

Critical Thinking, Deviant Knowledge and the Alternative Press

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We don't often think much about how we know what we know about the world. We assume that our knowledge of the world reflects the "way things are." But this assumption holds true only in so far as we have been well informed about the "way things are." I would argue that everything we know has been mediated to us through some group or individual. Even when we see something "with our own eyes," we don't see the thing as it is. Rather, we interpret it through filters that we have internalized.

Our political, economic, cultural, and religious institutions provide us with the filters through which we see reality. So if we are interested in understanding the world, we need to ask serious questions about the institutions that teach us about that world. This must be a compelling concern to educators.

Economics offers a striking example of how our understanding is shaped by institutions and the dominant culture. The organizations and practices that make up the economy impact us all. The economy isn't a force of nature but is a social creation governed by human choice. So to what extent do average people understand and think about the economy? Very little. That is an odd thing when you think about it. Why do supposedly self-governing citizens of a democracy understand very little about the economic institutions that directly impact and shape their lives? This question is of vital importance to the health of a democracy.

The majority of those who think about the economy and economics do so within the context of advanced corporate capitalism. The current form of capitalism is just one possible manifestation of a capitalist system. I don't use the phrase "free market capitalism" on purpose. The current arrangement of capitalism is fundamentally not a free market system. Few markets of any significance in the American economy are free and open to meaningful competition. I am sure that some readers are rather skeptical of this assertion. You should be since it goes against almost everything you read in

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the business press and on television, and it runs counter to what politicians and corporations tell you. To test my claim, consider some of the most important markets in American society: computer hardware and software production, automobile production, chemical manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, metallurgical production, fossil fuel/energy production and distribution, and movie, television, radio, and print media production. How many of these markets are genuinely open to new start-up companies? Just about zero. A few multinational corporations dominate and

control these markets. New competition usually does not occur in these markets unless another large corporation decides to diversify and enter the market.

If there is validity to this claim, then why do so many economists, politicians, and business leaders continue to speak of the wonders of "free market" capitalism and competition? More

importantly, why don't more citizens take notice of this incongruity? This happens, I believe, because the spectrum of ideas and thought presented in contemporary American life is incredibly narrow. Institutions are by and large designed to reinforce dominant ideas. In our society, the mass media are generally seen as a powerful force for shaping perceptions about life, the world, and our place in it. What do we see when we look closely at what actually comprises the mass media? We see a system dominated by five to seven major corporations. These few large media corporations own television and radio stations, movie theatres, cable networks, media production companies, newspapers, magazine and book publishing companies, and Internet ventures. To get a sense of the degree to which these five to seven media corporations dominate what we see, consult one of the media ownership charts at <http://www.thenation.com/special/bigten.html>, or <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/giants/>

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Think about the structure of a daily newspaper. The major sections of the newspaper tell the reader what is important. There are sections for world and national news from major for-profit news organizations beholden to corporate advertisers. There is a section for local news from local for-profit newspapers dependent on their advertisers. The business section is consciously aimed at the upper-middle and upper classes of American society, and a lifestyles section targets people with significant disposable income. What sections are missing from newspapers? Has anyone seen a labor/workers section that focuses on issues directly related to working people from a working person's perspective, like workplace democracy, safety, education, health, or international trade agreements that impact workers? Where is a substantial

environment/conservation section that rivals the analysis of football and other sports? Why isn't there a section devoted to the challenges of democratic citizenship or an exploration of how we can possibly come to terms with divergent political philosophies and the policies they generate?

The fact that there are no such sections in our daily newspapers says a lot about the structure of the mass media and its influence in shaping society. Television journalism mirrors newspaper journalism and is even more dependent on big money advertisers, devoting increasingly less time to information citizens in a democracy require if they are to participate confidently in the debates about matters affecting the quality of life for all.

So, where does a person go to locate information about the world that is outside the standard framework presented by dominant institutions? The answer is the alternative press. By alternative press I am referring to what some people call the dissident or radical press. The alternative press has a long history and has played a key role in advancing progressive causes such as abolition, woman's suffrage, workers' rights and safety issues, civil rights, the student movements of the 1970's, environmentalism, and even the establishment of free public education. To learn more about this history read the book: *Voices of Revolution: The Dissident Press in America*, by Rodger Streitmatter, published by Columbia University Press, 2001.



