

Alternative Media: Free from State, Market, and Capital(ism)?

On the Antagonisms of Alternative Media and the Alternative Economy

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Translation from German: Christian Fuchs

Abstract

This work discusses the potentials, limits, and problems of alternative media in capitalism. It compares alternative media to commercial media and public service media. A model is introduced that compares commercial and non-commercial media projects. Its dimensions are the economy, work, production, and communication.

Dilemmas of alternative media are analysed. As an example, a conflict at the Austrian free radio station Radio Orange is analysed.

The paper discusses the political economy of alternative media. Alternative media such as free radio stations have set out to do media in a way that is different to capitalist media. In this context, the role of the audience as media producers and the rejection of the market, capital, and commodities are important aspects of alternative media.

The analysis shows the problems and antagonisms that non-commercial, alternative media face in capitalist society. They struggle to establish independence from markets, capital, and the state. They face the problem of how to deal with these antagonisms which results in the alternative between adopting to capitalist pressures or operating as small-scale niche alternatives with small audiences and precarious labour. The paper concludes that material aspects and the political economy of alternative media need to be taken seriously. Not selling commodities and not paying wages puts many alternative media at a disadvantage vis-à-vis commercial media.

Keywords: alternative media, non-commercial media, independent media, free radio, alternative economy, counter public sphere

1. Introduction

"The bad existing state, the totality of society, has given birth to progressive subcultures. The practice, norms and institutions of society as a whole have given rise to their own antithesis, the practice, norms and institutions of progressive subcultures. [...] Society as totality tends towards affirmation, the subcultures towards negation; the synthesis, the abolition of the antagonism [...] has rarely been tackled" (Schwendter 1993, 191-192).

The theory and practice of alternative media basically live from the idea of the necessity and possibility of an alternative to the established media, which are generally characterised as "unfree", i.e. as dependent on the state and/or the market and capital, and are therefore fundamentally criticised (Fuchs 2010). The hallmark of a "free"

medium is therefore the greatest possible independence from the state, market, and capital. In this view, the dependence on capital and the market is regarded as a fundamental obstacle to the realisation of communication through the media that could meet the demands of a free, democratic society and the emancipation of society's members. Accordingly, the ideal-typical pair of opposites – non-commercial (free) media versus commercial (dependent) media – is an essential distinguishing feature and criterion in theory and practice.

In the context of this fundamental contrast, the following contribution is dedicated to the discussion of two interrelated questions:

- To what extent are the models and concepts discussed so far for media, economic and societal alternatives – measured above all by their different radicality, legitimacy and functionality – fundamentally suited to realising the freedoms sought in each case under the given media, economic, social, and societal framework conditions (theoretical feasibility)?
- To what extent are the desired degrees of freedom achieved in the respective models (“projects”) (practical degree of realisation)?

This problem can only be meaningfully discussed in the more general context of the theoretical discussion and practical development of models and concepts of alternative media and alternative economy. For it is precisely the concretion of this connection that is an essential element of the initially only “abstract” (societally and democratically founded) aspirations for freedom as well as an essential goal and motive of the “concrete” (subjectively-individually-emancipatory founded) attempts at liberation of the participants. In the available academic literature – presumably due in particular to the traditional separation of academic disciplines – this connection has hardly been addressed: “Alternative media” are treated as a marginal field of Media and Communication Studies, “alternative economy” is a marginal field of Economics. For this reason, an attempt is made here to bring together the above-mentioned subject areas based on the sub-discipline of Media Economics in Media and Communication Studies¹. The treatment of the two basic questions mentioned above will be carried out in two analytical steps:

1. Differentiation of various concepts of alternative media in the context of the development of the theory and praxis of the alternative public sphere.
2. The characterisation of the degrees of freedom of non-commercial media in distinction (comparison) to public service media and commercial media.

2. On the Development of the Theory and Praxis of the Alternative Public Sphere and Alternative Media

In order to assess the theoretical feasibility and the degree of practical realisation of currently practised concepts of alternative media, it is necessary to take a developmentally differentiated view of the theory and practice of the alternative public sphere and alternative media. This makes it clear what degree of freedom and alternativeness current alternative media are striving for or achieving, compared to the models and concepts of the alternative public sphere and alternative media that were discussed and practised in the past (usually only for a short time).

