



# introduction

by andrea langlois & Frédéric dubois

Autonomous media are the vehicles of social movements. They are attempts to subvert the social order by reclaiming the means of communication. What defines these media, and makes them a specific type of alternative media, is that they, first and foremost, undertake to amplify the voices of people and groups normally without access to media. They seek to work autonomously from dominant institutions (e.g. the state, corporations, the church, the military, corporatist unions), and they encourage the participation of audiences within their projects. Autonomous media therefore produce communication that is not one-way, from media-makers to media consumers, but instead involves the bilateral participation of people as producers and recipients of information.

The content of autonomous media is intended to provide information that supports social struggles and is alternative to that which is offered by the corporate mass media. True alternative discourses can only be fostered through a media organization that remains open, transparent, and non-hierarchical. For that reason, autonomous media move beyond the issues of content and into those of organization, participation, and empowerment.

Autonomous media, ranging from pamphlets to newspapers, pirate radio to websites, are increasingly part of the activist toolkit. They are the spaces into which the rationales and analyses of activists are launched, with the hope that seeds will be sown to help movements grow, ripen, and bear the fruit of social change. Media is society's resource for self-representation but the world can not be changed merely through the images and words presented in the media. True change will come only through people's participation in the processes of social change.

The goal of media activists is not to replace mainstream media with a new form of media monopoly, but instead to contest the symbolic reality constructed by corporate institutions of media concentration. As Patrick Cadorette, media activist, words it, "Today, through their generic control of the global mediascape, highly concentrated financial interests have achieved unprecedented influence over the way we think, see, and shape the world. We now depend on transnational corporations, banks, insurance companies, arms-makers and traders to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas on our behalf."<sup>1</sup>

Media activists seek not only to provide a space for information that is an alternative to that which is found in mass media, but also to create media that breakdown hierarchies of access to meaning-making, therefore allowing those typically found at the grassroots to have a voice and to define reality. Feminists have been addressing this question for the past 30 years, arguing against positivistic discourses that divide knowledge into the rational (legitimate and objective) and the irrational (illegitimate and subjective). Yet the problem remains that some segments of the population have more power to “speak truth” than others and that radical discourses are naturalized and thus neutralized.

Although there are gaps within the mass media in which radical discourses sometimes take hold, the overall picture shows a mediascape in which certain voices are privileged and in which dissent is used to reinforce the status quo. As Scott Uzelman illustrates in chapter one, media activists view the corporate media machine as a formidable obstacle to social movements. Corporate media structures both support and benefit from capitalism—they are businesses bent on making a profit, not on challenging the status quo. Mainstream media reinforce political apathy and discourage political engagement. Media convergence and the concentration of media have led to the homogenization of information, not to its diversification, thus widening the divide between those with discursive legitimacy—i.e., the right to speak and be heard—and those without.

If the global justice movement is committed to changing the world, its participants must struggle to reclaim and to create spaces in which all people can participate in communication and culture, and therefore in politics. Media and public communication are important tools for the growth and survival of social movements, tools which are not just about socio-economics, but also, and perhaps primarily, about access to systems of meaning-making.<sup>2</sup> Activists from all social movements must therefore work towards the democratization of media and must also seize the media themselves.

The idea of seizing the media is not new in Canada. Social movement activists have always created and used various forms of media to get their message across. In the beginning of the 19th century, pamphlets were all the rage, as were politically-oriented newspapers. Later, with the advent of the common office photocopier came an outpouring of self-published 'zines, flyers, and chapbooks. In the 1980s, the anarchist community was

mastering the low-tech art of self-publishing, with publications, like British Columbia's *BLACKOUT* and Toronto's *ECOMEDIA*, helping to spread news and ideas.<sup>3</sup> The technology of fax machines brought autonomous media to a new level, making it easier for activists to share information with each other over vast distances.

Also over the past twenty or thirty years, Indigenous filmmakers in Canada—such as Alanis Obomsawin and Christine Welsh—have reclaimed a tool that has served an important role in colonization—the camera—using film as a way to resist colonization and to expose the oppression of Indigenous peoples in Canada. As documented in the essays by Marian van der Zon (chapter two) and David Widgington (chapter seven), the rise of cheaper and more accessible video and radio technologies have led to an increase in the amount of activist film and radio in grassroots movements. The internet has brought with it its own advantages, such as fast and easy communication through email and easy self-publishing, as illustrated in the essays on Indymedia and weblogging by Andrea Langlois (chapter three) and Dawn Paley (chapter eight), respectively.

