditions for *participation*, a hallmark of alternative and

activist new media projects. Mass media systems may have enormous persuasive power, but people’s principal mode of engagement with mass media is basically receptive (even from the “active audience” perspective advanced by many media and cultural studies scholars; see Livingstone, 2005). Exposure to or reception of a message may or may not provoke action on the part of the receiver; indeed, the preponderance of classical media effects research has been devoted to understanding just what conditions or predispositions are needed to convert message reception into action. In contrast, new media systems do not just deliver content; people must actively use them to *do* something, i.e., search, share, recommend, link, argue, and so on. Use is action by definition, which may encourage new media users toward more involved social and cultural participation online and off. We might argue that it is a much shorter step from use/interaction to participation than from exposure/reception to participation.

Like interactivity, participation has been a core concept in new media studies (see Karaganis, 2007). Mark Deuze (2006) argues for three distinctive modes of engagement with new media: participation, remediation, and *bricolage*. Participation, Deuze says, makes people “active agents in the process of meaning-making” (p. 66), and new media promote participation in this fundamentally constructive and interactive sense. Thus they also provide the necessary platforms for participatory journalism, participatory democracy, and so on. Henry Jenkins (2006), focusing on the production and circulation of popular culture “goods” via new media, says that although interactivity and participation are “words that are often used interchangeably” (p. 133), they are distinct concepts. Interactivity refers to “the ways that new technologies have been designed to be more responsive to consumer feedback” (p. 133), while participation depends on “cultural protocols and practices” (p. 23).

Participation can also be seen as the point at which an individual’s knowledge, or capacity to act, is actually transformed into communicative action (Lievrouw, 2001). From this perspective, *interactivity* is a necessary cultural, social, and technological condition that supports *interaction*, which in turn is a necessary condition for participation. We might think of interactivity as a feature of media infrastructure (articulating artifacts, practices, and social arrangements) and participation as a particular form of action supported by that infrastructure; but one depends on

the other. “Interactive” new media offer more opportunities for communicative action, and interaction, than do most traditional mass media formats, and thus more opportunities for participation.

The four main factors that help make new media new – recombination, networked architecture, ubiquity, and interactivity – also influence each other. On one hand, the design and use factors (recombination, networks) help shape the social consequences of the system (ubiquity, interactivity). In turn, the social consequences also influence continued use and future design choices. For example, again using the example of mobile telephones, so-called third- and fourth-generation (3G, 4G) phones have been designed to link a range of new and existing network services (voice calls, text messaging, web browsing, email, delivery of music and video on demand). As these services become a routine part of people’s mobile phone use, users’ expectations will naturally affect the design and marketing of even newer features and services.

To summarize, new media (like other communication technologies) can be defined as the combination of material artifacts, people’s practices, and the social and organizational arrangements involved in the process of human communication (see Figure 35.1). However, they differ from other media forms

and systems in four important ways: in terms of their design and use, they are continuously *recombinant* and complexly and dynamically *networked*; in terms of their social consequences, new media are widely perceived as being pervasively *ubiquitous* and *interactive* (with interactivity being a necessary condition for social, political, and cultural participation). Over time, design and use factors, on one hand, and social consequences, on the other, continue to influence each other mutually as the technology – an ensemble of artifacts, practices, and arrangements – develops.

Defining Alternative/Activist New Media

The definition above gives a broad sense of what new media are and how people perceive and use them. But what makes certain uses of new media “alternative” or “activist”?

Over the last decade, a number of writers have explored the uses of media, including new media and information technologies, in political, social, and cultural movements. As noted by Downing (2008), this body of work has shifted from a focus on the uses of communication technologies, especially mass media, by mainstream political campaigns and parties