¹ This approach was the basis of the empirical research project "Emergence and Development of Free Non-Commercial Radio stations in Austria" carried out at the Department of Communication Studies's Research Group on Media Economics and Empirical Communication Research at the University of Salzburg (Knoche et al. 2001).

The most comprehensive and knowledgeable German work on the “alternative public sphere” to date was presented by Karl-Heinz Stamm (1988). Primarily on the basis of this work, but also on the basis of Oy’s (2001) work on this topic, works on “alternative communication” (Eurich 1980; Weichler 1987), and works on the alternative press (Beywl 1982; Beywl/Brombach 1982), five basic models of the alternative public sphere with corresponding concepts of alternative media can be distinguished, each of which can be differentiated according to five criteria. At the same time, this differentiation represents a periodisation of the real development of the alternative public sphere/alternative media since the end of the 1960s (focussed on Europe). Due to the actual development, the distinctions and periodisations made can be neither selective nor mutually exclusive in terms of time or content, since overlaps in content and time are precisely a characteristic of the development. In some cases, even concrete alternative media projects have changed over time in such a way that they can be assigned to different models one after the other.

In general, there is a development in theory and actual media development that can be summarised in the form of *five basic models (types)* that are at the same time five phases: From 1) the counter-public to 2) counter-media, 3) alternative media (underground media), 4) movement/initiative media, 5) complementary media/citizen media.

In the context of the questions posed in this paper, it is of primary interest how the type of complementary medium (supplementary medium), which some alternative media (especially free radios) embody according to their own objectives, differs from the other four models and in what way similar characteristics are relevant. This is an analytical comparison without evaluations.

Concerning the criterion of *organisation*, free radios differ considerably from the other models in that they were usually initiated by committed individuals or groups of individuals without a movement, organisation or party background. In this respect, they are most similar to the alternative press, which, however, has usually emerged at least from the circle of “undogmatic left-wing groups“. Free radios also differ in terms of the criterion of publicity or communication model, as they most consistently enable a “participatory public“ that has public access. As with alternative media, production is for a local public, i.e., a spatially particular public sphere. In contrast to the other alternative media, free radio stations are less concerned with a critical public sphere than a pluralistic public sphere.

According to the criterion of *self-image or content-related goals*, free radio stations are distinguished by their aim of being close to the citizens, or more precisely, close to the citizens who are disadvantaged in the established media and do not get enough of a voice. In this respect, it is also a kind of “affected journalism“, as can also be found – albeit in a more pronounced form – in the alternative media. According to the criterion of *organisation for the implementation of objectives*, free radio stations are located between “lay journalism“ and semi-professionalism, similar to the movement and alternative media.

However, a decisive difference can be seen with regard to the criterion of *relationship to the established media*: the scale of this relationship ranges from criticism, opposition, resistance, control and demarcation in the other models to complementarity, correction, and cooperation in the case of free radio stations². Like the relationship to other media, a different degree of radicality of alternative media

² Germany’s Green Party has developed its relationship to the mass media in parallel in the same way (Knoche and Lindgens 1993, 765-766).

becomes clear, which is constitutive for the different types of media and thus also for the successive development phases of alternative media. Free radio stations see themselves comparatively little as critics, controllers, or opponents of the established media, which does not mean that they do not offer alternative programming. Their relationship with the established media is also more “relaxed” because they do not compete with them on a common market, but want to serve a separate (“minority”) market.

3. The Degrees of Freedom of Alternative Media Compared to Public Service Media and Commercial Media

The common starting point of the theoretical and practical approaches to alternative media is the conviction that both private and public service media are fundamentally unable or insufficiently able to realise the freedoms sought by media producers and recipients or to fulfil the propagated functions of society as a whole. In this view – in contrast to the widespread political opinion – reforms of the established media system are also seen as not or only slightly effective or not enforceable. Instead, the establishment of a “third sector” as autonomous as possible (alongside the market and the state) or a “third pillar” in the broadcasting system for non-commercial free media is considered necessary to solve the problem, the special feature of which should be the greatest possible freedom (independence) from the state, the market, and capital.

