A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DOMINANT AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN AN ONLINE CONTEXT

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite a rising democratic defict in dominant Canadian media they continue to hold much influce on policy-makers, government officials and citizens. While some scholars argue that recent advancements in communication technology change the dynamics of media production, making it more accessible, others argue that online media reflects what occurs offline. To test which position is correct, this thesis compares dominant and alternative news media websites. Overall, it appears that online media practices are a reflection of offline media. At best, alternative media adopt a hybrid model of production where they chose to selectively incorporate dominant media practices in the aim to meet the goals of alternative media.

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CHAPTER 1   INTRODUCTION

Dominant media have undergone several transformations in how they are perceived in North American society over the course of the last 50 years. They have moved from being seen as a watchdog, keeping check on those in power, to being thought of as a lapdog, catering to the demands of corporate interest. In some cases, skeptics even feel that they may have become mad dogs, lashing out at the people who are the subject of the news unpredictably and without warning (Hackett and Carroll 2006: 22; Taras 2001). Despite these shifts in how media are perceived, they continue to possess much symbolic power, playing a vital role in politics, influencing the ways their audiences construct, reproduce, and contest several aspects of their social lives (Couldry 2003; Hackett and Carroll 2006; Taras 2001). Arguably, the Canadian mass media "are as much a part of the democratic system as Parliament, the Supreme Court, or provincial governments" (Tara 2001: 4). However, this is problematic when considered in concert with claims of a rising democratic deficit in media accounts (Hackett and Carroll 2006; Taras 2001; Vipon 2000).

A number of structural factors of the Canadian media system have contributed to this deficit. These include corrupt policymaking, a failed regulatory system, the saturation of commercial interests, and government cutbacks to public broadcasting (Bailey et al. 2006; Hackett and Carroll 2006; Taras 2001). These factors ultimately lead to a lack of access to a diversity of civic information in the dominant media (Winter 1997). Policies that stem from the 'free market' ideology have allowed high concentrations of cross-ownership and convergence of different media formats, rendering large media companies

virtually untouchable in their monopolies of information. In fact, entry costs are high and competition is fierce, which disadvantages alternative voices (Gans 2003; Hackett and Carroll 2006; Taras 2001).

In Canada, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) has a mandate to "ensure that both the broadcasting and telecommunications systems serve the Canadian public" (CRTC 2010). However, formalized relationships between government and dominant media organizations have been criticized for being inherently corrupt and accused of failing to reflect society's best interests (Hackett and Carroll 2006). Media deregulation, moreover, is said to have caused public media to become increasingly oriented toward market driven and efficiency based approaches that limit the range of information they produce and cover (Bailey et al. 2008). For instance, although the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) was created to provide a means of national communication and identity building, it has been jeopardized by repeated government cut backs and the rise of numerous, more effective, commercial media competitors (Taras 2001; Vipon 2000). Other aspects of dominant news media have been compromised including investigative journalism, local content and publications, and distance from corporate control (Gans 2003; Taras 2001). As a consequence, media is not reflective of Canadians voices and is failing as a democratic public sphere (Winter 1997).

In response to claims of a rising democratic deficit of dominant Canadian news media, several scholars have cited the Internet as a new medium for news and information distribution that might offer an opportunity to change the current media

landscape and re-democratize the public sphere (Arquilla and Rondfelt 2001; Bailey et al. 2006; Dahlberg 2007; Preston 2001). A recent study conducted by Ipsos Reid shows that for the first time ever, Canadians spend more time online than they do in front of a television (Ipsos Reid 2010). It has also been shown that the Internet has surpassed print newspapers as a preferred medium for obtaining news information (Pew Research Centre 2009). In light of this transformation, Nick Couldry (2000) argues that the Internet provides a space "where symbolic resources are fought over, where citizenship and civil engagement may be redefined, where the predations of the asymmetry of power may be rebalanced" (43). By contrast, others warn that technology does not evolve independently from the social and political forces that surround it and online processes mimic what is seen elsewhere (Dahlberg 2007; Gans 2003; Silverstone 1999; Slevin 2000) and thus will also face limits to its democratic potential.

Much research focuses on how the Internet is governed by the logic of commercialization, and finds that power imbalances that occur in offline media are replicated in online media as a result of conglomerate culture (Atton 2004; McChesney 1999, Pickard 2008). What is largely missing from these debates is empirical research that examines other online news sources beyond those in the mainstream, namely the alternative media. Couldry (2003) has argued that in studying media power, "we must not only look at the distribution of economic and organizational resources and contests over specific media representations of reality, but also at the sites from which alternative general frames for understanding social reality are offered" (41). He highlights the necessary inclusion of alternative media in studies that investigate media. In light of these

recent assertions, my thesis aims to examine whether or not the Internet offers a more open, or democratic, space for social and political engagement of news. Likewise it incorporates an analysis of both dominant and alternative media to better understand these processes.

Let me briefly expand upon how I understand the differences between on and offline dominant and alternative media. Chris Atton (2004) argues that what makes online alternative media truly distinct from offline alternative media is that the Internet "enables publication outside the industrial arrangements of the publishing industry of media corporations" (57). Others argue that alternative media remain embedded within and reliant upon dominant cultural practices and products (Bailey et al. 2006; Hackett and Carroll 2006). In other words, although alternative media is distinct in some ways, they "work in a larger context of political, economical and cultural orthodoxes" (Atton 2004: xvi). Support for this argument is drawn from the overlap that is found between dominant and alternative media online. For example, features that were traditionally considered to belong to alternative media, such as blogs, are now found in the dominant media and conversely, professional journalists from dominant media have contributed to work posted on alternative media websites (Atton 2004: 58).

Despite some overlap, alternative media differs from dominant media in a number of ways. My thesis focuses on three core areas of difference: ownership, motives, and access and participation. Most alternative media are characterized as spaces for radical or marginalized perspectives, such as those belonging to social movements or minority

groups (Hamilton 2000; Pickard 2008). In an effort to maintain their ability to produce content that does not appear in the mainstream media, alternative media have remained largely independently owned (Hamilton 2000). This is considered a necessary measure to ensure that the content is not influenced or affected by external pressures. Alternative media seek to avoid practices that influence content including concentrated or centralized ownership. Independence has also allowed alternative media to adopt a decentralized and horizontal structure. How a media company or organiztion is structured is significant because this aspect dictates who is represented in the news and subsequently affects content (Gans 2003). Dominant media for example adopt a hierarchal struture that limits the diversity of who gets represented to the elites of society. Alternative media on the other hand adopts a more decentralized struture, which allows for a greater range of people and groups it represents and renders it more reflexive and responsive to particular issues that their audience deems significant (Arquilla and Rondfelt 2001).

In addition to being independently owned, James Hamilton (2000) argues that alternative media remain independent of market forces by largely rejecting several dominant media practices, such as using advertising as a source of revenue. Unlike dominant media, alternative media are not solely motivated by profit and the ultimate goal of reaching the widest audience possible. Alternative media have different motivations that include, but are not limited to, providing a place for views that exist outside of the hegemonic norm, catering to a particular community, and providing a space for under- or misrepresented groups (Bailey et al. 2008; Couldry and Curan 2003a). Motives are an important factor to examine in comparing dominant and alternative media

and have been included as the second factor of comparison of this study.