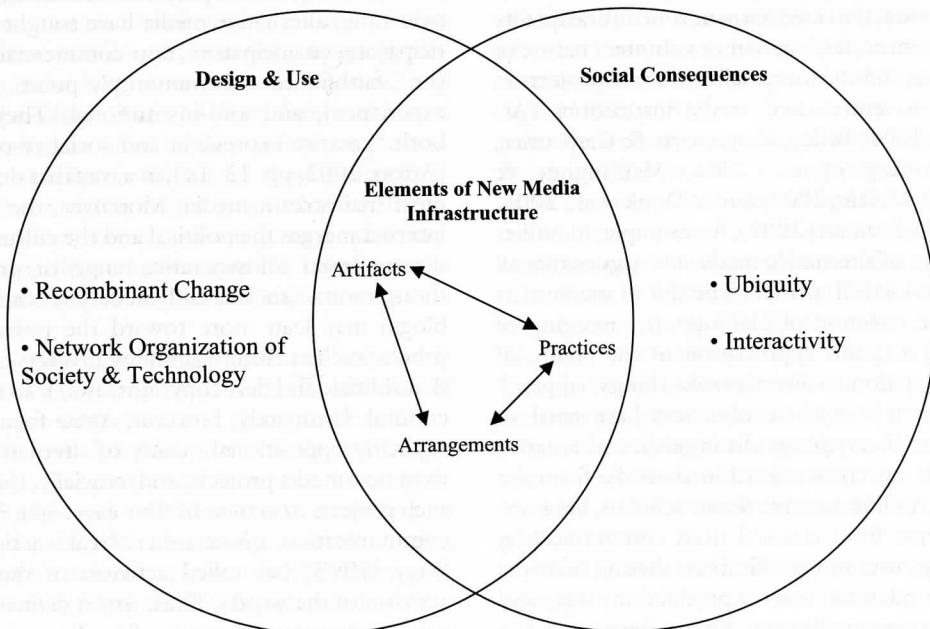


Figure 35.1 New media, defined

to a greater emphasis on citizen, activist, or community engagement with issues and movements through the internet and related technologies (see also Silver, 2003). Other work has focused on *tactical media*, a response to the post-1989 fall of communism in Europe, the failure of left-revolutionary movements, and the ostensible “victory” of market capitalism. Tactical media theorists, notably Geert Lovink, have suggested that smaller, episodic, nomadic, rapid-response moments of “resistance,” not revolution, are the only tenable way forward for political activism amid the cultural fragmentation and radical subjectivity of postmodernity (Cubitt, 2006; Garcia & Lovink, 1997). Critics, however, contend that such an approach – essentially all tactic and no strategy – is too easily co-opted by mainstream political and economic interests, and that diffuse “resistance” is no substitute for more fundamental, revolutionary change: “tactical media ceded too much to the neo-liberal triumphalists” (Ray, 2006, p. 32).

Many analysts have treated alternative and activist new media projects as the latest incarnation of a long historical line of oppositional, radical, underground, or anarchist media, including newspapers and small-press publishing, pirate or underground radio, and public-access video. Various writers have noted the experimental quality of alternative and activist projects that employ both mass media and new media forms and tools, the diversity of viewpoints and values being expressed, the eclecticism or subcultural quality of their audiences, the amateur or volunteer nature of participation, and the marginality of these projects in opposition to entrenched media institutions (Atton, 2002, 2004; Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2008; Downing et al., 2001; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Meikle, 2002; van de Donk et al., 2004; Vegh, 2003). Braman (2002), for example, identifies four qualities of alternative media and argues that all are found in tactical media: “The use of medium as content, the rejection of ideology, the merging of politics and art, and appreciation of the ability of digital information to directly make things happen.”

However, few of these observers have tried to define what, if anything, distinguishes alternative projects that use conventional mass media from the new media/online variety. Some scholars have applied concepts from classical mass communication research (e.g., uses and gratifications theory) or media studies (the relations among production, text, and audience) to new media cases. Others have tended to gloss the differences between mass and new media as a

simple matter of greater opportunities for interactivity, participation, or feedback, without probing deeply into what these processes are or why they are significant. Some writers have been reluctant to say which projects or issues are actually alternative or activist and which are not.

For example, in the preface to their edited collection on cyberactivism, McCaughey and Ayers (2003, p. 14) refuse to define what “counts” as “legitimate online activism” because projects that seem radical or oppositional from one point of view may seem insufficiently committed or effective from another perspective. Communication scholar John Downing, who has published extensively on the topic of radical media, argues that “context and consequences must be our primary guides in defining radical alternative media given the range of issues, actors, interests, and meanings involved” (Downing et al., 2001, p. x). Although alternative media are characteristically autonomous from mainstream media and emphasize the participation of and service to the communities they serve, there is “no one ‘right’ way to frame or define alternative media” (Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2008, p. 78).

One scholar who has made some clear distinctions, however, is Chris Atton, whose careful analyses of alternative mass media and the “alternative internet” (Atton, 2004) outline the differences between mainstream and alternative projects. He has suggested that over time, alternative media have sought to be participatory, emancipatory, non-commercial, authentic (i.e., faithful to a community’s point of view or experience), and anti-institutional. They combine both “creative expression and social responsibility” (Atton, 2002, pp. 13–14), in a way that departs from most mainstream media. Moreover, the alternative internet merges the political and the cultural across a diverse, even idiosyncratic, range of projects, although some (such as Indymedia sites or right-wing blogs) may lean more toward the political, while others (such as culture jamming projects or artworks that ridicule and defy copyright laws) lean toward the cultural. Ultimately, however, Atton focuses on the explicitly oppositional quality of alternative and activist new media projects, and, crucially, the nature of such projects *as actions in their own right*, rather than communication *about* other “real” actions (what Wray [1998] has called activism of the deed vs. activism of the word). Thus, Atton defines the alternative internet as “a range of media projects, interventions and networks that work against, or seek to

develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of 'doing' media" (Atton, 2004, p. ix).

Taking a cue from Atton's description, then, we might recast the general definition of new media above to propose that **alternative/activist new media employ or modify the communication artifacts, practices, and social arrangements of new information and communication technologies to challenge or alter dominant, expected, or accepted ways of doing society, culture, and politics.** Their creators take advantage of the recombinant, networked nature of new media infrastructure, and the ubiquity and interactivity that they offer users, to create innovative projects in which people extend their social networks and interpersonal contacts, produce and share their own "DIY" information, and resist, "talk back" to, or otherwise critique and intervene in prevailing social, cultural, economic, and political conditions. That is, alternative/activist new media projects do not only reflect or critique mainstream media and culture, they constitute and intervene in it.

Genre Theory and Alternative and Activist New Media

Broadly speaking, five basic genres of contemporary alternative and activist new media projects have emerged and become commonplace over the last decade: *culture jamming*, *alternative computing*, *participatory journalism*, *mediated mobilization*, and *commons knowledge*. Each of these forms relates to a different domain of social life, culture, or technological practice. Before looking at these genres individually, however, it is useful to say what a genre is, how genres play a role in media in general and in new media specifically, and to suggest the key themes or features that characterize alternative and activist new media genres.

