

ALTERNATIVE JOURNALISM IN DIGITAL AMBIENCE: INTERVIEW WITH JOHN DOWNING

Doctor John D. H. Downing is emeritus professor at Southern Illinois University. He has a significant curriculum involving media studies and was the president of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), which has been bringing communication researchers from around the world together for 50 years.

In Brasil, his contributions strongly influence people who study *Radical Media: rebellious communication and social movements*, a 544-page compendium that was translated and launched in Brasil in 2002 and is now in its second edition.

The book, whose subjects come from all over the world, discusses communication done by groups and movements that can be described as community, alternative, creative, and rebellious.

Currently, Downing teaches and researches at Northwestern University in Qatar, and his latest publication, not yet translated into Portuguese, is *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media* - Sage Publications, 2011.

This interview was done by email and translated into Portuguese by Dr. Nivea Bona with the help of the researchers in the group Jornalismo Alternativo na Era Digital. The interview was exclusive for the journal *Revista Uninter de Comunicação*.

Professor Downing, based on your biography we see that your writing shows that the media in grass-roots movements and in resistance movements often work really close to these movements. There is a discussion in academia that the social researcher needs to "get his or her hands dirty", that is, be in the field and get involved with research subjects to obtain more effective data and, after that, share that information with the surveyed communities. What is your opinion on this and how has your involvement in the grass-roots movements that you've studied been during your life?

I believe it's crucial to engage directly with people actually engaged in grassroots media projects, and equally so to talk to a variety of their users, both intensive users and occasional users. Of course the people involved in these projects sometimes have sharp conflicts with each other – maybe political principles, maybe tactical decisions, maybe personality clashes – so it's vital to talk to all sides. And in the process, keep the health of the project always in focus, not personal sympathy with one or other faction.

The grassroots movements I have been most closely involved with were when I was living in Britain (up to 1980), when I was involved especially with anti-racist, anti-nuclear war, and labor organizations. The jobs I had in U.S. universities were very often as head of the department, in

Texas for example with 1100 undergraduates and 150 graduate students. This didn't mean I was now superior and shouldn't be involved in practicalities! It just meant there were only so many hours in the day if I was going to do my job in a way that helped all those working with me. Nonetheless, I was still active on campus on certain issues, such as mobilizing a protest against the 1993 racist court verdict in Los Angeles exonerating the police officers who viciously beat the late Rodney King, almost killing him – parts of the city of Los Angeles were in flames at that time.

The Portuguese and Italian case-studies, and the Soviet-era Eastern European case-studies, were based on weeks or months of constant discussion and interviews, but I was not an activist in them.

There is a recurring discussion in study groups involving community communication where some argue that the communicator must teach communication techniques to the community in which she/he operates so that the community can produce its own media based on the communicator's information. Others believe that this format / procedure of making communication must be created and developed by the community on its own. What would be community communication in both situations?

My own view is that this needs to be a continuing dialectic over time, neither the one nor the other by itself. The needs of different communities will vary in variety and intensity, and the capacities of communicator/educators likewise. By the time all these factors are “put in play” with each other, it's hard to imagine anything close to a single outcome or process. But neither the top-down nor the totally autonomous approaches seem a good place to start. Rather a **mutual conscientizacao**.

Continuing with community communication, we have the professional journalist, often trained to be in the journalism market, and then we have the “amateur” communicator who comes from within the community. Can both do community communication? What are the boundaries and precautions to be taken by each in the construction of information?

Professionally trained journalists, as distinct from citizen journalists, are usually trained to be one-way communicators, delivering the news to those who don't have it. They may not be arrogant in their own attitudes, but that is the structure within which they are trained to work and continue to work. The “amateur” has all kinds of knowledge the professional is unlikely to have, all kinds of intuitions, and very likely very different priorities. But we are all in constant need of education, and a typical error among “amateurs” is to assume that denunciation of those in power is sufficient, or that refusal to acknowledge internal problems within the community is a sign of

loyalty to the community – rather than developing forms of news, discussion, and communication which may ease the community into taking certain issues more seriously, such as gender violence perhaps.

Usually resistance movements, which are against a system that can often be oppressive in several countries, end up using creativity to express their ideas and requests. You wrote several examples about this in *Radical Media*. In these studies, which of them surprised you the most and why?

In the 1960s, when I heard of the pirate radio ships which floated 15 km or so off the British coast, I was astonished. They mostly played pop music, and had no real social movement agenda, but still. Also at that time in central London and the middle of some other UK cities, small radical print media started to circulate, especially at demonstrations, and there were quite a lot of demonstrations. The slogans on the walls of Paris in May-June 1968 challenged many basic assumptions about how to live: especially “Put Imagination In Control!” (*L’Imagination Au Pouvoir!*). When in the late 1970s, still in Britain, I came to hear of the Italian “free radio” movement, which at its height had 80-90 stations in a short-lived Federazione delle Emittente Democratiche (FRED!), I was also astonished. I had grown up in a country and a continent where only government-approved or commercial firms could do radio or TV.

My two other spurs to thinking, this time even earlier, from high school in the late 1950s, were firstly the war poems of Wilfred Owen, a gay soldier in World War One, who had fought years in the trenches (and was killed in the last week of the war). I never had thought of poetry as subversive before, and Owen nailed the horror and futility of imperialist wars. And secondly the obscene and blasphemous verbal attack on religious hypocrisy at the end of *The Pardoner’s Tale* in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, written in 1475, which showed me the deep roots and continuity of subversive communication.