Most alternative media also reject what has been coined the "hierarchy of access" of dominant media wherein journalists in dominant media rely mostly on politicians or government officials as sources for information (Gans 2003). This limits the level of diversity that is found in dominant news sources (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Chris Atton (2002) argues that alternative media privilege contributions made by those outside of this hierarchy, such as everyday citizens and activists, which has allowed for a broader set of views to enter media discourse (also see Bailey et al. 2008). My thesis examines access and participation in the media to empirically test the assertion that it is an established difference between dominant and alternative media.

In comparing online dominant and alternative media sources, my thesis examines whether or not offline media practices are transferred into online spaces and whether or not alternative media online are different from dominant media sources online. Factors of comparison were informed by previous research on dominant and alternative media, and include ownership, motives, access and participation (Atton 2002; Couldry and Curran 2003b; Downing et al. 2001; Hamilton 2000). In this study, ownership refers to which company owns the news website under analysis. Structure as a function of ownership is also analyzed in terms of how many links to other news sources are found on the homepages. Motives refers to whether the website is mainly profit driven or if it rejects practices that generate revenue, a variable that is measured by the number of advertisements (profit or not for profit) that are found on the homepages of the websites.

Finally, access is measured by how many authors are found on the homepages (professional, expert or other) and participation is measured by whether or not the website incorporates the use of opinion polls.

CHAPTER 2   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   APPROACHES TO ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Foundational theories of alternative media have been based on the view that alternative media share core principles and practices and this creates a dichotomy between it and dominant media (Bailey et al. 2008, xii). Alternative media are thus placed in opposition to dominant media based on several organizational and ideological factors. For example, if dominant media are large-scale, profit driven, and cater to a broad audience, alternative media are defined as relatively smaller in size, non-profit motivated, and catering to a more specific community, whether local or dispersed.

Recently however, authors such as Atton (2002) have argued, "even within a single area of alternative media, there is much heterogeneity (of styles, of contributions, of perspectives)" (8). In order to fully grasp the complexities of alternative media, we must adopt an inclusive model that allows us to understand its heterogeneity and does not reduce it to being solely oppositional (Caldwell 2003; Rodriguez 2001). In doing so, my thesis approaches alternative media as belonging to one or more loosely bound categories, which include: serving a particular community, as an alternative to mainstream, linked to civil society, and as rhizome (Bailey et al. 2008).

Alternative media can be understood as serving a particular community or set of communities. It is important to note however, that media are not always limited to geographically bound regions. A virtual community, for example, can forgoe some of the

constraints of place or location as an "electronic network of interactive communication organized around a shared interest or purpose" (Castells 1996: 352). Although face-to-face communication is still considered to be invaluable for those who access alternative media such as activists and social movement actors, these networks serve to link individuals within an imagined community that may otherwise be geographically dispersed. Alternative media place emphasis on engaging individuals within a community and encouraging access and participation in all levels of media production (Bailey et al. 2008, Gans 2003).

Other literature emphasizes the literal meaning of "alternative" (Atton 2004; Hamilton 2000). This is commonly understood as challenging dominant media practices that are considered to reinforce hegemonic norms, policies and ideologies at the cost of under- or misrepresenting the vast majority of people within a given society (Atton 2002; Downing et al. 2001). *Rabble*, one of the alternative news websites included in my research, illustrates this well in its slogan: "News for the rest of us" (Rabble 2010). In this framework, alternative media provide a space for under- or misrepresented groups to produce counter-hegemonic representations that challenge the status quo (Bailey et al. 2008: 17).

Alternative media can also be linked to civil society, which serves as a fundamental component of democratic practice. "Civil society" is comprised of individuals, community groups, social movements, voluntary associations, and other social interactions that exert pressure on fellow citizens as well as those in power to

stimulate ideas and evoke social change (Janoski 1998). A feature of alternative media that reinforces their valuable role in civil society is the "explicit positioning of alternative media as independent of state and market" (Bailey et al. 2008: 20). Online mailing lists and web forums have been used to stimulate debate and participation in policy processes in a way that remains outside the formalized structure of the state (Arquilla and Rondfelt 2001; Hardt and Negri 2004; Juris 2008). A specific example is found in the work of *Indymedia*, an independent media network that has used the Internet as an open forum for interaction and debate amongst citizens concerning a variety of issues (Juris 2008; Pickard 2008). Alternative media are thus seen to provide citizens with a unique space for discussions that is distinct from dominant political discourse.

Finally, it is worth mentioning Delueze and Guattari's (1987) rhizome metaphor, which has been used to theorize alternative media. Although this approach has been met with some debate, it can help grasp some of alternative media's unique features. (Bailey et al. 2008). Rhizomes in nature are the horizontal roots of some species of plants that have multiple additional roots and shoots that stem from nodes underground. Characteristics of alternative media as rhizomatic include that it is heterogeneous and interconnected, constantly in motion with novel insertions and deletions, potentially coming apart and being put back together again, and adaptable to almost any style or format (Bailey et al. 2008). Approaching alternative media using the metaphor of a rhizome recognizes the complexity of different media. For example, alternative media are not always distinct from market and state pressures. Some alternative media organizations, such as The Canadian Charger, adopt selective advertising practices while

maintaining political independence, the ability to critique capitalism and dominant ideologies, and support of social movements (Bailey et al. 2008). Such a positioning renders them more of a hybrid between dominant and alternative media than fitting perfectly within a single distinct category (Benson 2003).

There are several advantages to the rhizome approach. First, it allows alternative media research to go beyond the limits of dichotomous definitions (Bailey et al. 2008: 33). Second, alternative media have connections with civil society, market and state and this does not challenge their ability to remain independent (Bailey et al. 2008: 28). This has led some scholars to conclude that some alternative media are not entirely counter-hegemonic but more transhegemonic in nature because they adopt strategies of fiscal survival from dominant media structures (Bailey et al. 2008: 28). In other words, instead of taking an entirely oppositional stance to the mainstream modes of operation and rejecting every practice that is employed by dominant media as is often depicted, alternative media can also take a negotiated view that is slightly less aggressive and allows them to adopt some dominant practices without compromising their purpose.

2.2 MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Debates regarding the public sphere inevitably draw on the work of Jurgen Habermas (1989), one of the principle theorists of the concept. Although his work has made significant contributions to our understandings of private and public spaces, it is criticized for valorizing a model of the public sphere that favoured the upper classes of society, an accusation that he has acknowledged as fair (Fraser, 1990). In an effort to

improve upon this foundational model of a public sphere, Nancy Fraser (1990) extends the concept to include subaltern and counter public spheres. This re-conceptualization allows us to consider alternative media as a public sphere.

According to Peter Dahlgren (2005), "a functioning public sphere is understood as a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates – ideally in an unfettered manner – and also the formation of political will" (148). Due to the communicative aspect of this definition, as well as its characterization of the public sphere as a safe space to exchange information, debate, and develop political will, media are considered to play a large role in shaping and influencing the public sphere (Dahlberg 2007). News media in particular, are held to the ideal standard of providing broad audiences with civic information as well as access to a broad range of perspectives (Bailey et al. 2008; Hackett and Carroll 2006; Gans 2003:113).