The concept of *genre* has a long history in the study of communication, from Aristotle's classification of different types of rhetoric and their power to influence or persuade listeners, to the analysis of major literary forms like poetry and fiction, to the categorization of films and television shows according to their style, format, and content (e.g., westerns, action films, situation comedies, game shows, reality programs, or news). Since the 1990s, scholars have also looked at various types of online communication as genres, including email, personal websites, FAQ

(frequently asked questions) pages, blogs, and online newspapers. These studies have sought to understand the similarities of online genres with more traditional types of media content, but perhaps more importantly, they have examined how new genres may be evolving and departing from more familiar forms, as people understand and use them differently and as new technological tools become available.

Basically, a genre is a type of expression or communication that is useful and/or meaningful among the members of a given community or within a particular situation.⁵ Genres have both *form* and *purpose*: that is, they have typical material features or follow certain format conventions, and they allow people to express themselves appropriately and achieve their various purposes or intentions in a given situation. A genre's characteristics may depend to a great extent on the communication technologies or media that are used to produce it. However, genre and medium are not the same thing – often, a genre may originate in one medium and then be carried over into others. For example, westerns were once a popular genre of print fiction that was later adapted to cinema and television. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of genres is how people adapt and modify them as new communication technologies become available in different social contexts (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992).

Genres have several other important functions that are relevant for alternative and activist new media projects. First, they help "mediate" or facilitate communication among members of communities. As Phil Agre (1998, p. 81) puts it, genres are the "meeting point between the process of producing media materials and the process of using them." The authors of an analysis of Web genres note that "Genres are useful because they make communications more easily recognizable and understandable by recipients" (Crowston & Williams, 2000, p. 203). Remarking on one-way mass media like cinema and television, Denis McQuail has observed that "The genre may be considered as a practical device for helping any mass medium to produce consistently and efficiently and to relate its production to the expectations of its audience ... a mechanism for ordering the relations between producers and consumers" (McQuail, 2005, p. 370).

Thus, genres are the means for creating and maintaining community and social context, and the cultural products of those communities and contexts. But they can also be so specific to a certain group's

worldview or situation that outsiders may not understand them – so genres can also act as boundaries or markers that exclude outsiders and reinforce the power of insiders, as with youth subcultures, for example (Hebdige, 1979). As Sonia Livingstone has pointed out, “different genres are concerned to establish different world views” (Livingstone, 1990, p. 155). Daniel Chandler (2000) observes that “Any text requires what is sometimes called ‘cultural capital’ on the part of its audience to make sense of it.” Indeed, “recognition of a particular genre is one sign of membership in a particular community” (Crowston & Williams, 2000, p. 203).

Another important point about genres is that they are not fixed or static, but active, dynamic modes of communication and expression that change with their users’ circumstances and interests. Some genres (the mystery novel, the television situation comedy, the scientific journal article, the newspaper editorial, the email message) have remained fairly stable over time because they have remained consistently meaningful and useful to the people who use them, and therefore feel no need to modify them. But other genres may change as rapidly as the communities that create and circulate them. Dramatic recent examples include the blending of personal web pages, instant messaging, tagging and bookmarking, and entertainment in social media like Twitter or Facebook, as well as DIY “mash-ups” of music and video clips such as those exchanged among high-school-age fans of Japanese *anime* (Ito, 2009). And, as these examples suggest, genres do not stand alone: members of a community commonly employ a variety of complementary genres in their interactions, which have been called genre systems (Bazerman, 1995) or genre repertoires (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994).

Genre Themes and Features

The distinctive genres of alternative and activist new media, like other media genres, have not emerged in a historical vacuum. It may be tempting to assume that new media, and especially the internet, have so utterly transformed the nature of human communication and culture that they have made all previous modes of expression and interaction obsolete. But successful innovations are always built on the foundations of existing practices, systems, and organizational forms; alternative and activist new media projects are no exception.

A full exploration of the social, cultural and political influences on alternative and activist new media is beyond the scope of a single book chapter (interested readers may review the longer discussion in Lievrouw, 2011). Briefly, however, major influences on the style and sensibility of these projects include two major activist art movements: early 20th century Dada, and Situationism, the critical perspective on postwar society and culture promulgated by Guy Debord and his colleagues in Paris in the 1950s and 60s. Politically, alternative and activist new media projects have adopted many of the issues and strategies associated with new social movements, which collectively are the subject of a wide-ranging and extensive research literature that bridges sociology, political science, political communication, and related fields.

Three major themes connect Dada, Situationism, and new social movements to contemporary genres of new media activism: the *scope* or size of activist projects; the *stance* of movements and projects relative to dominant/mainstream society and culture; and the nature of projects as *action* and activists as *agents* of change. Each theme encompasses several characteristic generic features, which in various combinations and to various extents can be found in the five genres of alternative and activist new media projects.