Freedom/Independence from:	Non-commercial media		Public service media	Commercial media
	Ideal	Real	Real	Real
State	Maximum	Partial	Partial	Partial
Market	Maximum	Partial	Partial	Minimal
Capital	Maximum	Partial	Partial	Minimal

Table 1: Ideal-typical freedom/independence of non-commercial media as opposed to public service media and commercial media

The legitimising self-image of free radio stations, based on this elementary model of freedom, thus lives from the differentiation or profiling in two directions: vis-à-vis commercial media and public service media. Ideally, this results in a scale of freedom in which non-commercial media achieve or at least strive for maximum freedom vis-à-vis both the state and the market and capital (see table 1).

Accordingly, public service media occupy a middle position: They are visibly only partially free of the market and capital. They are characterised by an increasing dependence on the market (commercialisation). Characteristic is above all a partial freedom from the state. Commercial media are, in contrast, characterised by minimal freedom from the market and capital (i.e. maximum dependence) and only partial freedom from the state due to the existing indirect dependence on the state (Knoche 1999b,180-188; 2016, 38-43).

The demarcation of alternative media from commercial media is relatively easy, as it involves the construction of a pair of opposites based on an almost exclusively negative demarcation, which is, however, filled with positive content. This is also expressed in the common self- and external designation as “non-commercial”. So, the overriding ambition is to avoid something that is criticised as *fundamentally* negative

and therefore unreformable. The distinction from commercial media is therefore not one of degree but one of principle (which is where the propagation of alternative media originally came from in relation to an exclusively commercial sector, the press). In order to justify and concretise this demarcation, alternative media can refer to academic literature on the one hand, and to practical reports on alternative "predecessor media" (alternative press, alternative video) on the other. In the Media and Communication Studies literature, approaches to a critique of economisation or commercialisation are nowadays almost part of the "good tone", though as a rule hardly in principle, but rather under moralising "cultural pessimistic" aspects and almost without exception completely without reference to the theory and practice of alternative media (see for example Jarren and Meier 2001).

The demarcation of alternative media from public service media is more difficult. This is because the latter is non-capitalist in character. Public service media's organisational form is the non-private, public economy. In addition, in theory and practice, there are some similarities in the general objectives of alternative media and public service media. Consequently, public broadcasters often argue that free radio stations are "superfluous" in that the functions of a "public service" can be fulfilled more effectively than by free radio stations based on a public-law organisational form and legally anchored tasks (programme mandate, pluralism, etc.).

However, a convincing demarcation can succeed if, in line with reality, it is not so much the principle or formal equalities and differences that are taken as a yardstick, but the practically existing qualitative or gradual differences within the framework of the principal equalities. This already succeeds concerning the (so seen alleged) non-commerciality of public service media. In principle, the orientation towards the principle of cost recovery is the same (no intention to make a profit). Qualitatively, however, there is a decisive difference between alternative media and public service media according to the scale of the forms of funding: By refraining from advertising in principle, alternative media avoid something that is seen as one of the "basic evils" of commercial media beyond the profit motive and as the "fall from grace" of public service media. A further decisive distinguishing feature is the actual commercialisation tendencies of public service media which result from their partial market dependence (quota orientation) and are visibly reflected in their programmes ("formats").

But it should not be ignored that the independence from the state, the market, and capital, which is ideally seen as being present to a maximum degree in the case of alternative media, does not exist in reality. On the contrary, it must be taken into account that "the alternative economy, at the risk of its demise, is bound either to the market, or to the state, or to redistributed revenues (income generated outside the alternative-economic production process, whose redistribution organ is not a state authority), or to a mixture of these three elements of whatever kind" (Schwendter 1986b, 259). Since alternative media such as free radios usually distribute their products free of charge, there is less direct dependence on the market than with other alternative projects, such as the alternative press. But the dependence on the state and "revenue" redistribution (donations, loans from private capital) is all the greater.