Although there is a substantial body of literature that is critical of dominant media, their function as a public sphere continues to influence public opinion, policy-makers, government and political institutions (Ferree et al. 2002, Gitlin 2003; Hardt and Negri 2004; Herman and Chomsky 1988). Scholars looking at these issues have tended to look at newsprint, television, and radio. However, this ignores new media, like the Internet, which several authors argue has transformed the dynamics of the media and has changed how information is produced, consumed, and organized (Castells, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2004). Online or Internet media content is seen as relatively inexpensive and

easy to disseminate, which allows everyday people and organizations outside of dominant media to participate in production, distribute messages, and connect with each other (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; Hardt and Negri, 2004; Klein, 1999). These features have led several authors to conclude that the Internet adds a dimension to the public sphere in addition to strengthening and democratizing it (Atton 2004; Couldry 2003, Dahlgren 2005; Hardt and Negri 2004).

Alternative media producers have taken advantage of these features of the Internet, as can be seen in the recent increase of alternative media websites (Bailey et al. 2008: 154; Hackett and Carroll 2006: 13). While dominant media are often criticized for their deep democratic deficit, alternative media are said to allow for a more inclusive, socially conscious and participatory public sphere (Atton 2002; Hardt and Negri 2004; Winter 1997). However, some argue that niche websites, many of which are alternative media sources, lead to fragmentation of the public sphere (Dahlberg 2007). In other words, there is a polarization of perspectives that stem from the rise of Internet media, which in turn challenges social cohesion, and renders consensus or at least majority representation by way of democracy, impossible (Dahlberg 2007). Fragmentation can be the result of dominant media online as well. For example, advertising strategies that are geared to highly specific audiences or markets can serve to reinforce stereotypes and intensify cultural differences (Carroll and Hackett 2006).

However, there are several limitations to democracy as a system of governance and it is often called in to question. For example, although reaching consensus is often

considered a fundamental pillar of a democratic system, this is criticized for being an

unrealistic goal that does not actually occur in practice (Dahl 1989). Moreover, whether

democracy as a political system has ever delivered a majority representation is highly

contested (Dahl 1989). Keeping this in mind, and in an effort to determine what makes

alternative media distinct from dominant media as an online public sphere, my research

compares dominant and alternative media websites based on three factors: ownership,

motives, and access and participation.

Ownership

In Canada, a small number of private corporations own the vast majority of

media. As a result, media conglomerates such as CTV Globemedia, CanWest Global[1],

and Quebecor are often referred to as media monopolies (Canadian Media Guild 2007;

Mahtani 2001; Taras 2001). Corporate media mergers occur at such a rapid rate that it is

difficult to capture precise statistics for a given time. It is certain, however, that alliances

among these corporations are stronger than in previous periods (Taras 2001). As a result,

a handful of owners and dominant shareholders hold substantial influence on mass media

because they have control over rewards, employment practices and the creation of

policies that reinforce and maintain their control (Curran and Seaton 1991, Gans 2004,

Gitlin 1980). In Canada, major concerns with respect to ownership include increasing

ownership concentration and media convergance, how current regulatory frameworks

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[1] CanWest Global has recently been granted bankruptcy protection by the courts and is
seeking buyers. Pending CRTC approval, Shaw Communications Inc. will purchase
televisions assest to control broadcasting operations and newspaper production will
operate as Postmedia Network Inc. under the direction of Paul Godfrey, the current chief
of the Toronto-based National Post.

facilitate concentration and convergence, and how the concentration of ownership limits the diversity of media content (Blidook 2009).

Many scholars fear that concentrated media ownership creates unbalanced power relations because dominant news reflects the perspectives of elites, who own and control media, and overlooks marginalized voices and alternative perspectives (Bagdikian, 2000; Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Gitlin, 1980; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). In catering to the elites of society, dominant media fails to represent those who fall outside of the hegemonic norm, such as radical social movements, ethnic minorities, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual) communities (Atton 2002; Downing et al. 2001). This reflects what Gans refers to as a top-down model of news production, where the actors and events that affect the majority of the population are not typically reported in the news (2003).

Gans (2003) identifies several structural factors that influence news production. These include time constraints and privileging news sources with a high level of power and prestige (Gans, 2004). Others argue that such practices are structural biases (Schudson 1989). In order to meet strict deadlines journalists often seek information that they can access quickly and consistently but that also carry the most potency and reliability. For example, Canadian journalists often cite male federal politicians because, in addition to their positions of power, they are deemed to have new, reliable and credible information about important issues that are relevant on a national level. Representation in dominant news media then is a function of how it is organized.

Ownership and organizational structures of alternative media differ substantially from those of the dominant media. Alternative media are typically much smaller organizations, independently owned, and decentralized (Downing et al. 2001; Hamilton 2000; Negroponte 1996; Preston 2001). This form of organization is facilitated by advancements in information communication technology, such as the Internet, which has become a preferred medium for a wide range of alternative news sources, allowing them to emerge as a space for counter-hegemonic views (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005). Employing a relatively decentralized structural format creates more diffuse linkages among individuals and organizations that transcend borders, facilitating cohesion and formation of relationships based on shared norms and beliefs (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001). Since alternative media sources are organized in a way that does not allow for high concentration of ownership, they have the ability to better represent groups and communities neglected by dominant news coverage (Atton 2002; Downing et al. 2001). This decentralized organizational structure also renders alternative media more conducive platforms for collective action to emerge via their diverse communication linkages (for example see della Porta and Mosca 2009; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2002).

The scale of ownership is an important aspect that may account for unbalanced power relations and the under- and misrepresentation of minority groups in the dominant media. My research will investigate this by looking at whether or not dominant versus alternative web sites reflect different degrees of openness to a diversity of sources of information. This will be measured by the number of hyperlinks found on the main page

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of each website that link to other sources of news. This follows a practice developed by

Stein (2009). Based on the theoretical foundation that ownership practices affect

structural organization, my first hypothesis is as follows:

> ***Hyp1:*** *Dominant media websites will have a lower number of links to external sources of news than alternative media websites.*

Motives

Several scholars have argued that the primary motivation of the dominant media

is to generate revenue (Atton, 2002; Bailey et al. 2008; Schudson, 1989). In an effort to

maximize profit, dominant media sources appeal to safe, conventional formulas that

avoid going beyond the scope of hegemonic values, in order to cater to a broader

audience (Bagdikian, 2000; Hamilton, 2000; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). According to

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988), practices such as these ultimately limit the

level of information diversity found in dominant news sources. A prime example of this

is the rise of "infotainment", a fusion of information and entertainment, or 'soft-news' in

dominant media news sources, which ultimately comes at the cost of meaningful political

content or 'hard-news' (Gans 2003; Hackett and Carroll 2006). By contrast, alternative

media "forgoes these comfortable, depoliticizing prescriptions in order to advocate

programs of social change" (Hamilton, 2000, p. 358). Paschal Preston (2001) argues that

because the alternative media have resisted control by commercial interests, they provide

political and social perspectives that are typically marginalized or not covered by the

mainstream media. To test if these assertions are correct, the second hypothesis of my

research is that:

> ***Hyp2:*** *Dominant media websites have more for-profit advertisements on their home pages than alternative media websites.*

Heavy reliance on advertising and profit driven sponsorship is an important factor to examine because it often carries obligations that result in further restriction of information diversity in dominant news media (Dispensa and Brulle 2003; Hamilton, 2000; Schudson, 1989). Obligations to a certain company that has provided funding or other financial support may create a conflict of interest or self-censorship in the media (Hackett and Carroll 2006). Subsequently, commercialism can easily take precedence over assisting and participating in a democratic public sphere (Hamelink 2000; Pickard 2008).