You will find people in the alternative press thinking and writing about issues from perspectives very different than those found in the major media. Much of the alternative press is non-profit and gets its funding from the sale of its publications and individual donations. This provides alternative publishers a level of independence that is simply not possible in the corporately-owned and -funded media. Publishers, editors, and writers of the alternative press are much more involved in their stories. Most people working for alternative press publications reject the dominant convention of "objectivity" espoused by those in the corporately owned media. It is not that they reject the concepts of factual information and honest journalism, rather they object to the myth that news can be told from a neutral "objective" perspective. Those in the alternative press argue that stories and issues are always framed by journalists, and that the press should be up front about its editorial stance and/or bias, allowing the reader to make up her or his own mind.

Conservative, and often quite reactionary perspectives have usually had a wide distribution in American society. Most of the mainstream newspapers actively criticized the progressive reforms I mentioned earlier. They often railed against the authors and editors of the alternative press for their "crack pot" ideas. Very conservative journals, magazines, and newspapers are well represented in most library collections and periodical indexes. The problem with the alternative dissident press is that very few libraries subscribe to their publications and they are not well represented in the major periodical indexes. As a result most Americans know very little about alternative publications and how to access them.

Here is a small sampling of alternative press resources:

Web Sites:

AlterNet (News): <http://www.alternet.org/>

Common Dreams (News):
<http://www.commondreams.org/>

Parecon (Participatory Economics):
<http://www.parecon.org/>

Znet (Social Commentary):
<http://www.zmag.org/weluser.htm>

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Magazines:

Alternative Press Center (List of 300 alternative periodicals plus subscription information): <http://www.altpress.org/direct.html>

In These Times: <http://www.inthesetimes.com/>

New Internationalist: <http://www.newint.org/>

Z Magazine: <http://zmagsite.zmag.org/zmagtop.htm>

Books Publishers:

Common Courage Press:
<http://www.commoncouragepress.com/>

Monthly Review Press:
<http://www.monthlyreview.org/mrpress.htm>

Seven Stories Press: <http://www.sevenstories.com/>

South End Press: <http://www.southendpress.org/>

To be truly informed citizens capable of making complex choices concerning the world, we need to be well informed. We need to learn about the structure of the major corporate media and how it limits what we know about the world. We need to inform ourselves about the role of a free and open press in supporting a pluralist democratic society. We also need to know about alternative ideas and ways to shape our world. We need access to ideas that come from sources that have something other than the profit motive as the reason for their existence. American society has benefited greatly from the contributions of the alternative dissident press. It is our responsibility as educators to learn about this history and inform our students of current publications that will assist them in becoming critically engaged members of a vibrant democratic society. I'll end with one of my favorite quotes. It is from a letter that Thomas Jefferson wrote to Edward Carrington in 1787:

The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them. ♦

Do you have a comment or response? Send these to Vic Klimoski: vklimoski@csbsju.edu or 1025 South Prior Avenue, Saint Paul, MN 55116.

- ♦ Harlan Copeland Award for Excellence in Programming – **Greta Ploetz**
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Those attending the Thursday evening pre-conference, heard the results of the MACAE survey of its membership. The purpose of the survey was to get a better idea of how MACAE can take a more strategic role in leading in a time of change.

Among the results were: 1) The realization that the membership of MACAE is a confederation of instructors in a variety of disciplines and is therefore not a content-specific organization. Its value lies in offering the type of exchange of skills and information that applies to all its members on the website, the newsletter, issues forums, and the conference; 2) Major reasons for belonging to MACAE are networking, professional development, and advancing the cause and awareness of adult education in the state; and 3) additional value for MACAE members would be communicating using a more robust website with links to articles or papers of interest, timely information on events and conferences of interest to educators ranging from education, youth development, juvenile justice, and expert forums online in a threaded chat. The information generated by the survey will be used by the board of directors as it makes decisions and plans ways of serving MACAE members.

The annual conference is an important event for several reasons. It is an opportunity to gather the wide community of professionals committed to the continuing education of adults for significant discussions of current issues, idea, and challenges. The conference also invites "local talent" to share what they are doing in terms of practice, learning about how adults learn, developing as "working theories" for the field, and discovering through collaboration and partnerships. Planning for the 2005 conference will begin soon. Charlotte Knoche, conference chair, would love to receive suggestions for themes. She would also welcome participation of members in helping to plan the event. ♦