Due to the extensive dependence on state subsidies, for example, there is even an existential dependence on the state, especially if it is not very willing to provide subsidies. But even in the case of a state that is willing to subsidise, there is an elementary dependence on the state in terms of the realisable degree of radicalism of the "alternatives" in terms of objectives and programme design. As the examples in Germany show, only optimal "normalisation" ("citizens' radio"), i.e. the extensive renunciation of "alternativeness", guarantees optimal state subsidisation. Alternative

media are also dependent on the market in three ways, but to a much lesser extent than public service media and commercial media: concerning the labour market, the producer market, and the recipient market.

In my opinion, this is one of the biggest problems with which alternative media have to contend, a problem that has not yet been critically addressed, a problem whose extent is always proportional to the “radicality” of their alternative objectives: figuratively speaking, many alternative media want to create a very small non-commercial island in a very large commercial sea with very few resources and protect it from the constant threat of being swamped. Alternative media operate in a permanently increasing commercialised society with commercialised politics and an almost perfectly commercialised economy, especially in media markets.

Compared to earlier phases of societal development (with a short-lived societal environment of student movements, alternative movements, citizens’ initiatives, and new social movements), there is currently even more of a lack of a societal environment that can recognise or hope for a significant need and demand for alternative media. In this respect, there is also a long-term lack of workers who are sufficiently motivated and who can (or want to) afford to serve the (from this point of view “idealistic”) goal of alternativeness in the face of poor pay and insecure, physically and psychologically stressful working conditions. Furthermore, in the long run, there is a lack of producers who can (or want to) “voluntarily” fill the offered public access with alternative content. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that political or cultural activists strive for maximum presence in established media for understandable reasons, to be able to have a significant impact on society. And finally, there is a lack of interested people (traditionally called media recipients) who show (or have) a need for alternative media or, if they have a need, satisfy it by receiving programmes from alternative media. This problem can therefore currently only be alleviated by alternative media renouncing as far as possible the “radicality” of alternatives. As a consequence, they tend to take on the form of complementary or citizen media.

For alternative media as non-profit organisations (NPOs), which belong to the non-profit sector as a “third sector” alongside the economy and the state, it will most likely not be possible to avoid greater dependence on the market in the context of the international development of neo-liberal, almost exclusively market-fixated economic policy. According to the results of a large-scale international research project on the development of the “third sector”, the following can also apply to this sector worldwide: “The market is on the advance” (Anheier 2001, 59), i.e. the economisation/commercialisation of large parts of this sector will hardly be stopped, according to the researchers involved. This is not surprising, considering the extreme neoliberal economic policy that has been pursued for several decades now, with the absolutisation of the market. Third-sector organisations have only two options in the future: Either they develop into (non-profit) enterprises or they remain socio-politically meaningless “non-profit dogs” (Anheier 2001, 70).

For alternative media, this means that in the future their dependence on the state as well as on the market and capital is likely to increase, threatening their very existence: on the state, because it will be able to impose its conditions (in terms of content, politics, and culture) even more than before – even for small subsidies – because of the structurally conditioned difficulties of alternative media to finance themselves sufficiently in a “self-managed” manner via the market and capital. Alternative media are hardly attractive for the market and capital, so that attempts at financing in these areas create increased dependencies and make it necessary to adapt. In accordance with the prevailing economic policy, non-profit organisations have

for some time now been receiving active help from academics and advice writers on the way into market and capital dependency as well as into dependency on private-sector modes of production and relations of production. Such authors have, for example, claimed that fundraising is one of the promising “magic bullets” (Haibach 2002), another is the “donation etiquette” (Burens 1998) or the management of non-profit organisations (Simsa 2001, who presents “civil society as a bearer of hope”). The development towards market and capital dependence is often “favoured” by alternative media for free radio stations for at least two reasons: a) because of the objective necessity to reduce or eliminate state subsidies, and b) because of the opinion that a dependence on the state is fundamentally more disadvantageous than a dependence on the market and capital. Such arguments also tend to assume that market and capital do not have such a negative effect as is “exaggeratedly” feared in some places.