In addition to corporate advertisements, another indication of profit motives found in dominant media is the use of classified advertisements as a source of revenue (Taras 2001). Classified advertisements, or "classifieds", are advertisements in a newspaper, or comparatively in news websites, that an individual must pay to publish. These can be a lucrative enterprise for the media organization since the individual usually pays per character of text and the price varies depending upon where in the newspaper or webpage the ad is placed. Conrad Black for example, formerly a major owner of North American dominant media, has been quoted as saying that classifieds are the "meat and potatoes" of revenue in the newspaper industry (Taras 2001:17). A similar system to generate revenue through traditional print classifieds exists online. The dominant media is criticized for prioritizing consumerism over reporting 'hard-news' as a result of these practices (Hamelink 2000; Pickard 2008). To test these assertions and evaluate how dominant and alternative media may differ in this respect, my third hypothesis predicts that:

Hyp3: Dominant media websites will have a higher frequency of classified ad use than alternative media websites.

In contrast to the profit driven model that is adopted by the dominant media, alternative media must tread a fine line between generating the necessary resources to function while also remaining independent of external market pressures so as not to compromise content (Hamilton, 2000). Despite their struggle to survive without succumbing to market pressures, alternative media are said to largely reject the use of commercial and for-profit advertisements based on the premise that such practices compromise the integrity of the message (Hamilton, 2000). Alternative media are said to rely on donations and subscriptions more heavily than advertising (Atton 2002; Downing et al 2001). As a reflection of such arguments my fourth hypotheses is:

Hyp4: Alternative media websites ask for operational donations more frequently than dominant media websites.

In order to measure whether dominant and alternative media are distinct in regards to motives, websites have been examined and data has been collected on the number of advertisements on their home pages and on whether classifieds are incorporated into the website. Data on whether websites ask for donations to fund their operations has also been collected to use as a measure of motives that are not necessarily profit driven. Motives of the websites under examination in this study is a variable that aims to capture how profit driven different dominant and alternative media are in relation to eachother. A heavy reliance on for-profit advertisements and classifieds can also infer the presence of vested interests. If dominant media rely on advertisements as a source of revenue, they will not have to as for donations, while alternative media that do not rely on advertisements will have to ask for donations.

Access and Participation

As noted earlier, there is a hierarchy of access to dominant media, which provides professional journalists and elites more access to media as a platform to express their views than dissidents, minority groups and everyday citizens (Atton 2002; Gans 2003; Herman and Chomsky 1988). This is an important factor to consider because the power an individual or organization has is in a given public sphere is related to how much access they are granted. Ultimately, greater access leads to even more power (Gans 2004; Herman and Chomsky 1988). Alternative media, especially when defined as serving a community, often allow and even encourage a diversity of citizens and communities to actively engage in the production of information and content (Couldry 2000; McQuail 1994; Rodriguez 2001). Consequently, the division between producers of content and consumers is blurred because the consumer is no longer a one-dimensional subject in news, but is instead able to represent itself first hand or in a way that is not mediated by journalists and other newsworkers (Bennett 2003; Carey 1998; Couldry 2000; Deuze 2003). As a result, alternative media provides a space for people that are under- or misrepresented in the dominant media to access and participate in an online public sphere (Atton 2004; Rodriguez 2001). Because the 'hierarchy of access' is said to exist in dominant media, while alternative media are perceived as more open and accessible, the fifth, sixth and seventh hypotheses are as follows:

> ***Hyp5:*** *Dominant media have more professional journalists contributing content to the home page of their websites than alternative media.*
>
> ***Hyp6:*** *Dominant media have more experts contributing content to the home page of their websites than alternative media.*

Hyp7: Alternative media have more diversity of authors that contribute to the content of their websites than dominant media.

"Access" in the media can have several different meanings. Most commonly, "access" is defined as allowing the public to "submit relatively open and unedited input to the mass media" (Lewis 1993: 12). However, within dominant media access and participation has been limited to marginal passive participation. Some have argued that media should allow access that provides publics with a choice to select the content they will consume as well as a way to transmit it. That is, to receive feedback and make demands of the media organization (Bailey et al. 2008). Such active participation is a two-way interaction between the media source and the consumer (Bailey et al. 2008). Although the dominant media has attempted to increase audience participation by broadcasting audience discussion programs, such as talk shows, alternative media are usually deemed more accessible and better equipped to cultivate an inclusive and meaningful participation (Downing et al. 2001; Livingstone and Lunt 1994; Rodriguez 2001).

In the dominant media the public is limited in submitting input directly, for example, through mechanisms such as letters to editor or indirectly as is the case of opinion polls. Opinion polls, including those that are implemented by social networking sites such as Facebook, are often incorporated into news websites to give the illusion of access and participation when in reality they, "have a centripetal psychological effect, encouraging all to conform to the view of the majority" (Hardt and Negri 2004: 262). In other words, opinion polls inform us in a very unidirectional way (Taras 2001). For example, dominant media has been accused by both sides of the political spectrum of

manipulating the public through opinion polling (Hardt and Negri 2004). A higher

frequency of opinion polls therefore, would reveal that a particular website was

attempting to provide some sort of access and participation. As noted however, the

definition of access and participation varies from a rather empty one-way submission of

input as in the case of opinion polls to a meaningful, two-way process of access and

participation. The presence of opinion polls indicates whether a website adopts a more

uni-directional mode of access and participation. If dominant and alternative media vary

with respet to their definitions of access and participation, there will be a difference in

their use or non-use of opinion polls. This issue is examined in hypothesis eight:

> **Hyp8:** *Dominant and alternative media websites will differ with respect to their use of opinion polls.*

CHAPTER 3   METHODS

My thesis examines whether or not alternative news media are distinct from dominant media on the Internet, and if they are different what factors distinguish them from each other. Given that the Internet has become the predominant platform for disseminating independent media and alternative views, I collected quantitative and qualitative data from a select number of dominant and alternative online news sources.

In employing a predominantly quantitative mixed-method approach, my analysis followed a concurrent nested strategy (Creswell 2003: 218). This strategy is defined by single-phase data collection, in which quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously (Creswell 2003: 218). Basic frequency counts, distributions and cross tabulations were used to identify the trends and patterns that emerged within the different types of media examined. The quantitative coding guide used to construct my data can be found in Appendix A. Qualitative methods included observation of websites and taking field notes based on ownership, motives, and access. For example, making note of how the website defines itself, collecting data on which media companies owned which websites and describing the type of adertisements that were found on each home page. The questions that were used to guide this aspect of the research can be found in Appendix B. Ownership, motives, and access and participation were examined as base factors that determine how dominant and alternative media operate.

