The promise of strategic communication?

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Introduction

“A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism.”

(Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848)

Since the beginnings of the financial crisis in 2007, the spectre of ‘communism’ has begun to haunt the world for the first time in a quarter century, amidst the tumult of growing social and political unrest, from the ‘Arab Spring’ to Quebec’s ‘Maple Spring’, from anti-austerity protests in Europe to the spread of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) across the US and beyond. These waves of widespread unrest are evidence that neoliberalism has failed to maintain the ‘consent’ of the governed, and yet the governed, or at least the ‘Left’, have been unable to take advantage of the ‘crisis’. Some activists, frustrated with the apparent inability of alternative media to move beyond ‘tactical media’ (Ray and Sholette, 2008), have called (with tongue firmly in cheek) for a ‘networked Leninism’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2012) or attempted to promote a discussion of strategy (e.g. the OWS periodical *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy*). Other activists and academics are reassessing the idea of ‘communism’, including Lenin’s ‘vanguard party’, in the hopes of finding a ‘political instrument’ that can coordinate, mobilise and organise the various organisations and movements against neoliberalism (e.g. Budgen et al., 2007; Dean, 2012; Panitch et al., 2012). The allure of the Leninist model is understandable because it brings ‘certainty’. However, we need to rethink the ‘party paper’ as ‘strategic communication’ to move beyond this impasse.

This chapter, therefore, proposes a way for alternative media to move beyond a ‘tactical’ orientation and engage in strategic communication based upon a rethinking of the ‘party paper’, the once-dominant model of Leninist political organisations. While the practices of Leninist parties historically have created a considerable degree of mistrust among potential social movement allies, at least since the 1960s and 1970s, activists have overlooked the potential of the ‘party paper’ as a model for strategic communication. After outlining key aspects of strategic communication and the vanguard party, this chapter will address the strengths and weaknesses of the five functions that make up the concept of ‘vanguard media’ as strategic communication: ‘party paper’; ‘organisation’; ‘bridge’; ‘network’; and ‘public relations’.
Strategic communication has generally been associated with those interested in exercising power via management of government or corporations and has therefore been closely identified with such traditional areas of academic study as ‘corporate communication’ and ‘marketing, advertising, and public relations’ (Hallahan et al., 2007: 4). However, recent developments have seen a shift whereby strategic communication includes “activist organizations and social and citizen movements” as part of a move away “from … management studies” (ibid.: 4). Although alternative media practitioners have been uncomfortable with the concept of persuasion because of connotations of “manipulation,” persuasion is the essence of influence, which is at the core of strategic communication. If “purposeful influence is the fundamental goal of communications by organizations”, then it is not just vanguard parties, corporations or governments that can be said to engage in strategic communication, since alternative media seek to influence others (ibid.: 10).

The vanguard media concept also need not be limited to a singular, historical or narrow understanding of a ‘party’. The use of the term ‘vanguard’ itself does not necessarily indicate that it has to be an authoritarian form of governance or political organisation, despite the legacy of Communist parties. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘vanguard’ as simply “leaders of movement, of opinion etc.” Most, if not all, alternative media perform one or more functions of ‘vanguard’ by this definition, whether or not they recognise formal or informal leadership, as they constitute a movement, milieu or organisation by engaging in raising consciousness, highlighting the abuses of power and the powerful and/or challenging the dominant ideology or laws; they are also the primary means for articulating the ideas and perspectives of, and thereby constituting, movements, milieux and organisations. Such communication practices translate effortlessly into rationales for vanguard media, for which “strategic communication” is the “purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission” (Hallahan et al., 2007: 3).

I am therefore proposing to re-conceptualise the strategic aspect of communication, one that is often overlooked by alternative media studies, but is frequently implied in the desire for transformation, by rethinking the ‘vanguard party paper’ as ‘vanguard media’. While vanguard media can be seen as part of an organisation, movement or milieu, with corresponding control, constraints and hierarchies within the differences in the degree of informal or formal organisational structure, the model is about identifying the five functions for alternative media that make up strategic communication and could contribute to building a counter-public sphere.