4. Alternative Media’s Norms and Characteristics of Freedom and Alternativeness

In general terms, “wanting to be different”, “wanting to act differently”, and “acting differently”³ is a counter-model to public service media and commercial media. Such forms of “being different” are the general goal of the initiators, organisers, and “makers” of alternative media. The concrete objectives are mainly oriented towards the “negation of the status quo” (Dorer 1992, 83), but are also guided by independent (positive), “visions” and “concrete utopias”. For a more specific characterisation of modes of being and acting differently concerning alternative media as alternatives to the commercial media system, it seems useful to make a comparative differentiation according to economy, work, production, and communication (see table 2). Based on these main criteria, the essential alternative characteristics of alternative media can be identified according to various individual features (see a similar procedure for the alternative press in Eurich 1980, 26-34).

	Commercial norms	Non-commercial norms
Economy		
Organisational form	Means of production, companies, and corporations as private property	Decoupling of property and the power of disposal, association, co-operatives
Organisational goal	Private maximisation of profit, commodity production, advertising that advances consumption	Cost recovery principle, production of use values, creation of a public sphere for underrepresented interests/needs, contribution to the emancipation of society
Financing	Advertising, subscriptions, payments by consumers	Mixed financing without advertising
Work		

³ Here we are deliberately speaking only of “alternatives” in the sense of difference. The question of “radicality”, the degree of deviation or contrast to the status quo, this “other” in the sense of freedom and alternativeness, is dealt with in this work primarily from the point of view of external and internal contradictions.

Mode of production	Division of labour, departments, separation of manual and mental labour	Low degree of the division of labour, job rotation, no separation of mental and manual work
Relations of production	Hierarchical, performance pressure, competition, heteronomous, non-creative, undemocratic, non-transparent, collective bargaining agreements, partly precarious working conditions.	Non-hierarchical, minimisation of performance pressures, cooperation/collective, self-determined, creative, democratic, transparent, partly collective bargaining agreements, partly precarious working conditions
Production		
Products	Production of commodities, formats, target group orientation	No commodity production, open and pluralistic, minority orientation, local context, culture, multilingualism
Communication		
Producers – recipients	no public access, separation between producer and recipient	Public access, elimination of the separation between producer and recipient

Table 2: The norms and characteristics of freedom/alternativeness of non-commercial media as negation of the norms and characteristics of commercial media

In general, at least six basic objectives or functions can be identified for “alternative projects“, which, depending on the project, show different degrees of radicality of the alternativeness strived for and/or realised and can also be realised with different priorities (see also Beywl 1991, 281, who names three main functions of the alternative economy for New Social Movements). Schwendter, who prefers the term “alternative economy“ to the terms “counter-economy“ or “self-economy“, which are too emphatic for him, sees their objectives or functions in an extremely limited and sceptical way: “as a basis for the reproduction of subcultural individuals, in the best case to provide use-values for subcultural (political, religious, etc.) work“ (Schwendter 1986a, 62).

In my opinion, however, it is appropriate to assume a broader spectrum of objectives/functions for the media sector. What the interrelated basic objectives mentioned below have in common is that they are aimed at changing the social status quo, albeit often to very different degrees. It is a frequently observed phenomenon that the degree of radicality and the setting of priorities is changed in the course of the development history of an alternative project, mostly in the direction of less radicality and greater priority for individual objectives. One can subdivide the basic objectives and the desired fulfilment of functions into the following two types:

1. Social, societal, democratic, emancipatory, “idealistic“ goals:

- The production of goods or services as “use-value“ for the needs of society's members;

- The production of goods or services as the basis of social and societal transformations;
- Infrastructure and resource endowment for the respective alternative area.

2. *Individual, subjective, emancipatory, existential, "egoistic" goals:*

- The workplace as a basis of the participants' reproduction (livelihood);
- A professional field of activity as liberation from the constraints of "normal" working life and "normal" societal life;
- A professional field of activity as a possibility for the self-realisation and emancipation of the participants.