Websites were selected according to several defining criteria. Both the dominant and alternative news websites examined were based primarily in Canada or identified as

having a national Canadian focus. In addition, both sets of websites provide a variety of news, versus focusing on a single topic or being aligned with a particular social movement or cause. Each had active contributions from a number of authors as opposed to websites that are composed of links to other news sources. They had to be updated at least within a year prior to the start date of data collection, May 16th, 2010. Categorization as dominant or alternative media was based primarily on ownership. Websites owned by one of the three major companies that constitute the Canadian Media triopoly (CTV Globemedia, CanWest Global, or Quebecor) were treated as dominant media. Table 1 lists the 12 websites analyzed and their classification as dominant or alternative. Six of each type of media website were incorporated into my research.

Table 1: List of Dominant and Alternative Websites Analyzed in this Study

Dominant	Alternative
National Post (CanWest Global)	*Canadian Dimension*
Canada.com (CanWest Global)	*Straight Goods*
CTV News (CTV GlobeMedia)	*Canadian Charger*
Globe and Mail (CTV GlobeMedia)	*Briar Patch*
Canoe (Quebecor)	*Rabble*
CBC News (Public)	*The Dominion*

As "one of this country's largest cultural institutions", this study considers CBC News a dominant source (http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/about/). Although CBC News is publically owned by the Canadian government, and it does not fit with much of the literature on dominant news sources, it is treated as such because of it role in mainstream politics. Since the Canadian government publically owns it, it is automatically prevented from being able to exist between market and state, which is a defining characteristic of alternative media. The CBC shares other similarities with privately owned media

organizations including its ability to provide non-stop coverage and its adoption of a

profit-driven model of production.

To help identify alternative news websites, the *Independent Media* website, which

serves as a directory of non-corporate journalism (www.independentmedia.ca, 2010), was

used to identify sources. Alternative media websites were selected primarily based on

claims made by the sources themselves that they provide an alternative source of news

and information. Additionally, alternative websites were selected if they identified as

independent or non-profit, and as if they claimed to represent marginalized views that are

not covered by dominant media.

I observed the home page of each the six dominant and alternative news websites

listed in Table 1 for 30 days. Observation occurred in two 15-day periods. The first

period of observation was from May 17th to May 31st 2010; the second was from June

17th and ended on July 1st 2010. Data was collected in this manner to capture any

significant differences between the two months and to provide a more thorough sample.

Screen shots of each website were taken for every day of observation during the two

sampling periods to track and record what was observed. A total of 360 observations

were recorded over both periods of analysis.

For my content analysis of the web pages, a total of 24 variables were explored,

of which 19 are used in my thesis. In total these included: source, month, day, type,

dominant links, alternative links, total links, internal links, corporate advertisements,

other advertisements, total advertisements, professional authors, expert authors, other authors, total authors, call for advertising, call for donations, video, audio, images, social networking sites, RSS feed, classifieds and opinion polls. *Source* is the name of the website under analysis. *Month* is the month in which the data was collected, either May or June. *Day* is the date that the data was collected. *Type* refers to whether the website was categorized as a dominant news source or an alternative news source (dominant type was coded as 1 and alternative type was coded as 0).

The following variables were used to measure ownership: *Dominant Links* is defined as the number of links that were provided on the home page of the website that linked to other dominant news websites, excluding those that belonged to the same media corporation as the website under analysis. *Alternative Links* is the number of links that were provided on the home page of the website that linked to other alternative news websites. *Total Links* is the sum of *dominant links* and *alternative links*. *Internal Links* refers to the number of links that were found on the website that linked to other news websites that were owned by the same media corporation as the website under analysis.

The following variables were used to measure motives: *Corporate Advertisements* is the number of corporate advertisements that were observed on the home page. These are defined as a space on the webpage that was devoted to selling or promoting a product or service. These include corporate branding and logos (linked or unlinked), image or text, and anything that was labeled as, or under the header of, 'advertising' and include promotion of the website itself. *Other Advertisements* is the number of other

advertisements that were observed on the home page. These are defined as a space on the webpage that was devoted to non-profit organizations, fundraising events, charitable organizations, social movements, or unions. These included logos, linked or unlinked, images or text and were often found under the heading of 'sponsorship' or 'partners'. *Total Advertisements* is the sum of *Corporate Advertisements* and *Other Advertisements*.

The following variables were used to measure access and participation: *Professional Authors* refers to the number of authors that appeared on the main page whose profession was journalism, or something within the media production industry, such as producer or editor. This included authors of a written piece (including stories and blogs) or podcast. *Expert Authors* refers to the number of authors that appeared on the main page who were experts in their field. For example, doctors (medical or academic), economists, or industry specialists. This included authors of a written piece (including stories and blogs) or podcast. *Other Authors* refers to the number of authors that appeared on the main page who were not officially associated or did not identify with a particular profession or expertise. For example, this included everyday people or citizens, undergraduate students, volunteers, or activists. Often, the description of the author included both expert and activist, and in those cases the author was coded as expert. This included authors of a written piece (including stories and blogs) or podcast. *Total Authors* is the sum of *Professional Authors, Expert Authors* and *Other Authors*.

The following are dichotomous (Yes/No) variables. *Call for Advertisement* is whether or not the website promoted the opportunity to advertise on the website. *Call for*

Donations is whether or not the website asked for donations or funding exclusive of advertisements, or subscriptions. *Video* is whether or not the website used video. *Audio* is whether or not the website used audio such as podcasts or radio shows. *Images* is whether or not the website used images or visual illustrations. *Social Networking Sites* is whether or not the website had a link to or promoted social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter. *RSS Feed* is whether or not the website used RSS feed, an application that syndicates frequently updated content online. *Classifieds* is whether or not the website had a classifieds page. *Opinion Polling* is whether or not the website used the function of opinion polling, whether through a social networking site or other company/source.

As is evident by the title of the concurrent nested strategy used in this study, quantitative and qualitative data were brought together for analysis using an embedded or nested design (Creswell 2003: 222). As such, qualitative data was embedded into the quantitative analysis in a way that contextualized and enhanced the quantitative findings (Plano Clark 2008: 380). In the following section, the results of this study are reported and an analysis based on the factors of ownership, motives, access and participation is provided.

CHAPTER 4   RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

As noted throughout my thesis, the purpose of this study is to examine whether media practices offline are replicated online, and to determine whether dominant and alternative news media websites differ with respect to ownership, motives, and access and participation. This section will report the findings of this study based on these three factors.

4.1 Ownership

The manner in which ownership affects the organizational structures of online news websites was measured by generating three tables that compare the number of dominant, alternative, and internal links by type of website (Tables 2-4). My first hypothesis was that dominant media websites contain fewer links to external sources of information than alternative media websites. Generally this hypothesis is supported by the data collected. As one can see in Table 2, which looks at links to other dominant media sources, none of the dominant media websites provided links to other sources. The only links they offered were to other companies controlled by their umbrella of media concentration. This finding is in line with previous scholarship illustrating that dominant media adopt a highly centralized structural organization (Bagdikian 2000; Vipond 2000).