Scope

Scope includes two related features. The first is the **small scale** of activist projects. From “provocations” at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916, to the graffiti slogans of May ’68 in Paris, to the spoof corporate website posted in 2002 by the Yes Men on the eighteenth anniversary of the deadly gas leak at the Dow Chemical plant in Bhopal, India, activist art, new social movements, and new media activists have tended to mount relatively small, low-cost projects. Today’s alternative and activist new media projects have been called “micromedia” (Peretti, 2001a). Media theorists David Garcia and Geert Lovink have described small-scale *tactical media* – small interventions rather than coherent, carefully planned campaigns, “what happens when the cheap ‘do it yourself’ media ... are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture” (Garcia & Lovink, 1997). Or, as Sean Cubitt puts it, “Tactical media are addressed to what is doable now, to the effective and to the short term ... ‘winning’ is not an option” (Cubitt, 2006, p. 42).

To some extent this preference for small-scale projects may be attributable to the fact that few artists and activists have access to substantial, reliable sources of funding and staff. However, the “micromedia,” DIY aesthetic would also seem to reflect a basic attitude among activists about super-sized modern culture. For example, the rejection of mass production, consumer culture and consumption, and industrialized violence and warfare that defined Dada re-emerged in the countercultural, confrontational manifestos and constructed situations of the Situationist International (SI). Activists in new social movements, from environmentalists to gay rights advocates to anti-globalization protesters, have inherited a similar distrust, and even hostility, toward large-scale, dominant power structures and institutions.

The scale of activist projects may also be limited because the audience for any minority, oppositional view is likely to be small by definition, at least in a movement’s early stages. In addition, activists place a high value on flexibility and rapid action: the Dadaists numbered no more than a few dozen artists and writers at the peak of the movement (Dickerman, 2005). The SI, which never included more than eight or ten core members, became notorious for its frequent, abrupt ostracisms and expulsions of collaborators whose philosophical or political views diverged from the core (Wark, 2009). One effect of the small scale of most activist sites online, and the distinctively personal (not to say idiosyncratic) roles that their creators play in these projects, is that they tend to give visitors and contributors a sense of familiarity or intimacy, of being an insider who knows the players personally.

Given the small scale of artists’ and activists’ projects, it is unsurprising that they also tend to be **collaborative**, the product of group effort, rather than individually produced, solo works. In this respect they are part of a larger trend toward a “new collectivism” associated with postmodern art and activism (Stimson & Sholette, 2007). Like the most memorable Dada and Situationist efforts, and the communitarian values underpinning new social movements, the “new collectivism,” and alternative and activist new media projects, are predicated on an assumption of community, interactivity, and participation in their design, organization, and operation. Chris Atton (2004), for example, has described the “social authorship” or social creativity of alternative internet sites and actions. The power of new media

“lies less in the information that it [*sic*] carries than in the communities that it creates” (Schrage, 2001). In their analysis of Indymedia journalism, Sara Platon and Mark Deuze (2003, p. 337) have observed that “The potential for immediate interaction between users on the internet surpasses all other media. . . . [Indymedia] also has an increased potential for (re) connecting media formats and forms of journalism with different types of community.”

Stance

A second general theme that bridges activist art movements, new social movements, and online activism has to do with their sense of separation or difference from dominant culture and mainstream social beliefs or values – that is, how they situate themselves, or the “space” they occupy, relative to the rest of society. The *stance* of alternative and activist new media projects can be seen in three main characteristics.

First, these projects are **heterotopic**, that is, they act as “other spaces” or “countersites” for expression, affiliation, and creativity apart from the dominant culture (Lievrouw, 1998). A heterotopia, according to Michel Foucault (1986, p. 24), is “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which . . . all the other real sites that can be found with the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.” This definition certainly resonates in the context of activist art and new social movements, as well as newer online projects. Dada, for example, had a very specific physical geography that included several major European cities and New York. Only a handful of artists and writers worked in each place, and the emphasis of the work varied from city to city. (German Dada, for instance, was decisively political and revolutionary in its aims, while the Zurich, Paris, and New York contingents emphasized absurdity, playfulness, randomness, and the “gratuitous gesture”; Dickerman, 2005; Hopkins, 2004; Lippard, 2001.) Nonetheless, through steady streams of correspondence, travel, and collaboration the Dadaists established a relatively coherent aesthetic that took a defiantly oppositional, “outsider” stance toward dominant art, culture, and politics. Similarly, the SI believed that only the deliberate fabrication of shocking situations and “counter-spectacles,” in opposition to dominant economics and politics,

could offer “spectators” a way to reclaim authentic experience and autonomy. And as Alain Touraine, Alberto Melucci, and other theorists have argued, new social movements have been effective not because they try to restore cherished social values, but because activists themselves have demonstrated and exemplified new, alternative, “other” values and practices for the rest of society, out of a “desire to erect communities conceived as a refuge within an increasingly thicker social network. Marginality, considered for so long a failure of integration, becomes thus the hallmark of an opposition, a laboratory in which a new culture and a social counterproject are being elaborated” (Touraine, 1988 [1984], p. 106).

Likewise, borrowing a term from Arjun Appadurai, online activists and artists create diverse “mediascapes” or “cartographies” (Holmes, 2007) where they can “congregate” and share minority or marginalized views. Maren Hartmann (2004) has argued that “being online” constitutes a sort of *cyber-flânerie* analogous to the strolling of nineteenth-century *flâneurs* in Paris or Berlin or the *dérives* of the Situationists, redefining and reshaping the meaning of cultural spaces as they go. Others have noted the nomadic quality of social and cultural engagement via new media and information technologies, particularly the possibilities for oppression, and for autonomy and resistance, available to the “nomads” and “data dandies” who traverse digital networks (Lovink, 1997; Critical Art Ensemble, 1994; Economist, 2008a). Hakim Bey’s concept of Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ) (2003) has been invoked as a model for new media activism by a number of scholars.