It is not difficult to see a number of contradictions these objectives contain, so that in practice they are a constant source of tension and conflict among the participants. Conflict lines arise above all from the tension between social versus individual, ideal versus material objectives (accusation of "betrayal"), from the competition for the realisation of individual objectives in the face of scarce resources (accusation of a "lack of solidarity"), etc. The contradictions immanent in the goals are also a source of fundamental academic and political debates as well as a source of criticism from those who are not directly involved but who are interested in academia and/or politics. Depending on the point of view, the degree of radicalism of the alternative project and the priorities set are criticised to a greater or lesser extent in various ways, 1) either as not radical enough and/or too individual, 2) or as too radical and/or not individual enough, 3) or as too little "idealistic" or too "idealistic".

As expressed in the quote at the beginning of this work, the negation of that which exists is the starting point for alternative media as well as for other progressive subcultures, which inevitably leads to a permanent tension-laden contradiction of affirmation (*thesis*) and negation (*antithesis*). The radical antithesis is the total negation, which involves "wanting to be totally different" and "wanting to act totally differently". In the current societal system, this regularly leads to a dead end or to the failure of the alternative project. This is why, for example, the subculture researcher Rolf Schwendter (1993, 192) points the way to *synthesis*, the abolition of contradictions through the productive development of negation while retaining progressive aspects of affirmation. For this reason, the antithesis, the total negation, is also left out of table 2 and the presentation is concentrated on the juxtaposition of affirmation (commercial media) and the combination of partial negation and partial affirmation (non-commercial media).

The non-commercial norms listed in table 2 are initially only ideal-typical in the sense of "noble" goals. Their more or less extensive implementation in practice is constantly (at least latently) up for disposition, because it is under pressure from the contradictory nature of these norms in the media, economic and societal environments. Ultimately, there is always the fundamental danger of a changeover through adaptation/integration into the "establishment" or into the "compact majority" of the non-alternatives (Schwendter 1993, 59-62).

Paradoxically, "free/alternative management" etc. is supposed to be possible despite the private-legal and commercial form of enterprise or organisation, which is otherwise rightly criticised in principle, more or less well-founded, as a "fundamental evil" of the commercial media system. The primary aim of alternative media is, therefore, to eliminate the negative effects of private enterprise on alternative media work as far as possible, or at least to mitigate them by choosing non-profit forms of organisation such as associations or worker cooperatives, and by striving for "capital

neutralisation” by decoupling ownership from the power of disposal over property (Beywl and Brombach 1982, 556).

The establishment of worker cooperatives tends to be associated with the abolition of the class antagonism between capital and labour and between ownership and non-ownership of the means of production (co-ownership and democratic self-administration of those working in the cooperative). But since private-sector cooperatives are not oriented on generating capitalist profits, but must be oriented on generating a surplus for tax reasons alone (otherwise they are classified as “hobby”), they must act according to market principles when designing the content of alternative media products (Knoche 2023a, 67-68; 2023b, 99-100).

Marisol Sandoval (2023) critically addresses the fundamental contradictions of cooperatives in (digital) capitalism. Using the examples of platform cooperativism as the basis for the production of alternative media with emancipatory political objectives and cultural cooperatives, she rightly reflects on a multitude of contradictions and tensions that cooperatives are confronted with in practice (see Sandoval 2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2020; de Peuter, Dreyer, Sandoval and Szaflarska 2020; Dreyer, de Peuter, Sandoval and Szaflarska 2020).

The history of alternative media reveals an overemphasis on democratic self-management and self-realisation of workers as the goal and result of alternative media, which distracts from questions of content (Knoche 2023a, 66-67; Knoche 2023b, 98-99). In this respect, a dominant paradigm of alternative media theory and practice with the objective of “alternative media as participatory media” (Sandoval 2009, 2011) is seen as tending to hinder the production and reception of alternative media content that is critical of domination.

In other words, alternative media often make the attempt to build and maintain a kind of paradisiacal little oasis in the vast desert of commercial media, in which the elements of the capitalist economic and social system that are constitutively connected with the private-sector form of organisation are “negated” or “circumvented”, so that they do not take effect in a counter-productive way concerning the freedom and alternativeness that are strived for. In this context, the basic elements on which alternative media are based are the following ones:

- the private economic mode of production with the private ownership of the means of production,
- the owner’s power of disposal over the dependent workers (relations of production as relations of domination, labour power as a commodity) as well as
- the right to determine the production targets and
- the right of the owners to valorise the products (Knoche 2001, 183-191; 2021, 331-338).