Table 2: Number of Dominant News Links as a Share of Dominant and Alternative News Source Content
Ownership

Number of Links	Dominant News Sources	Alternative News Sources
0	%100	%78
1	%0	%7
2	%0	%4
3	%0	%6
4	%0	%4
5	%0	%1
6	%0	%1
Total	%100	%100

By contrast, 22% of the alternative website observations had 1-6 links to dominant news sources. This illustrates how alternative websites branch out to other sources of news while dominant websites remain centralized. Table 3 examines this further by looking at links to alternative news sources. Dominant news sources have no links to sources outside their news organization while 66% of alternative website observations have between 4 and 47 links to other alternative sources of news. This finding is consistent with assertions that alternative media are more interconnected and rhizomatic (Arquilla and Ronfeldt; Bailey et al. 2008; Pickard 2008). It also provides an example for how dominant media fails to acknowledge alternative media websites.

Rabble and Straight Goods in particular had a variety of links to both dominant and alternative media. These sites therefore should be considered as a hybrid form of media, comprised of both dominant and alternative media types of sources, which is consistent with descriptions of alternative media (Bailey et al. 2006; Benson 2003). These findings illustrate how the link between ownership and diversity of information that occurs offline is replicated online (Dahlberg, 2007; Gans 2003; Silverstone 1999; Slevin, 2000). Sadly, it appears that alternative media on the Internet have largely been unsuccessful in democratizing media in any immediate or recognizable way. These findings are consistent with claims by Livingstone and Lunt (1994) and Winter (1997).

Table 3: Number of Alternative News Links as a Share of Dominant and Alternative News Source Content
Ownership

Number of Links	Dominant News Sources	Alternative News Sources
0	100%	34%
4	0%	1%
5	0%	2%
6	0%	2%
7	0%	1%
8	0%	7%
9	0%	13%
10	0%	3%
11	0%	2%
12	0%	3%
30	0%	11%
31	0%	6%
46	0%	12%
47	0%	4%
Total	100%	100%

To explore what information is linked to different media web sites Table 4 reports whether or not dominant and alternative media link internally or to other news sources. When this was examined, two-thirds of dominant website observations had between 2 to 37 internal links displayed on their web pages. *The National Post*, *CTV News* and *Canoe* consistently engaged in this practice. This illustrates how dominant websites provide the illusion of variety, but in reality the websites that dominant media link to are ultimately from the same source. It is important to differentiate between legitimate variety and the

illusion of variety since having more of the same thing does not translate into a variety in choice (Taras 2001). Dominant and alternative media are distinct with respect to this characteristic since alternative media does not adopt this practice. As Table 4 shows, none of their links were to internal sources.

Table 4: Number of Internal Links as a Share of Dominant and Alternative News Source Content		
Ownership		
Number of Links	Dominant News Sources	Alternative News Sources
0	34%	100%
2	17%	0%
8	16%	0%
37	34%	0%
Total	100	100

This reflects findings of previous scholarship that shows that concentrated ownership limits the level of opinions and perspectives that can be incorporated in the news (Dispensa and Brulle 2003; Bailey et al 2006; Gans 2003). Differing ownership practices appear to be related to the diversity or lack of diversity of their content. It may be concluded that this is a key difference between dominant and alternative media websites and is consistent with previous research offline.

4.2 Motives

Motives were measured by the number of advertisements on the home pages of the websites, whether the website reported classifieds, and whether the website asked for donations. Several authors have argued that alternative media are engaged in a constant

struggle for survival because they typically reject dominant means of generating revenue, such as advertisements, because they are perceived as compromising content (Atton 2004; Couldry and James Curran 2003b; Hamilton 2000). As a result, my second hypothesis was that dominant media websites have more mainstream advertisements and means of generating money on their home pages than alternative media websites. Table 5 explores this hypothesis by looking at advertising on dominant and alternative web sites. Dominant sites had between 7-48 ads the home page compared to only 2 to 9 by alternative websites. More than one-third (39%) of dominant website observations had eleven advertisements on their home pages while approximately the same proportion (38%) of alternative websites displayed only four. This finding supports the distinction made with respect to dominant and alternative media having different motives and reinforces the concept that some alternative media website are hybrid models that employ some dominant media practices like advertising (Bailey et al. 2006; Benson 2003).

Table 5: Number of Corporate Advertisements as a Share of Dominant and Alternative News Source Content
Motives

Number of Corporate Ads	Dominant News Sources	Alternative News Sources
2	0%	1%
3	0%	16%
4	0%	38%
5	0%	2%
6	0%	16%
7	17%	1%
8	1%	7%
9	2%	16%
10	9%	3%
11	39%	0%
14	5%	0%
15	11%	0%
16	1%	0%
48	17%	0%
Total	100%	100%

While both dominant and alternative news media are shown to use advertising, there are marked differences in the type advertising that occurs on dominant websites versus alternative websites. Table 5 and 6 show that while dominant websites advertised mainstream products and information, and had no links to "other" ads, 50% of alternative website observations had between 1 and 2 other kinds of ads and 17% had 15 other kinds of ads on the home pages. These included ads for unions, non-governmental organizations, charitable events, fundraisers and social movements. *Briar Patch,* for

example, advertised for a women's labour movement while *The Dominion* advertised for an independently produced film about progressive politics (Briar Patch 2010; The Dominion 2010). *The Canadian Charger* provides an interesting case where although ads were generated through Google, there was a broad range of organizations that were represented, including one that promoted First Nations Leadership (June 26, 2010). These findings are consistent with assertions that alternative media are heterogeneous and cater to specific communities of people versus mass audiences, which is typically the target goal of dominant media (Mahtani 2001; Rodriguez 2001).

Table 6: Number of Other Advertisements as a Share of Dominant and Alternative News Source Content

Motives

Number of Other Ads	Dominant News Sources	Alternative News Sources
0	100%	34%
1	0%	44%
2	0%	6%
15	0%	17%
Total	100%	100%

To look at motives I also considered whether or not websites used classified ads and whether or not they asked for donations. Recall that according to the literature, dominant media rely heavily of classified ads as a source of revenue while alternative media are said to generate the necessary means to survival in other, non-commercial ways. Hypotheses that were developed to test these arguments were based on previous studies and I expected that dominant media websites would have more classified ads than alternative media websites.

Likewise, I expected that alternative media websites would ask for donations more frequently than dominant media websites. Table 7 and 8 examine these in detail. Table 7 shows that none of the alternative media websites used classifieds compared to 67% of dominant website observations. Because classifieds are a fundamental source of revenue for dominant newspapers, this illustrates that the motives of dominant offline media practices are replicated in online media (Dahlberg 2007; Gans 2003; Silverstone 1999; Slevin, 2000).

Table 7: Use of Classifieds as a Share of Dominant and Alternative News Source Content
Motives

	No Classifieds	Classifieds
Dominant News Sources	33%	67%
Alternative News Sources	100%	0%

By contrast, none of the dominant websites asked for donations, while 100% of the alternative website observations did. That alternative media websites continue to rely on donations as a source of revenue, as they do in the offline realm, brings us to a similar conclusion that offline practices are replicated online. It also challenges arguments that the Internet changes the dynamics of information and news production.

It is clear that dominant and alternative media have different motives. Another notable difference worth exploring between types of web sites is that the availability of resources, or the lack thereof, is reflected in how often information is updated. Dominant media websites are updated daily, even hourly, while alternative media websites are more

sporadically updated. This is possible due to the revenue that dominant media generate as organizations that are primarily profit driven. Some alternative websites are updated every other day, while others only on a bi-monthly basis. For example, *Canadian Dimension* is an offline magazine that is published six times a year. Therefore new content does not become available online until a new issue is published (Canadian Dimension 2010). *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post* were not only updated frequently in terms of content, but both underwent substantial changes in their website layouts and design between the May and June data collection periods.