Critics have noted the potential for social fragmentation or separatism, and the loss of civic or public culture, in the diversity of online sites (e.g., Mitchell, 2003; Sunstein, 2007). Others worry that separation from mainstream discourse and the concerns of the larger society tends to reinforce extremist values and opinions. However, such “cyber-separatism” or “nanoaudiences” (Kahn & Kellner, 2005) may be balanced by the growing ability of underrepresented groups to seek greater visibility and legitimacy for their interests on a global scale by going online, as in the widely-analyzed use of websites by the Zapatista movement in Mexico in the 1990s (Chadwick, 2006; Cleaver, 1994, 1998; Garrido & Halavais, 2003).

Given their heterotopic nature, perhaps it is unsurprising that, like activist art and new social movements, many alternative/activist new media projects have a **subcultural** quality, or that online activists

cultivate what Kahn and Kellner (2003) have called subcultural literacy. Chris Atton (2004, p. xi) notes that the study of the alternative internet can basically be considered “the study of subcultures.” Like anti-nuclear activists using *agitprop* street theater, publishers who distributed John Heartfield’s photomontages lampooning German militarism in the 1920s and 30s (Getty Center, 2006; see <http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/heartfield/>), or Situationists setting out on their rambling *dérives* searching for new, unexpected ways to encounter the Paris streets, online activists expect their audiences to share a degree of insider knowledge, a “hyper self-reflexivity about the nature of pop culture” (Collins, 1995, p. 2), that has also been described as an “aesthetic of poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, desiring” (Garcia & Lovink, 1997). Alternative and activist projects reinterpret the familiar with an acute sense of awareness of contemporary culture – and expect that others who are interested will “get it,” too. Issues, images, buzzwords, and attitudes are selected, captured, subverted, co-opted, fragmented, recombined and re-presented in unexpected (and ideally felicitous) ways.

In line with their heterotopic, “outsider” status and subcultural sensibilities, activist art, new social movements, and alternative/activist new media projects often have an acute sense of **irony** and **humor**, especially in their appropriation of mainstream cultural images and ideas to advance alternative or oppositional meanings. Online projects are often ironic, playful, humorous, campy, or parodic (Braman, 2002); or as linguist Geoffrey Nunberg has commented about blogging, their participants often present themselves as “co-conspirators who are in on the joke” (Nunberg, 2004, quoted in Stimson & Sholette, 2007, p. 2). New media activism has been called “immature . . . [celebrating] the possibility of ironic, humorous and contradictory political actions” (Peretti, 2001b). Such projects “do not take themselves that seriously . . . they know how to laugh” (Lovink & Richardson, 2001, n.p.). Both Dada and the SI made extensive use of absurdity and black humor in their commentaries on art and modern life. A similar playfulness has carried over into the sensibility and style of many new media projects, and is often seen in their public communications and events. Although “[n]othing can suck the air around it like political art: so many words, so much ideology worn so transparently on the sleeve, so much certainty, and so little of interest to look at”

(Thompson, 2004, p. 10), a lot of alternative/activist art projects are straightforwardly funny, exploiting the absurd quality of much of mainstream culture, economics and politics. Well-known collectives such as The Yes Men, ®™mark, and the Critical Art Ensemble, for example, seek to inspire outrage by pointing out and mocking the absurdity, or even producing a little humorous absurdity themselves.

Agency and Action

A third theme linking activist art, social movement theory, and alternative/activist new media projects is action and agency – that is, the extent to which projects are conceived and executed as *action*, by participants who see themselves and their projects as *agents* of social change. Two characteristics are involved here. The first is that all three traditions are explicitly **interventionist**. Their creators seek to interrupt or alter existing conditions, to subvert common-sense or taken-for-granted meanings and situations, to “introduce noise into the signal” (Dery, 1993, n.p.), or to create “. . . a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 90). Contemporary artists and activists attempt to “create situations in the world at large” (Thompson, 2004, p. 10).

The Dadaists made their interventionist aims clear through their deliberately public events, propaganda, and provocation. In Europe between the wars it was still possible “to interpose one’s art, even with no guarantees of effectiveness, between the official message and the audience” (Hughes, 1991, p. 81). Dada sought to launch “intervention[s] into governability, that is, subversions of cultural forms of social authority – breaking down language, working against various modern economies, willfully transgressing boundaries, mixing idioms, celebrating the grotesque body as that which resists discipline and control” (Dickerman, 2005, p. 11). The Dadaists’ anarchic, iconoclastic methods were meant to achieve a “clean slate” or *tabula rasa* for reconceiving everyday life and culture (Lippard, 2001).

Today, activist projects online “push against” existing sites, events, and practices: “Culture jammers do not exist without corporate billboards” (Lovink & Richardson, 2001: n.p.). Projects can either constitute intervention and action in themselves (such as the persistent and illegal posting of DVD decryption code on U.S. websites; Eschenfelder & Desai, 2004), or invite and encourage intervention by others (such

as the continuous stream of proposals for staging cultural and political flash mob events throughout the world, posted at <http://www.flashmob.com>; see also Rheingold, 2002).