The party paper

The ‘party paper’ in one form or another remained the dominant model for alternative media as long as both print media remained the primary and most accessible means for radical social and political movements to communicate their messages (e.g., in terms of technology and cost) and the vanguard party remained the dominant or preferred model of political organisation among social and political activists.
Lenin’s ‘party of a new type’, or vanguard party, had been a response to try and organise the array of movements, parties and other radical working-class formations that had arisen during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The paper, as Lenin (1973[1902]) argues in *What Is to Be Done?*, is as necessary to a political organisation (or social movement) as scaffolding is to a building, because it provides the means around which the party (or movement) forms: without a paper (or media), there would be no party (or movement).

The party paper was the primary means for reaching out to potential or prospective supporters, a much smaller group than the general public, but larger than an internal audience of party members and sympathisers (thus, different from both the ‘bridge’ and ‘organisation’ functions discussed below). In seeking out potential supporters, the party paper functions to support those readers, who act as agitators and propagandists to carry forward alternative news and views via agitation, which is “short-term information tactics to bring immediate abuses and problems to public notice”, and propaganda, which is “longer-term communication strategies … to shape the hearts and minds of the public” in one or other ideological direction (Downing, 2001: 68). The function of the party paper, codified in the Communist International’s Theses, identifies these two functions, agitation and propaganda, as critical to promote the ‘party line’ which also enables the organisation of cadres into a party (e.g. Fogarasi, 1979[1921]).

The party paper’s function is closely related to both its historical origins during the rise of mass-produced newspapers at the start of the twentieth century and the nature of print media, which is ideally suited to sustaining systematic serial critiques of a political-economic power structure, and vitally necessary to promote a vision of an alternative (e.g. Pimlott, 2006). The tendency for top-down control and one-way communication practices within the Bolshevik Party, and subsequently with the affiliated parties of the Communist International, was only partly related to the nature of print media, which involved a range of skills and the division of labour (and which is similar to the capitalist division of labour). The Bolsheviks had, in point of fact, actually made use of the most advanced communication technologies of their era, which did include mass-produced newspapers and film (e.g. Ely, 2013). Even the party papers of vanguard parties, such as the UK’s Socialist Workers’ Party’s weekly, Socialist Worker, are not actually modelled on Bolshevik papers, such as Iskra or Pravda, but rather on a radical version of a popular commercial newspaper, such as the Daily Mirror (e.g. Allen, 1985; Pimlott, 2006).

More importantly, it should be recognised that, although the nature of print media practices might lend themselves more readily to the top-down, one-way mode of communication that was widely practiced in Communist media, this central weakness of the party paper is the result of the belief in the need for the organisational discipline based upon the historical example of the Bolshevik Revolution. This perspective ignores the historical situation that Bolsheviks faced between 1900 and 1921: the Tsar’s secret police; foreign war and intervention; civil war. The key practice known as ‘democratic centralism’ was supposed to enable the membership to exert control over the leadership, which would run the party between party congresses, the forum in which members were supposed to be able to exert their influence. As long as the USSR and other Communist regimes existed, this particular
understanding of the role of the party paper wielded influence among political radicals on the Left.

**Organisation**

Whereas the party paper functions in the role of reaching out to the public via the agitation and propaganda of readers, the ‘organisation’ function is about the process of enhancing and enabling internal communication within a milieu, organisation or movement, and it is vital to building and strengthening that entity’s capacities for it to work effectively. This function emphasises the importance of the internal structure for enabling the effective communication between producers and member-readers.

It emphasises the two-way flow of internal communication between those in leadership or decision-making positions and the rank-and-file. This function is as necessary for the smallest organisation as it is for the largest. The Communist Party is an example whereby different media were designated for enabling internal communication between members from the internal ‘party review’, which highlighted party departments, issues and debates to specialist niche journals, focusing on topics such as art or economics. Since participants engage with members with similar interests, there can be assumed prior knowledge of foundational concepts and ideas, which means more complex arguments can be made around the organisation’s ideology, theory, policies, internal operations, tactics and strategy.

Control is a key aspect of the organisation function with the emphasis of many alternative media on the means of democratic control, not always just emphasising the practitioners’ control, but also that of movement activists and their audiences. One such long-running example is *Il Manifesto*, which began as a monthly run by a cooperative of journalists during Italy’s ‘hot autumn’ of 1969. *Il Manifesto* broke away from the left political party with which it had been connected and broadened its range of contributors; to connect its audiences with the staff, the paper held congresses where readers and producers could debate and develop the paper’s editorial line (Downing, 1984: 237–54). However, an emphasis on extending control to activists and/or audiences can clash with professional standards and marketplace demands, that some forms of alternative media emphasise more than others.