There is no way to avoid discussing the advent of the Internet and the ammunition supplied by this to grass-roots movements in order to circumvent hegemonic communications. This means you can expose the diversity of arguments, creations, and opinions of various groups. But we still have a public access issue that could be changed by stimulation both here in Latin America as elsewhere in Africa or Asia. In your view, the advent of the Internet can be compared to the advent of the Gutenberg press but for grass-roots movements? Why?

The press was used both by Protestant Reformation activists and by the Catholic hierarchy. In that sense too, the Internet can be used by a variety of social forces, from the racists and neo-

fascists to the social justice activists. However, as time goes by, it is clear that many regimes in our planet, from Washington to Beijing, see it only as an opportunity to be squashed or set on rails they themselves invent. Or as an instrument of state surveillance. Or for commercial surveillance, as per Google. *A luta continua...*

Thinking about the Internet as a driving force of globalizing problems, news, and initiatives, what is your opinion about this medium being seen as the builder of movement networks and pressure networks, as we have seen with Ayotzinapa in Mexico when the whole world turned to watch that incident or many others such as the Arabian Spring and 15M in Spain?

Very encouraging moments. But the technology itself *enables* movement-building, unless government regimes intervene to spy and close down. It doesn't build.

Among the options of media that can democratize information, which one would be more favorable in your opinion, given the weak Internet access in several regions of the world?

Important point. Weak or non-existent literacy are major issues too. I suspect that radio continues to be central, and will continue for some time to come.

The concept of alternative journalism, or even an alternative media, especially in Brazil, was very strong during the years when we had a dictatorship, when the State clearly showed a repressive force, joined together with the market (economic power), and left thousands of people on the outside looking in. The alternative was the opposite of what was built in the mainstream media. Can we still think that the concept of Gramsci's hegemony can be used nowadays, or has there been an increasing complexity of social relations and communication relations erasing a little of the "two sides" and creating various others "sides"?

It's impossible to see, at this point in history, a "class for itself" in universal *coordinated* action, even though I consider that those dependent on salaries/wages, whatever their occupation or political beliefs, do have that reality in common (a class "in itself"). Nonetheless, there are numerous complexities and dynamics, such as those of gender, 'race', religious beliefs, language, region, neighborhood, educational access, which intermesh with strictly economic dynamics. Gramsci's thought needs building upon and developing imaginatively, and I am sure he would be the first to agree if he were still here. What I do like about his approach is its focus on the long-term. Hegemony is poorly understood if it is seen simply as instantaneous media manipulation, for instance propaganda in favor of the 2003 US war against Iraq. We need to think in decades and generations – that moment in 2003 and the years that immediately followed were important,

and part of the hegemonic process, but that process is longer, deeper and more evolving than a single moment, however disastrous.

Based also on the above discussion, is there a media that we can keep as "alternative" today? In your opinion what are the characteristics that might define it: production processes, themes addressed, expected results? Or is it better to understand it as radical or grass-roots?

I think that organizational structures, content, aesthetics, language, community input, modes of financing, are all part of the 'alternative'.

Can you please comment on the situation of the professional journalist, graduated from college, compared to the further spread of information over the Internet in an era when everybody can become producers and receivers in the digital environment.

The finance needed to support journalism, especially really good investigative and global journalism, is the key question. Anyone in principle can have good journalistic principles and motivation. But who will pay that person to put those talents to work for years and decades? Part-time citizen journalists are essential. But they can never substitute for full-timers.

As a publisher of scientific journals who has been a part of the International Communication Association and has led the International Association for Media and Communication Research for a few years, how do you see communication research in different regions of the world? Have universities really fulfilled their roles of giving visibility to the various communication initiatives and exchanged information with grass-root communities, rebels, and alternatives, or do they remain in the same "ivory tower", with knowledge separated from these initiatives?

Mostly, in the ivory tower. The cases when this does not seem to be so need examining carefully. Scooping up grassroots information in order to make policing strategies more *efficient*, as opposed to more constructive for the community, would be a perfectly 'acceptable' ivory tower strategy. The other crucial problem, this time with sincere and hard-working professors and researchers, is that the information they put together and the arguments they make, often do not get shared sufficiently with the communities which could use them. "Second" versions of research, short and clear, aimed at the general community, are needed. But it is also the case these days that many university researchers are themselves in the process of being 'proletarianized', made to work harder and longer for the same money... and their time to write these becomes less and less their own.

Please tell us a little bit about the contact network Ourmedia / Nuestros Medios founded in 2001 and what results can be measured so far.

We organized low-cost conferences in the USA, Catalunya, Colombia (twice), Brazil, India, Australia, Ghana, and Ireland (the last one to date, in 2013). The network still has a listserv, but its dependence on outside funds has prevented it from continuing on into the 2010s as it did in the 2000s. No conference is currently planned, so far as I hear (I've been teaching the last two years in Turkey and Qatar, but nothing has come to my attention at all). Its contribution while it was active was to connect up activists across the planet who until then had no knowledge of each others' work and projects. It helped to overcome their loneliness, which at times can make it hard to keep going. The memory means that lots of people know now that there are certain to be many projects in action, regardless of whether they know of them or not. For those who participated in one or more of the conferences, they represented a focusing of attention and energy which will in many cases continue on for decades.