As interventions and actions, alternative and activist projects, activist art and new social movements alike are often **perishable**, short-lived responses to rapidly changing cultural contexts and meanings. They are “. . . capable of taking risks, even if this means they might self-destruct in the process” (Lovink & Richardson, 2001). Alternative and activist new media projects in particular are notable for their “mobility, [their] flexible response to events and changing contexts” (Meickle, 2000). Like the communication links and traffic flows on the digital networks that support them, activist projects online organize, disorganize, and reorganize more or less continuously, with a high rate of attrition as a result. In this respect they resemble earlier artistic movements, such as conceptual and performance art (both of which are often cited as direct descendants of Dada, and to a lesser extent, Situationism), which were deliberately made not to leave material – thus collectible or commodifiable – traces or remnants.

An important influence on the perishability of alternative and activist new media projects may be the ephemerality of the Web itself. At any time, a surprisingly large proportion of all websites are outdated, broken, abandoned, or inaccessible using standard web browsing techniques – comprising the so-called “invisible” or “dark” Web (Sherman & Price, 2001). One widely-cited study from 2001 estimated that the “deep Web” was anywhere from 100 to 500 times the size of the easily-accessible “surface” Web (Bergman, 2001). In 2000 a study by IBM researchers of the largest sample of the World Wide Web available at the time found that about 30% of all websites were either barely connected, or entirely disconnected, from the rest of the Web, and that searchers actually found what they were looking for online only about 24% of the time (Broder et al., 2000). In 2003, another study found that nearly 70% of blogs had not been updated in the previous two months (Henning, 2003).

Of course, it is important to remember that throughout history, only a tiny fraction of *any* media artifacts – written manuscripts, letters, printed books, films, photographs, audio or video recordings, artworks, and so on – have ever been preserved. Indeed, not only is history “written by the victors” from selectively-saved documentary evidence; it is

becoming depressingly apparent that the deliberate, and selective, destruction of records is being revived in the digital age as a tool of repressive power, from the burning of ancient Islamic texts in the Sarajevo library to the deletion of inconvenient emails and other electronic records in corporate offices or an American presidential administration (Sanders, 1997), to denial-of-service “botnet” attacks launched against an opponent in advance of military action, as in the conflict between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It may be wishful thinking to expect the situation for the preservation of digital media materials will be any different.

Five Genres

As noted previously, broadly speaking, five main genres of alternative and activist new media projects have become familiar parts of today’s online mediascape. In this closing section we review all five, including brief examples of each. The five genres, the social/cultural domains they address, their typical forms and purposes, and their genre features are summarized in Table 35.1.

Culture Jamming

Culture jamming borrows, comments on, and subverts elements from popular culture, such as entertainment, advertising, art and music, literature, cinema, and so on. This genre critiques popular/mainstream culture, particularly corporate capitalism, commercialism, and consumerism. Here, media artists and activists appropriate and “repurpose” elements from popular culture to make new works with an ironic or subversive point – put another way, culture jamming “mines” mainstream culture to critique it. As a strategy for making political art and commentary, culture jamming predates the internet, and many of its signature tactics originated in Dada and Situationism. Early culture jamming projects borrowed elements from mass media and pop culture sources, especially print and broadcast advertising and corporate image communications (e.g., logos, slogans, and products); classic examples can be found at the website of the Canadian magazine *Adbusters* (<http://www.adbusters.org>). However, with the birth of the World Wide Web, the same media strategies were quickly adopted by online activists and digital media artists in the 1990s, including the

Table 35.1 Genres of alternative and activist new media

<i>Genre</i>	<i>Social Domain</i>	<i>Forms</i>	<i>Purposes</i>
Culture jamming	Popular culture, mainstream media, corporate advertising	Appropriated images, sound, text from popular culture	Cultural critique, political and economic commentary
Alternative computing	Computing, telecoms, media infrastructure (hardware and software)	Hacking, open source system design, file sharing, cryptography	Open access to and use of information and IT
Mediated mobilization	Social movements, identity, cultural politics, lifestyles	Social media, mobs, virtual worlds, blogs	Activist mobilization, lifestyle examples ('prophesy')
Participatory journalism	Reporting, news, commentary, public opinion	Online news services, blogs, Indymedia	Covering under-reported groups and issues, investigative reporting
Commons knowledge	Expertise, academic/technical disciplines & institutions, socially-sanctioned knowledge collection and organization of diverse, arcane knowledge	Tagging, bookmarking, wikis, 'crowd sourcing'	Mobilizing 'outsider,' amateur knowledge, comprehensive

launching of “memes” (Wasik, 2009) and so-called “guerrilla” or “viral” marketing. Culture jammers must also contend with an ongoing cycle of “reverse jamming” where radical or oppositional messages and styles are reappropriated or recuperated (Hebdige, 1979) by mainstream marketers to give their products a cool, countercultural, or anti-establishment image (for a satirical critique of such cross-appropriation, see Frank & Mulcahey, 1997).

Since the late 1990s, one of the most widely-recognized culture jamming projects has been @™ark, a parody corporation that was deliberately incorporated by its artist-creators to indemnify themselves against personal legal liability for activities that might attract the ire of the firms and interests they criticized (Khamis, 2003; Stallabrass, 2003). Comprised of only a handful of regular participants who are never personally identified, @™ark solicits “investments” (donations) from the public to support small prospective art projects that criticize exploitative market economics, corporate malfeasance, the industrialized military, reactionary politics, and consumer culture. @™ark’s “dividends” are measured in cultural impact and visibility; successful “investments” have included underwriting for The Yes Men and the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO), among others.