A key weakness in this model is the degree of control that can be exerted over the leadership and staff by the rank-and-file (except where alternative media are organised as cooperatives). Ensuring democratic control involves making the processes of decision-making and the selection of decision-makers transparent and the leadership and staff accountable to the membership. A related weakness is when the internal focus becomes the primary function of an organisation or movement; this can lead to full-time disputes and even all-consuming struggles over an organisation’s resources. The CPGB between 1982 and 1985, for example, descended into a full-blown ‘civil war’, where the internal struggle for control of the party meant factions building bases via taking control of different publications. For example, one tendency took control of the CPGB’s daily newspaper, *The Morning Star*, whereas opponents consolidated their control over other periodicals, such as *Marxism Today* or *Comment*. The
Gramscian ‘war of position’, a strategy that many leading party members argued for to fight Thatcherism, became a ‘war of position’ within the party.

The bridge

The concept of the ‘bridge’ function of vanguard media identifies alternative media’s most historically pervasive role at least since the rise of the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century ‘pauper press’ and the socialist and Chartist papers of the nineteenth century. Well before Lenin made the case for the ‘party paper’, alternative media provided a bridge between radical working-class formations and the ‘general public’. The function played by newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets has been crucial in constituting radical working-class movements and spreading their ideas, both among their own publics as well as to the broader public outside their milieux.

Since the 1960s, the bridge model has functioned in a manner similar to that of mainstream news media in providing a range of ‘news and views’ on the Left or for particular social movements (e.g., environmental, ethnic), and/or between such movements and the national public sphere. There are a number of examples of national alternative newspapers, such as News on Sunday (UK), Il Manifesto (Italy) and Die Tageszeitung (TAZ) (Germany), and broadcast programmes, such as Democracy Now! (US) and The Real News Network (TRNN) (US), which attempt to function as bridges between alternative and mainstream audiences. Both Il Manifesto (launched in 1969) and Die TAZ (launched in 1978) have existed for a considerable amount of time and therefore have achieved a level of credibility and reputation, which can enhance their position in reaching a broader audience beyond their immediate organisational bases. Il Manifesto provides a considerable amount of coverage of the full range of subjects (and more) that mainstream newspapers do, as does Die TAZ. Although both express editorial support for particular Left and environmental political alternatives to mainstream parties, they both maintain an editorial independence from direct affiliation with any party.

In the English-speaking world, there have been few examples since the 1960s of newspapers that are able to bridge between marginal and politically radical audiences and the general public at a national level. In 1986, there was an attempt to start a weekly, the News on Sunday, to redress the imbalance in outlets for more left-of-centre views beyond the centre-right of the Labour Party, as provided by such mainstream newspapers as The Daily Mirror and The Guardian. It survived for about six months amidst a host of problems, where conflicts arose between professional and commercial pressures on one side and democratic political processes and radical values on the other (e.g., Chippindale and Horrie, 1988). The News on Sunday’s awkward attempt at merging top-down and bottom-up involvement in its production became a disaster, reinforcing the perception that alternative media cannot compete with corporate media to reach a broader public via mainstream distribution channels.

However, there are a number of web-based news media series that are attempting to act as a bridge between small and marginal audiences of politically informed and motivated citizens, and the general public, as part of an attempt to reach out beyond state and corporate broadcasters. (It should be noted, though, in consideration of
the bridge function, that there has been a development of a few well-resourced media in English-speaking countries, such as Al Jazeera English and Russia Today, which offer a much more critical and independent view of dominant elites and ideologies in the West, but which do not represent the politics of alternative media. Interestingly, The Guardian in the UK has been able to gain a greater online presence in the US and Canada because of the lack of mainstream, left-of-centre journalism in those countries.) For example, the most enduring broadcast program to date, which had its origins on the alternative Pacifica Radio network (established in 1948), is Democracy Now!, hosted by Amy Goodman, which provides both televisual and audio reporting broadcast over airwaves and online by various local stations around the US and abroad, and has built up a wider audience than most alternative media. Both Democracy Now! and the web-based TRNN adopt aspects of the professional journalistic techniques, including requesting interviews with government and corporate spokespeople, but retain a critical understanding of how news and power works.