The fact that alternative media are confronted with elementary contradictions due to their organisational form alone is easy to understand and therefore difficult to deny. It is not to be denied that in the practice of alternative media, these contradictions are tendentially considerably mitigated. On the contrary, this mitigation is to be recognised as their special achievement when it works. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that such mitigation also requires a constant, energy-sapping “displacement effort” to maintain an “illusion”. Such illusions become evident in conflict situations in which the elementary contradictions that exist come to the fore. Therefore, when in the following the contradictoriness of the theory and practice of alternative media is placed in the centre, this is not meant to promote resignation or hopelessness, but to protect against illusions and thus to provide an adequate solution to the problem (see also Hollstein and Pentth 1980). It is not by chance that the unavoidable breaking up of these

contradictions runs through the entire history of alternative media. This circumstance cannot be surprising if one takes seriously the fundamental and serious nature of these contradictions. There is much evidence for the realisation that every intention, no matter how honourable, and every attempt to implement an alternative project, no matter how determined, will sooner or later be confronted with the contradiction between market mechanisms and claims to emancipation, often up to the point where the alternative project's existence comes under threat (Kraushaar 1986, 88). According to Schwendter, "This is by no means accidental: there is hardly a point in the everyday life of alternative projects that is not controversially precarious and contradictory in itself" (Schwendter 1986b, 259).

It is also no coincidence that attempts to actually overcome the basic contradiction of "private enterprise" – in conjunction with the other contradictions that follow from it – have in most cases led to one of two "solutions through failure" in practice⁴: Either there is the complete abandonment of the non-commercial project or the transition to commercialisation, also belittlingly called professionalisation (Beywl 1982, 30-31).

5. An Example: A Conflict at Radio Orange

Radio Orange (<https://o94.at/>) is a non-commercial free radio station that broadcasts in Vienna, the capital of Austria. It was founded in 1998. It is financed by public funding and annual donations made by several hundred supporters. There are hundreds of voluntary, unpaid radio producers who create programmes for Radio Orange.

Alternative media's underlying problem can be briefly illustrated by discussing an example conflict at Radio Orange, in which the freedom-restricting dependencies associated with the private-sector organisational form became visible. This conflict ignited precisely because of the basic contradiction of the private-sector organisational form: the board of the four-member association of editors, which is the holder of the broadcasting licence and owner of the radio infrastructure, in 2004 wanted to use its legally derived power of disposal over the dependent employees and determine the production goals and the organisation of production concerning its "owner risk" (including credit liability). In a certain way, the essentials for the freedom and alternativality of alternative media listed in table 2 are called into question: the alternative production goals, the modes of production, the relations of production, and the produced content. With reference to the lack of "operative capacity to act" and therefore the fear of endangering the entire project, the association of editors demanded "professionalism", which in plain language means nothing other than a certain subordination to the "normal" conditions of private companies or enterprises.

The association of editors proclaimed the "end of the founding era", combined with the "vision" of establishing a project that can survive and work in the long term with the help of a thorough change in the previous "operative organisation". The aim was to put an end to, or at least modify, an alternative practice that was still demanded by the dependent employees in particular, and which was cited by the owners as the reason for the feared failure of the project. The paid employees of the radio station were fighting against this idea of professionalisation and especially against the dismissal of an employee by the association of editors. In this conflict, therefore, everything that had been permanently negated, denied or suppressed came to the fore: legally protected "owner power", underpayment, workload, "self-exploitation", informal

⁴ Failure should not be presented here as inevitable and resigned. In a positive way, the many real failures can be taken as a yardstick for the great achievements of those who "survive" as an alternative project.

hierarchies, the problems of breaking down the division of labour, the non-transparency of decision-making structures, the enforcement of individual and particular interests, dependencies, financing problems, etc.