Alternative Computing

The genre of **alternative computing** constitutes the critique of, and direct intervention in, the hardware, software, and institutional power and gatekeeping of the material infrastructure of information and communication technologies (ICTs). It is the province of highly skilled programmers and engineers who oppose and work around commercial or political restraints on access to information or information technology. In the words of media activist Mark Dery, it can be thought of as “Outlaw computer hacking *with the intent of exposing institutional or corporate wrongdoing*” (Dery, 1993, emphasis in the original) – a practice that is often referred to as hacktivism. Thus alternative computing combines technical expertise with explicit ethical commitments (i.e., it is not undertaken solely for personal gain or amusement, or for criminal purposes; see Nissenbaum, 2004). The range of activities that can be classed as alternative computing includes the development and distribution of free and open source software, to the extent that

open source software designers intend it as a critique of proprietary technologies (see the GNU Manifesto of the Free Software Foundation, <http://www.gnu.org>), as well as the planting of hidden bits of code or “Easter eggs” in software programs to acknowledge the contributions of otherwise uncredited programmers or produce unexpected system responses, and publicly demonstrating the susceptibility of well-known software to viruses or security breaches (often over the system owner’s objections).

Alternative computing also includes the development of programs or systems that elude or sabotage state or commercial surveillance and censorship, encrypt data and communications, or disable digital rights management or copy protection schemes, in the name of preserving users’ privacy, government or corporate accountability, or freedom of information, for example. More extreme tactics include sabotage directed against organizations that activists consider to be engaging in exploitative, unjust, or corrupt activities, such as “ping storm” or denial-of-service (DOS) attacks that overload an organization’s servers, “Google bombs” that manipulate an organization’s page rankings in the results returned by search engines, or the redirection of searchers to “spoof” web pages that mimic an organization’s original site, but with critical content, to political or ironic effect. Alternative computing is often traced to the libertarian, countercultural values that developed among highly skilled programmers in the 1960s and 1970s, self-described hackers who considered computing to be a force for progressive social transformation and personal expression (Nissenbaum, 2004; Turner, 2006).

The stakes and risks associated with alternative computing can be seen in the controversy and legal repercussions surrounding the publication of the Decrypt Content Scrambling System (DeCSS) in the counterculture technical journal *2600: The Hacker Quarterly* in 2000. DeCSS was a very small piece of computer code created by a Norwegian teenager to allow him to play legally-purchased DVDs on his Linux-based PC, a workaround to the copy protection technology that restricted DVD playback to machines running Windows or the Mac operating system. Although the code quickly circulated among tech hobbyists around the world, and was even reported in the *New York Times*, when it appeared in *2600* all of the major U.S. movie studios joined in a lawsuit against the magazine’s

publisher (who used the pseudonym Eric Corley), claiming violations of the U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act. Corley was not only instructed by federal courts to remove the code from the *2600* online site; *2600* was prohibited even from pointing readers to other places where it might appear (even where it was legal, as in Europe at the time). Although Corley argued that such restriction amounted to censorship and violated his First Amendment press and speech rights, the courts sided with the studios and nearly bankrupted Corley, who had to abandon his defense.

However, that wasn't the end of the matter: outraged computer activists continued to post and circulate DeCSS online as a form of support for Corley and *2600* – for example, by making the code into artworks and poetry, on the premise that artworks are speech that has unambiguous protection under the First Amendment and is sheltered by the principle of fair use in copyright law. Eschenfelder and Desai (2004) found that even as the code became obsolete and was superseded by other decryption programs (even though it remained illegal in the U.S.), postings of DeCSS actually increased after the federal court rulings silenced *2600*, a situation the authors characterize as “software as protest.”

Participatory Journalism

Participatory journalism projects employ the ethics and practices of professional news reporting and editorial opinion to cover communities, stories, and points of view that are neglected by powerful institutions and the mainstream press. Web-based alternative, radical, or critical news outlets and services adopt the practices and philosophy of public, civic, citizen, participatory or “open source” journalism to provide alternatives to mainstream news and opinion. This genre includes online news services, where news is gathered and published in much the same way as conventional print and online publications, as well as news and opinion web logs (“blogs”), where authors and readers contribute opinions and debate current events and issues. Both types of projects critique the traditions and prerogatives of establishment journalism and the press (so-called “mainstream media”), particularly the mainstream’s marginalization or exclusion of local, minority, unpopular, or fringe communities, issues, and views. Often staffed by volunteers with a

personal or political interest in the stories and issues they cover, these sites cultivate connectivity and interactivity within their home communities, and seek to break down the distinctions between news providers, on one hand, and readers/citizens, on the other.

Since its launch at the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999, the Indymedia movement and its growing roster of Independent Media Centers (IMCs) is perhaps the most closely watched (and researched) participatory journalism project of the last decade. Its unique “Indymedia news model” (Platon & Deuze, 2003), based on an innovative technological platform and a rigorously open editorial policy that allows anyone to contribute, has helped Indymedia grow from a handful of IMCs in 1999 to nearly 200 today.

