

Since the beginnings of the information society in the middle of the 19th century, technological innovation has interacted with ideological development and social and cultural change to yield new forms of communication. I define these as "alternative media" because they are news-related mass media that significantly differ from the news as it was presented prior to these innovations with the intention of promoting political change. Four distinct types of alternative media can be identified, differing 1) in the features that made them alternative, 2) the form of power exercised, 3) their approaches to aesthetics and consumption, and 4) the political role of the individual. All four types can be seen in contemporary "tactical media" practices:

Defining Tactical Media: An Historical Overview

by [Sandra Braman](#)

The Individual as Subject and Audience

Electrification of the printing press in the mid-19th century made it possible to print newspapers in vastly larger quantities for a much lower price, launching the "penny press." These newspapers were revolutionary in two senses: they reported on average people and events rather than only the most famous and/or influential, and they were read not only by the socio-economic elite but by the masses across all social groups. Ideologically, the emergence of the penny press took part in the shift from republican to participatory forms of democracy—that is, from assuming that the role of individual citizens was only to elect representatives, to assuming that citizens have a number of important political roles in addition to electing representatives. The penny press celebrated consumption, and exhibited a popular aesthetic. In socializing a widely diverse immigrant population into "the American way," the penny press enacted structural power, the exercise of power through the shaping of institutions and decision rules. The audience and the subject matter were what made this medium "alternative."

News as Critique and The Fact as Power

Beginning in the 1890s and culminating in the 1920s, technological and ideological innovations lead to the practices of what was known in the US as "yellow journalism." The telephone—used as early as the 1870s as a mass medium for distribution of news—facilitated the formation of groups mobilizing for political activity. The radio and the airplane (from which massive numbers of leaflets could be dropped) added forms of distribution that were proven during the Spanish-American War and World War I to be of use in the deliberately persuasive campaigns that became known as propaganda. The ideological innovations, first of populism and then of communism, combined with these new material and informational technologies to create an approach to the news that not only reported on events critically but also succeeded politically in putting up barriers to existing forms of power. The citizen was sovereign. Consumption was still of value but the consumer, rather than profit, was key. The popular aesthetic, influenced by the desires of propaganda, became lurid. What was "alternative" was the introduction of critique into coverage of the news subject and the use of alternative sets of facts to achieve that critique. News of this type pursued symbolic power, the shaping of behaviors through an impact on ideas.

Alternative Channels and the Story as Power

Starting in the 1960s offset printing, the mimeograph machine, and then the photocopy machine brought the means of production to the general population because they were inexpensive and required little technical knowledge. Those who produced the news identified themselves as citizen outsiders who offered alternative channels of content in familiar media such as newspapers and radio shows. Content was not only critical but was created using a different set of procedures: "Objective," or New York Times-like journalism relied upon official institution-based sources, defined news according to the movement of events through bureaucratically-defined rhythms, and considered itself successful when it presented the news as a pile of atemporal and acontextual "facts" in imitation of science. The "new" journalism, on the other hand, drew upon a much wider range of sources, defined news according to the impact of events upon individuals, and considered itself successful when it presented the news as a comprehensible story embedded in a social context with a history and a future. Critiques, often grounded in Marxist thought, were critical of consumer capitalism and its impact on culture and aesthetics, as well as politics. Media channels and the nature of the news genre were what made these press activities alternative in the continued pursuit of symbolic power.

The individual as news producer and the medium as content

The tactical media movement that was born in the 1990s takes advantage of the proliferation of new media possibilities made available by digital technologies, the arrival of postmodern experience and theory, and the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Practitioners and theorists of tactical media such as Gregg Bordowitz and Geert Lovink decline any notion of ideological purity, seeking instead what Lovink refers to as "pluriform

difference;" indeed, the use of tactical media by the far right has also been acknowledged. The identity of the often migrant citizen may be based in global civil society rather than a specific nation-state. Tactical media not only report on events but are events in speech become action, information as agent. They exhibit the postmodern blurring of genre by combining news and political commentary with art. Consumption, aesthetics, and humor are viewed as opportunities to enact power, often most successful in one-off events rather than campaigns. 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 are why tactical media are "alternative." This is the first set of media practices designed in pursuit of informational power—power enacted through control over the informational bases of instrumental, structural, and symbolic forms of power.

Many tactical media practitioners take great care to distinguish themselves from the alternative media of the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on four dimensions of difference: the shifts from adherence to strict ideological positions to abandonment of ideology, from rejection of consumption to use of consumption for political ends, from rejection of aesthetics to use of aesthetics for political ends, and from a focus on the content of media to, as Marshall McLuhan put it, the medium as content. A look at the myriad examples of what practitioners and theorists have described as tactical media since 9-11 in the virtual casebook, however, demonstrates that—like all evolving social forms—when new modes of alternative media appear they do not replace but become layered over those that have come before. We have seen the attention to the individual and effort to get news to the general population that characterized the penny press; critique of policy and efforts to use that critique to block the exercise of power by those who hold it in its traditional forms that characterized yellow journalism; the appearance of alternative versions of reality from the historically voiceless and emphases upon storytelling over fact that characterized the alternative media of the 1960s; and adventuresome and innovative use of electronic media to not only critique policy but to serve as modes of direct action itself that characterize the tactical media of the 1990s and on.

David Garcia offers a theoretical way of understanding the simultaneous appearance of these many different modes of alternative media when he comments that tactical media practitioners are not afraid of power and therefore willingly take up the tools of the past and of those whom they critique. Each of the four types of alternative media that have appeared over the course of the information society represents a specific type of agency. Each of those modes of action has value in the contemporary environment—they reach different audiences, serve different ends, and launch different types of social processes. They share, however, the goal of expanding the range of voices that can effectively participate in public discussions understood, as Pat Aufderheide puts it, as discourse about shared problems that require shared solutions. Thus the phrase "tactical media" might be defined in both narrow and general terms: The narrow definition refers to the nonideological, aesthetic, and humorous use of digital media as content. More generally, "tactical media" may be used as an umbrella term to cover all four types of alternative media as they appear in the 21st century.