Even if this example is used here to discuss the fundamental contradiction that arises from the private-sector organisational form of alternative media, it is not intended to express a fundamental "equality" with commercial media. In the case of Radio Orange, in contrast to the owners of commercial radio stations, the owners of the free radio station work voluntarily as elected members of the association and do not profit in the sense of private profit-making. In addition, there are internal participation and co-determination structures (also from outside in the form of an employee/subscriber association). In principle, however, it is legally possible at any time, based on the private-sector form of organisation, for the licence holders and association chairpersons to mutate into "real" media entrepreneurs and transform free radio into a "real" media enterprise.

6. Summary and Outlook

In summary, it can be stated that the degree of radicality of alternative media, measured against all the criteria mentioned, is almost without exception low in comparison to the models of the alternative public sphere and alternative media practised so far, which are historically characterised by models of the counter-public sphere, counter-media, social movement media, alternative media, and complementary media. This circumstance can be fundamentally criticised from a position that sees a high degree of radicalism as necessary, legitimate and purposeful, and accordingly classifies a low degree of radicalism as "betrayal" and/or "adaptation". From a position that considers a lower degree of radicality necessary, legitimate, and purposeful, taking into account the current societal conditions (power, structures of consciousness, needs, etc.), the current concepts of alternative media and free radios can be praised as a feasible way of achieving goals or even as the only possible way. The limit of the second position is reached, however, when it becomes clear that the feasible path does not lead to the achievement of the declared goals, or only leads to them to a limited extent. The pressure towards "giving up the original goals" comes from two opposing sides: from the side of the "alternatives" themselves, who (have to) give up because they cannot cope with the contradictions and lack of livelihood security, and from the side of the "established" actors, who constantly press for the (re)integration of the "alternatives" by all means (for examples, see Schwendter 1993, 67-75) or, if this is not possible, their "elimination" or isolation (for the example of the Green Party in Germany: Knoche 1999a, 429-434).

A closer analysis shows that even for non-commercial media, insofar as they are organised in the private sector, there is no principle of independence from the state, the market, and capital in the existing media, economic and societal environment, let alone maximum independence (as is often ideally assumed), nor can there be. Since markets are currently regarded as the almost sole regulators of economic and social development, the principle of quantity (majority, quota) is also anchored in commerciality as an all-dominant steering instrument. Without legitimisation by a "large number" hardly anything is possible, least of all securing economic existence. Theoretically, therefore, there are three possible survival strategies for alternative media, some of which stand in opposition to each other:

- Either a far-reaching *adaptation* (largely renouncing "alternativeness") to the existing and further developing strongly commercialised market conditions; however, the market power of commercial media stands in the way of success here;

- or a *change in market conditions* by enlarging the markets for "alternatives"; this "conquest" of the markets cannot be regarded as promising in the foreseeable future when viewed soberly;
- or a *partial market adaptation to minority markets* (while maintaining "alternativeness" as far as possible) with niche existence and niche production; then, however, the question of financing and thus the question of existence increasingly arises.

The latter survival strategy is the one that is currently being used by free radio stations in Austria and will probably continue to be used in future. In order to ensure at least a marginal survival, a well-calculated and well-dosed restriction of freedom and dependence on the state, the market and capital, but at the same time a far-reaching marginalisation must be "accepted" for the reasons mentioned. In the prevailing political context, however, sooner or later the free radio stations will most likely be caught up by the all-dominant "market forces", i.e. an appeal to minority markets and niche existence is hardly a secure basis of legitimacy for obtaining state subsidies in the long run and is not a sufficient economic basis for successful fundraising.

All this is certainly not conducive to the fulfilment of the still-existing individual-subjective needs and the social-objective need for more radical, "ruthless" alternativeness striving for societal change. But every "alternative project" requires an adaptation to societal conditions and that means at present: to a thoroughly capitalised society of neo-liberal character. The "system-adequate" alternative would be that the "alternative project" is an end in itself. This may be judged negatively under the claim of a (self-)obligation to initiate processes of societal change. From the point of view that at least for those involved – it fulfilled a ("good", e.g., livelihood-securing and perhaps even emancipatory) purpose, it could, however, be assessed positively or at least accepted. A better alternative would be a transformed society as a basis for alternative media to thrive, but this brings up the tiresome "chicken and egg problem".

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