The aim of this collection of essays is to document some of the practices of today's media activists—their strategies, tactics, challenges, and successes. It is not simply an academic communications reader, nor is it an activist toolbox—it is both and much more. We began this project after noticing that little documentation and discussion on autonomous media exists, even though knowledge and analysis around it abounds within activist communities. The purpose of this book is therefore to harness this knowledge and to create a space within which to discuss and explore autonomous media tactics developed within a Canadian context. By shining a spotlight on these marginal media projects, we hope to draw people towards them—like butterflies to a light-bulb—to experience, first-hand, the power of organizing autonomously and producing media.

This book is about media that blossom out of the repetitive efforts of ordinary people who are fed-up with the mainstream media. It is about those who decide to act in favour of the long march towards media democracy. This collective effort has been made possible by the contributions of devoted people who view the mediascape as a battlefield. This field of confrontation between commercial-, social movement-, and state-driven logics<sup>4</sup> is, in the heads of media activists, one of the determining foundations upon which capitalism regenerates itself and spreads injustice. This

is why they act. This is why they write. This is why they have chosen to collaborate in this project, to share their experiences and analysis around autonomous media. They are a part of the social movements they describe. They are media activists.

Each chapter was written to stand alone, so the reader can approach the book in the order she or he wishes. Yet, there are several fundamentals which permeate the entire book. To begin with, connections between media that are temporary or permanent—media set up to cover a one-week protest, or established community radio, respectively—are addressed by each author. Some autonomous media are put together by ad-hoc coalitions, whereas others are planned with care and last for years. This is an aspect discussed in each chapter of the book, and which is especially important in a context where the need for projects that support resistance and dissent come and go. The temporary versus permanent, but more importantly the combination of both in the form of tactics and strategies are emphasized.

Also transversal to the book is the global aspect of current social movements. All authors address the dynamics of global and local struggles in which autonomous media are embedded and to which they contribute ammunition. Although many of the writers are based in Montréal, they have all made an effort to draw on examples from other cities and countries. They examine the local, regional, national, and international implications of the autonomous media they describe and analyze.

These themes help situate autonomous media within an increasingly globalized world, which is ever-changing, and thus creating openings, limitations, and opportunities for media activists. Some authors—such as Andréa Schmidt (chapter five) and Isabelle Mailloux-Béïque (chapter six)—also describe specific autonomous media projects. They discuss them within a perspective of social change and the empowerment of communities participating in, and affected by, these projects. In addition to exploring the broadcasting, screening, and publishing of content created by and for activists and marginalized groups, they tackle issues such as the role of media activists in social movements (chapters one and five), the relationships among media projects (chapter nine), and the organizational aspects of autonomous media (chapter six, seven, and nine).

The book begins with an exploratory chapter on media activism, in which Uzelman theorizes why communication is so important to social movement networks. It then goes on to examine the tactics and strategies of people who take up communication-centred struggles. The following chapters delve into more specific examples, inviting the reader to explore various media from activist video (chapter seven), to culture jamming (chapter four), to street newspapers (chapter six), along with computer-mediated tools such as open publishing, as practiced within Indymedia (chapter three), and weblogs (chapter eight). These essays provide the reader with a sense of the plurality and diversity of autonomous media projects, illuminating the importance and roles of autonomous media within their communities and publics. Other essays address the larger issues around autonomous media, such as independent reporting as a tool for international solidarity-building (chapter five) and the importance of building autonomous media networks (chapter nine). In the afterword, Dorothy Kidd, a seasoned media activist and academic, reflects back on the book, providing some historical context for radical media movements and positioning this collection of essays in relation to larger movements for social change.

In the media activist's toolbox are not only microphones and keyboards, but also markers, glue, film, spray-paint, and coloured pencils. Because the visual aspect of media activism is essential and full of imagination, the book contains unique art, graffiti, illustrations, and photography. Élise Gravel and Fanchon Esquieu illustrate autonomous media in all its forms and shapes with help of original *aquarelles* and *gouache* paintings. Within the following pages, the reader will also find photos of media activists in action by Québec City photographer Bernard Bastien, and photos of stencil-graffiti from around the world, provided by globe-trotting Dawn Paley. The work of these artists is interspersed with other stencil art and designs which caught the eye of Chester Rhoder, the book's graphic designer.

