Doctoral Dissertation

Title: Theory of Alternative Media in the Digital Age
and an Empirical Study of its Efficacy:
a case study of digital startup news outlets in the US

Doctoral Program in Applied Sociology
Graduate School of Sociology
Ristumeikan University
フジハラ　ヒロミ
FUJIHARA Hiromi

In a increasingly complex media landscape due to the rise of the Internet, this dissertation aims to present rationale and evidence to justify the argument that alternative media (AM) are indispensable components of "the democratic media system," which guarantees diversity of discourse. It also intends to determine structural problems which let AM alienate from the existing commercial driven media system.

"The democratic media system," advocated by a British media scholar J. Curran about a quarter century ago, is the system that includes alternative media, such as non-profit and citizen media, other than mainstream media, in order to co-exist a wide variety of media forms in the system, not being dominated by mainstream giants, to guarantee diversity of discourse.

Rethinking the system, which has been regarded too idealistic, and letting it as a realistic argument, the dissertation constructs an updated theory of AM and demonstrates empirical study to prove its efficacy in the digital era.

These arguments are summarized into the following three parts.

First, as a preliminary step toward the argument, the dissertation attempts to create a comprehensive definition of AM, as well as to classify its functions and features. These tasks, regarded as a very challenging work due to their intricate nature, are done as a fundamental research of entire study.

It actually examines the main literary works of alternative media in Western nations since 2000 by analyzing each concept, then rethinks and classifies the definitions and concepts of alternative media. Through the analysis, it clarifies the current trends and issues of alternative media research, then sorts out alternative media in five categories. By doing so, it enables to comprehend AM in a structured way, as well as to discern present-day AM beyond the dichotomy between "mainstream vs. alternative."

Second, it verifies whether AM are essential for the democratic media system from historical perspectives. Named predawn AM "people's media," it figures out how AM emerged, developed, declined, and marginalized, then how they succeeded the roles to the present AM by applying Cultural Studies' historical approach. It explores the AM's history in England, where the leading nation of "people's media"

among the world, by reconstructed AM's actual practices, that are found by dug up from various previous studies, by related to the social and the political contexts in successive periods. As a result, it finds out that "people's media" exhibit various similar characteristics of present AM, such as representing socially vulnerable people, a personal publishing tool for ordinary people, autonomous media not relying on advertisement, etc., and played democratic roles in creating an alternative public sphere and shaping grass-roots opinions. For this reason, England enabled to accomplish the world's first people's revolution, the birth of modern journalism, and the solidarity of labor's movement, only because "people's media" had powerful voices at the time.

After the mid-19th century when newspapers rapidly commercialized and popularized, however, "people's media" increasingly declined. The study reaffirmed that this was due to the structural change of media control by switching from the government hands to the free market system. Since then, the media system was dominated by conservative mainstream media, and consequently, current "marketplace of ideas have inherently distorted by commercial pressers.

Even though AM was marginalized, they have never vanished but have succeeded as the media to convey the perspectives of minorities and subcultures. It can be understood that current practices in UGCs, blogs, and online news startups are the evidence to actualize "people's media" that have been alienated for a while, but suddenly being activated due to the digital technology.

Third, in order to verify the assumption above, it conducts an analysis of a case study to determine the degree, if any, to which digital startup news outlets in the U.S. contribute to the diversity of social and political discourse. Viewing these outlets as the successor of alternative media (AM), the study examines their journalistic practices and considers how they contribute to creating the "alternative public sphere" that is essential to a pluralistic democracy. The study posits that journalistic practices shared by traditional AM and startup digital outlets provide evidence that both contribute to diversity of discourse. The author selected outlets randomly from the U.S. East Coast and collected data via questionnaires and open-ended interviews. The data show some practices duplicate those of AM and suggest a measurable contribution to the diversity of civic discourse. The study also indicates traditional AM and digital outlets are not necessarily antagonistic and highlights several common trends.

By discussing three arguments above, this dissertation clarifies the structural problems, which lead mainstream media to encompass other media forms and to dominated the system, also presents clues reconstruct the democratic media system, which includes AM.