Despite differences in resources and ability to update it is clear that both dominant and alternative websites have tried to take advantage of the Internet as a multi-media platform, using an array of media formats that suit their purposes or needs (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001; Bennett 2003; Couldry and Curran 2003a). However, this too is influenced by the availability of resources. Video for example, is expensive to produce relative to radio or podcasts, or print information. It is not surprising then, that dominant media use video as an element to accentuate reporting. That they do so is evident from the fact each dominant website observed incorporated video, while only half of the alternative websites did. Although alternative website *Canadian Dimension* does not have video on its website, it does incorporate *Alert Radio* through a link. *Alert Radio* is a weekly radio show that is broadcast across several local university and other radio stations (Canadian Dimension, 2010). Not surprisingly, at least half of the alternative websites use free website design templates (Briar Patch 2010; Canadian Charger 2010; The Dominion 2010).

The various media formats employed in both dominant and alternative news media are so streamlined that it is often difficult to distinguish among them, especially among links to news columns, blogs, video or podcast. Both types of websites take advantage of and promote the use of RSS feeds as another means to stay informed. Most dominant media sites have incorporate mobile texting as a media format. Using this technique, users are periodically updated with latest news via text messages to their cell phone. *CTV News* takes it one step further and encourages the viewer to download the new "CTV News Internet Explorer 8", a web-browsing platform themed entirely with this dominant news source.

There is also a distinct difference in the style of advertising used in dominant versus alternative websites, particularly with respect to how intrusive or visually distracting the advertisements are. Ads on dominant media websites are usually fairly large images, and in some cases move and grow in size as the viewer scrolls across them, either intentionally or otherwise (Canada.com: May 18, 2010). Ads on alternative media websites, on the other hand, tend to be smaller than those on the dominant media sites, are more discrete, and are more often committed to self-promotion, as in the case of *Straight Goods* (2010).

Motives are key differences between dominant and alternative media. Given that dominant media adopt a profit driven model, it is appropriate as a next step to investigate which modes of operation alternative media adopt that fall outside the sphere of pure

commercial interest. This is the rationale for examining the third and final dimension of comparison between dominant and alternative media: access and participation.

4.3 Access and participation

4.3.1 Access

According to the academic literature, dominant media rely heavily on professional journalists and expert authors, while alternative media draw on other sources to contribute. This informs my fifth and sixth hypotheses that dominant media have more professional journalists contributing to their websites than alternative media and that dominant media use more "experts" to contribute to their websites than alternative media. As seen in Table 8, both dominant and alternative websites use professional authors. My fifth hypothesis, as seen in the same table, is not supported. 32% of dominant web site observations cited no professional authors, 2% cited 3 professional journalists, 6% cited five professional journalists, and 4% cited 9 professional journalists. In contrast, only 2% of alternative websites observations cited no professional journalists, 12% cited three professional journalists, 16% cited five professional journalists and 11% cited nine professional journalists. However, this is a result of the fact that the alternative websites examined here generally have more authors and articles on their home pages than dominant sources. For example, Table 9 shows that the total number of authors as a share of websites' content. While none of the alternative website observations had no authors, several of the dominant observations (18%) did not display any authors on their homepages. All authors that were displayed on the homepage were included in this data collections, whether it be from newswires or other content.

Table 8: Citation of Professional Authors as a Share of Dominant and Alternative Source Content
Access

Number of Professional Authors	Dominant News Sources	Alternative News Sources
0	32%	2%
1	20%	18%
2	7%	6%
3	2%	12%
4	4%	8%
5	6%	16%
6	8%	7%
7	7%	3%
8	5%	4%
9	4%	11%
10	2%	7%
11	1%	0%
12	1%	1%
13	0%	3%
16	1%	0%
Total	100%	100%

Table 9: Number of Authors as a Share of Dominant and Alternative News Source Content
Access

Total Number of Authors	Dominant News Sources	Alternative News Sources
0	18%	0%
1	19%	0%
2	10%	1%
3	8%	0%
4	7%	1%
5	6%	1%
6	6%	4%
7	7%	22%
8	6%	4%
9	7%	2%
10	3%	2%
11	1%	5%
12	1%	10%
13	0%	7%
14	0%	11%
15	1%	3%
16	0%	1%
17	1%	7%
18	0%	12%
19	0%	7%
21	0%	1%
Total	100%	100%

My sixth hypothesis is also rejected. As Table 10 shows, alternative media observations cite more experts than dominant websites. Alternative media use expert

authors more frequently than dominant media. It should be noted, however, that although

expert authors included professors, executive members of non-profit organizations, and

lawyers, expert authors in alternative websites often identified as activists as well. For

example, *The Canadian Charger* frequently cites authors that identify as

professor/activist or lawyer/activist (Canadian Charger 2010). It is also worth noting here

that there were some differences between the types of experts that were cited in dominant

and alternative media websites. For example, authors in dominant websites tended to be

lifestyle-oriented experts such as professional chefs, gardeners or travel gurus. Other

experts routinely featured were financial and industry specialists. On the other hand,

expert authors that were cited in alternative media were most frequently academics.

Table 10: Citation of Expert Authors as a Share of Dominant and Alternative News Source Content
Access

Number of Expert Authors	Dominant News Sources	Alternative News Sources
0	58%	2%
1	17%	7%
2	16%	4%
3	8%	3%
4	2%	19%
5	0%	8%
6	0%	14%
7	0%	16%
8	0%	15%
9	0%	9%
10	0%	3%
12	0%	1%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

These results indicate that both dominant and alternative website observations use professional journalists and expert authors. Again, the results support the rhizome model of alternative media, as well as arguments that alternative media are not completely distinct from dominant media, but are hybrids that selectively employ dominant media practices (Bailey et al. 2006; Benson 2003). That authors are often not cited on the homepage of dominant websites also implies that authorship practices online are different than what is traditionally observed offline, and challenges the arguments that offline practices are replicated online (Dahlberg 2007; Gans 2003; Silverstone 1999; Slevin, 2000).

To engage the issue of access further I explore my seventh hypothesis, that alternative media use more diverse sources of authors than dominant media. When examined in Table 11, we find support for this. "Other" authors were infrequently cited in dominant media, as is evidenced by 98% of dominant news website observations displaying no authors belonging to the "other" category. However, just over three-quarters (76%) of alternative website observations featured authors other than professional journalists or experts. This finding supports theories that alternative media provide a space for everyday citizens, activists and under- or misrepresented groups to engage in the production process (Couldry 2000; McQuail 1994; Rodriguez 2001). It is also consistent with the argument that offline media practices, such as restrictions on who is permitted to contribute to dominant media, are also found online (Dahlberg 2007; Gans 2003; Silverstone 1999; Slevin, 2000). In other words, a hierarchy of access is visible in online dominant media, while alternative media websites provide a platform for those who are excluded from this process (Atton 2004; Gans 2003; Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

Table 11: Citation of Other Authors as a Share of Dominant and Alternative News Source Content
Access

Number of Other Authors	Dominant News Sources	Alternative News Sources
0	98%	24%
1	2%	26%
2	0%	35%
3	0%	10%
4	0%	5%
5	0%	1%
Total	100%	100%

4.3.2 Participation

Although access is one element of democratic media, participation is also important to consider. On this front I hypothesized that dominant media websites use opinion polls more than alternative media websites. Table 12 reports on the usage of Opinion Polls, a passive means of participation, and findings support my expectations. Only 17% of the alternative website observations used them. Although opinion polling offers the ability to submit information, giving the illusion of access and participation in the media, there is no direct feedback or critical debate, which are critical for fostering a democratic public sphere (Dahlgren 2005) and is in line with claims by Hackett and Carroll (2006).