Mediated Mobilization

Mediated mobilization extends and transforms the power of “live,” local social relations and organizing – such as kinship and social support networks, professional affiliations, or expert advice networks – into online action, using tactics drawn from political/cultural organizing and social movements. It takes advantage of web-based social software tools like social network sites, personal blogs, flash mobs, and email listservs, as well as DIY digital media, to cultivate interpersonal networks online and to mobilize those networks to engage in live and mediated collective action. People develop relationships, seek and give advice and guidance, and amass and trade “reputation capital” online – all of which has had important consequences for social, cultural, and political movements. As a number of researchers in social movement theory have suggested, the internet and related technologies would seem to be ideally suited to the identity-focused needs and interests of new social movement activism. The articulation of live and online/mediated interpersonal and group communication and collective action is the hallmark of mediated mobilization.

Analyses of the growing global justice movement since the late 1990s have demonstrated the power of mediated mobilization, showing that new media technologies have emerged as powerful virtual arenas where people with similar interests can seek, find, and assess information and each other across geographic distances and social/cultural boundaries. Indeed, they can affect the dynamics of power by

appropriating and exploiting the logic of networking in both the social and technological senses (Castells, 2009; Juris, 2008).

Commons Knowledge

Commons knowledge projects reorganize and categorize information in ways that often explicitly challenge or reframe established, expert methods of generating and classifying knowledge and the prerogatives of mainstream cultural institutions and disciplines. This genre relates to the content of culture itself – the nature of knowledge and expertise, how information is organized and evaluated, and who decides. Traditionally, top-down, hierarchical classification systems or taxonomies based on expert disciplinary knowledge, such as those used in library catalogs, have helped determine what kinds of information are worth collecting and how different types and areas of knowledge relate to each other. But the sheer volume and idiosyncrasy of information online has driven the creation of new tools, such as search engines and tags, that use searchers' own language, rather than the predetermined *controlled vocabularies* (search terms or technical language) approved by experts, to locate and retrieve relevant resources. This reliance on everyday language and users' own schemes for rating and classifying information has fostered the growth of folksonomies – organic, dynamic, bottom-up classification schemes for organizing and categorizing diverse, arcane, local, personal, or amateur information sources, which often challenge or critique expert disciplinary taxonomies. For an example of this genre, we need not look far: the familiar case of Wikipedia demonstrates that wikis, tagging, and other tools for online collaboration have opened the way for powerful and practical grass-roots alternatives to expert consensus and knowledge authority.

This brief synopsis can only suggest the diversity and innovativeness of activist art, advocacy and protest that have become such a prominent aspect of politics and culture online. The definition of new media advanced at the beginning of this chapter suggests that genres of alternative and activist new media are not static, but will continue to recombine and emerge as issues and viewpoints change, as technological tools are reconfigured, as communication practices proliferate and diffuse, and as institutional and cultural formations and arrangements realign and recombine. The framework proposed here may be

one step toward characterizing and understanding that evolution.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is adapted from Chapters 1 and 2 of *Alternative and Activist New Media* (Lievrouw, 2011), passages from which are reproduced with permission by Polity Press and Leah Lievrouw.
- 2 I use the term "ecology" in the etymological sense noted by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, i.e., the discipline or "order of the house," rather than the sense used in the subfield of media ecology, to distinguish the present discussion from that tradition and Toronto School-type medium theory, which has been an important influence in media ecology.
- 3 The ubiquity of new media also gives them the quality of being "always already," an idea related to Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* or being-in-the-world, and his analysis of technology as being ready-to-hand or taken for granted until it breaks down, thus becoming "visible" to the user. The idea was later elaborated by Jacques Derrida (*toujours déjà*) as a quality of experience that makes it difficult to imagine that the world was ever different in a time prior to the present – a common sensibility among younger new media users, who may have no recollection of a time before web browsers or pushbutton telephones, for example, or in the celebratory pages of publications like *Wired*. Sociologist Leigh Star and her colleagues have adapted many of Heidegger's ideas about technology in theoretical discussions of technology *infrastructure* (Star & Bowker, 2006; Star & Ruhleder, 1996). The definition of new media infrastructure advanced here builds on several key ideas from Star's work.
- 4 In fact, national rates of broadband connectivity (i.e., high-speed internet access via coaxial cable, satellite, digital subscriber line [DSL], or fiber optic connection) have recently been added to the list of national or economic development indicators used by international agencies like UNESCO and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (see *Economist*, 2008b; OECD, 2008; and the OECD Broadband Portal, <http://www.oecd.org/sti/ict/broadband>).
- 5 The present discussion provides only a general treatment of the much larger field of genre studies and analysis in communication and other disciplines. More detailed overviews can be found in Bazerman (1988, 1995), Chandler (2000), Freedman & Medway (1994), McQuail (2005), Miller (1984), and Yates & Orlikowski (1992). For discussions of genres in the context of the World Wide Web, see Agre (1998), Crowston & Williams (2000), Dillon & Gushrowski (2000), Miller & Shepherd (2004), and Yates, Orlikowski & Okamura

(1999). The points in this section are drawn mainly from these sources.

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D. M. BOYD AND N. B. ELLISON

36 Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship

Introduction

Since their introduction, social network sites (SNSs) such as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, and Bebo have

attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices. As of this writing, there are hundreds of SNSs, with various technological affordances, supporting a wide range of