Like all documentation projects, this volume is not without its gaps and limitations. The come-and-go nature of autonomous media as well as their marginality and limited audiences has prevented the authors from using examples from every corner of this enormous country. Yet, an effort has been made to describe a wide range of practices developed in Canada and elsewhere.

It would have been suitable to detail such inspiring initiatives as the low power “radio barn-raising” co-sponsored by the devoted people at the Prometheus Radio Project out of Philadelphia or to discuss music and DJ-ing as forms of autonomous media. Subversive and creative tactics, such as street theatre, puppet-making, and small press publishing, are also missing. We deliberately left out descriptions of innovative projects, such as *ÎleSansFil*, designed to promote free public wireless internet access in the Montréal area. Although this is part of recent developments that could serve the cause of guerrilla communications and prove useful for those who want to coordinate direct action from connected public spaces, we preferred to encourage analysis of autonomous media that already operate. The *ÎleSansFil* project, as well as other open source projects, catalyze new avenues of dissent that still need to be fully understood and exploited by media activists.

We have tried with insistence to enable the convergence of a wide variety of autonomous media creations to this project. If this objective has only been partially met, we believe that by taking a closer look at the many examples of autonomous media from the following chapters, the reader will encounter diversity.

There are some obvious omissions in this book project, such as the absence of media projects by and for Indigenous communities, illustrated amongst others by REDWIRE MAGAZINE, created by members of the Native Youth Movement, or the inspiring radio and television broadcasting in Nunavut and other Inuit territories. If there is to be a regret, it is definitely to have failed in amplifying voices of Indigenous writers and creators. Without wanting to excuse this particular blind spot, it is demonstrative of the general disconnect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous social and media activists. Although many activists bridge this unfortunate separation—such as demonstrated by NATIVE SOLIDARITY NEWS aired on CKUT radio in Montréal or the 2004 independent media centre set-up in Kanesatake, on Mohawk territory—most movements resisting corporate globalization in Canada do not specifically seek to voice indigenous discourse.

These blind spots were not intentional but definitely limit the dialogue we intended to make possible. Our aim was not to end-up with an all-encompassing encyclopaedia about what makes media subversive, but to trigger discussions and instill curiosity, encouraging readers to go out in search of more examples and to participate in the creation of media.

Many more books need to be written, and many more autonomous media projects need to be created, shared, and supported.

While we were both finishing our graduate work within the university, we had the desire to give back to the community. We wanted to share some of our observations and experiences as insiders of autonomous media projects along with those of the many activists and friends that work, most often voluntarily, to create autonomous structures and to disseminate alternative discourses. This collection of essays is the result of that first desire, the artefact that has grown out of the initial idea. We hope that this book inspires debate and discussions and that you, the reader, learn as much from it as we have from putting it together. In the spirit of autonomous media, we encourage readers to comment about elements of this book, whether you agree or disagree at: [www.cumuluspress.com/autonomousmedia](http://www.cumuluspress.com/autonomousmedia). We especially hope that perusing the words and illustrations within its pages, you will be inspired to activate resistance and dissent.

## notes

<sup>1</sup> Cadorette, Patrick. (October 2004). Montréal. Personal interview. Cadorette is a member of Québec Indymedia and volunteers at Radio Centre-Ville, a community radio station, both in Montréal.

<sup>2</sup> The ideas presented here on social movements, media, and access to meaning-making were originally developed in Andrea Langlois' Master's thesis. Langlois, Andrea. (2004). *Mediating Transgressions: The Global Justice Movement and Canadian News Media*. Unpublished Master's Thesis. Concordia University. Available online at: <http://ase.ath.cx/hosted/liberterre/memoire.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the history of self-publishing in Canadian anarchist communities, see: Allan Antliff (ed.). (2004). *Only A Beginning: An Anarchist Anthology*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Sénécal develops these logics and explains their interplay in Sénécal, Michel. (1995). *L'espace médiatique. Les communications à l'épreuve de la démocratie*. Montréal: Liber.

## web resources

Centre for Aboriginal Media: [www.imagenative.org](http://www.imagenative.org)

ÎleSansFil: [www.ilesansfil.org](http://www.ilesansfil.org)

Native Solidarity News: [www.ckut.ca/nsn](http://www.ckut.ca/nsn)

Pink Panthers: [www.lespantheresroses.org](http://www.lespantheresroses.org)

Prometheus Radio Project: [www.prometheusradio.org](http://www.prometheusradio.org)

Redwire Magazine: [www.redwiremag.com](http://www.redwiremag.com)