Table 12: Use of Opinion Polls as a Share of Dominant and Alternative News Source Content
Access

	No Opinion Polls	Opinion Polls
Dominant News Sources	0%	100%
Alternative News Sources	83%	17%

Participation was examined further by looking at the use of linking to or providing social networking sites (SNS), like Facebook. I expected that dominant websites would use these more than alternative ones. However, this was not supported by my analysis of websites. In fact, of 100% both dominant and alternative website observations used them. This finding is interesting in light of the fact that during the observation period there were widely publicized allegations that Facebook, one of the most popular social networking sites, fails to adequately protect user privacy. Most

dominant and alternative websites also incorporate message boards or reader comments

pages, although these are often censored or hand-picked. For example, *CBC News* selects

one reader comment a day to display on the home page (CBC 2010). *CTV News*

encourages the viewer to post comments on stories, the responses to which in turn

contribute to what are deemed to be the "most talked about" stories of that day (CTV

News 2010). Interestingly, again I find that the distinction between dominant and

alternative websites is blurred.

Overall, my research has shown that patterns found in offline and traditional news

media are generally persistent in online news media. Moreover, the alternative media

examined in my sample appear to be hybrid rather than true alternatives to dominant

news media.

CHAPTER 5   CONCLUSION

Overall my research has found that online ownership practices and motives are largely a reflection of offline practices. Similar to offline practices, concentrated ownership of dominant media is evident online, which is illustrated by the hierarchal organization of news information and the limited links to external news sources (Bagdikian 2000; Gans 2003; Stein 2009). Alternative news media on the web reflected a decentralized organizational structure like their offline counterparts but they also relied on dominant media links, reflecting a hybrid model rather than truly distinct alternatives (Benson 2003).

In addition, it is clear that the profit driven motives of dominant offline news media are consistent with dominant online media. High levels of mainstream and profit driven advertising found on dominant websites support this finding (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Schudson, 1989). Online alternative news media maintain similar motives to offline alternative media in that they limit mainstream advertising and support alternative ads (Hamilton 2000). Moreover, each alternative news media website examined in my sample solicited donations, which suggests that online alternative media continue to be engaged in a struggle for survival since profit is not their primary goal (Couldry and Curran 2003b; Hamilton 2000).

Although ownership practices and motives of offline news media are largely observed in the online media in my sample, access to and participation in online media is shown to vary slightly from offline media practices. For example, although it is common

practice to cite authors in dominant print media, authors are rarely cited in dominant websites. Moreover, despite arguments that offline alternative media is composed mostly of non-professional journalists and non-experts, online alternative media frequently cite both professional journalists as well as experts in their websites (Atton 2002; McQuail 1994; Rodriguez 2001). Again this shows that clear-cut distinctions are actually more blurred in practice.

These findings suggest a conceptualization of alternative media that differs from the dichotomous definitions used by many scholars. In other words, alternative media examined seem to better reflect hybrid models of organization and content creation (Bailey et al. 2006). For each factor used in my analysis (ownership, motives, and access), news media websites incorporated a mix of both alternative and dominant media practices. For example, alternative media websites linked to external dominant and alternative sources of news, had low to moderate use of advertising, and cited mostly professional journalists and experts in addition to everyday citizens and activists. Alternative media in my sample reflect a hybrid model that selectively incorporates and draw upon dominant media practices. In the future, a research design that incorporates a larger sample of websites would better contribute to how we understand the relationship between dominant and alternative media.

As can be expected, there are limitations to this study and the variables that are used to compare dominant and alternative media. It is important to note that this study is somewhat exploratory. As a result, this study could be improved by further specification

of the varibles. Motives for example, can refer to a broad category of ideologies and practices of a media organization and this study only captures one aspect of this muli-faceted concept, the use of for profit advertisements to indicate a profit driven model of production. This study would be strengthened from a deeper analysis of the variables that better reflects their complexity.

As is evident from the findings, alternative media provide a diverse amount of information, are less profit driven, and allow for a broader variety of contributors than dominant media. As such, it can be concluded that if alternative media organizations were strengthened and as a result were able to reach a broader audience, they could potentially serve as stronger, more inclusive and democratic public spheres. Through comparing dominant and alterntative media, this study has contributed to the body of media research that is inclusive of alternative media and provides insight into the functioning of dominant media power.

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APPENDIX A

Quantitative Coding Guide

Website:	
URL:	
Date Accessed:	
Time Spent:	

Ownership	Quantity #
Are there links to other dominant news websites? If yes, how many?	
Are there links to other alternative news websites? If yes, how many?	
Total number of hyperlinks to other news sources on the homepage:	

Motives	Quantity #
Are there for-profit advertisements on the main page? If so, how many?	
Are there other advertisements on the main page? If so, how many?	
Does the website make use of classified ads? (Y/N)	
Does the website ask for donations? (Y/N)	

Access	Quantity #
Are professional authors displayed on the homepage? If so, how many?	
Are expert authors displayed on the homepage? If so, how many?	
Are 'other' authors displayed on the homepage? If so, how many?	

Participation	Y/N
Are opinion polls incorporated in the website?	

APPENDIX B

Qualitative Coding guide

Website:	
URL:	
Date Accessed:	
Time Spent:	

<u>Summary:</u>

General:

1. How does the website define itself on the webpage?

2. What is the slogan of the website when bookmarked?

3. Does the website display a logo? If yes, what is it?

4. Are there photographs or visual illustrations? If so, what are they? How is the webpage generally designed?

Ownership:

5. Who or what company/organization is listed as owning the website?

6. Are partnerships or other affiliations/collaborations stated? If yes, which ones?

7. Are there other links beyond dominant/alternative websites (i.e. government, NGO, SM, social networking cites such as Facebook or Twitter)? If so, which ones?

Motives:

8. Does the website explicitly state their bias or selection practices with respect to reporting, which stories get covered or how they align themselves? If yes, how so?

9. Does the website ask for funding/donations from visitors?

10. When was the website most recently updated?

11. What is the date of the most recent article?

Access:

12. Who appears on the main page or is listed as contributors? (name/occupation)

13. Does the website provide that there are restrictions with respect to who can contribute? If so, who is permitted to submit articles/stories to be displayed on the website?

14. Does the website list objective with respect to what they will put on the webpage or what they are looking for in terms of contributions? If so, describe.

15. Are visitors encouraged to contribute to the website?

16. a) Does the website have a message/discussion board? b) Are there restrictions with respect to who can participate (i.e. necessary membership etc.)?

17. Is the website open source?