A more episodic example of the bridge function is that of Robert Greenwald’s Brave New Films (BNF), which produces low-cost single-topic films for rapid distribution and broadcast. These films are professionally produced (though limited resources and time constraints do have some impact on the final quality). BNF was set up in 2002 to react swiftly against New Right propaganda; it is telling that its inaugural film was based on deconstructing the Fox News channel’s techniques (Outfoxed). By the end of 2010, its videos were reaching 50 million viewers.

While the adoption of professional media techniques raises the potential credibility of alternative media with audiences outside their milieux, there are some potential pitfalls. For example, alternative media could become a vehicle for corporations and governments to reach out into counter-public spheres. Marxism Today’s transformation from a dense, jargon-laden journal into a ‘glossy’ magazine enabled it to reach a larger public beyond its original party readership. Although it never succeeded as a bridge for radical ideas to reach a broader public beyond the ‘radical ghetto’, Marxism Today did instead provide a bridge for mainstream media professionals to intervene in the Left’s counter-public sphere, helping pave the way for New Labour by dismantling the Left’s ‘shibboleths’ (Pimlott, forthcoming).

Thus, while the bridge function offers potential in reaching out beyond the ‘radical ghetto’ to the general public, it can also enable access to dominant groups that might gain legitimacy with alternative media audiences. It is also the one function that often divides alternative media practitioners over the extent to which one adopts or adapts to the marketplace and mainstream formats to reach the general public. Some see the process of the bridge function as undermining the ‘message’ of alternative media (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010).

Network

With the rapid spread of new media technologies since the 1990s, the idea of alternative media operating as a ‘network’ quickly gained popularity with activists. The network function was seen as overcoming top-down control and one-way communication, and other problems of corporate and state media and older forms of alternative
media, such as the Leninist party paper; these media were seen as examples of authoritari
an constraints of a bygone era, closely associated with analogue technologies. The
new digital media technologies enabled a process of decentralised decision-making
and production processes, and two-way, participatory communication that is closely
associated with the network’s origins in the prefigurative politics of multiple social
movements at the ‘Battle of Seattle’ in 1999. Although it connects different individuals
and groups via a non-hierarchical and ‘leaderless’ form of grassroots democracy,
participatory production is not inherently progressive, nor are networks necessarily
without hierarchy (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010).

The first and, for several years, leading network model was the Independent Media
Center (IMC) collective across the world, which became known as the Indymedia
network. The IMC was launched in 1999, when more than 50,000 environmental, alter-
globalisation and labour activists protested the World Trade Organization (WTO)
meeting in Seattle. The network is closely associated with the alternative media activists
using laptops and camcorders to show the world police brutality and that a different
perspective on ‘globalisation’ was possible. The possibilities of the IMC provided
considerable interest and engagement from alternative media practitioners, and the
IMCs spread, albeit unevenly, to different cities, regions and nations around the world,
offering a range of marginalised and radical news and views in several languages.

Indymedia offers an example of how the network functions to enable dispersed and
autonomous alternative media to retain their ideological, operational and political
independence on one hand and yet link up with social-political movement allies and
operate as a coherent entity. It offers a network of alternative news and views to
anyone around the world with access to the internet. Indymedia raises some of the
problems that come with operating such a global network of alternative media. There
have been disagreements over content and attempts to prevent some items from
being published via the network. However, it has not been without its problems, as
with some stories that have been seen as offensive to some groups, yet participants
have tried to avoid ‘censoring’ such stories. A separate page was provided for such
stories, but not on IMC pages immediately available via search engines.

Another aspect of the network function points to the potential of a loose ‘coalition’
or ‘coordination’ of alternative media, which comes out of developments in the US,
where research found that alternative media audiences do not overlap, contrary to what
had been assumed. Various alternative media recognised that cooperation was also
important because of the dominance of the New Right’s juggernaut via Fox News,
and the various cable TV and radio outlets for ‘shock jocks’ and right-wing talking
heads like Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck (Clark and Van Slyke, 2010). Thus, the
Media Consortium, a grouping of alternative media, has begun building a broad,
progressive counter-public sphere that has successfully challenged neoliberal and
neoconservative ideas, by sharing and coordinating their messaging and framing
of issues the way the New Right has done, via its ‘echo chamber’, over the past
thirty-plus years (ibid.: 78). While the range of alternative media in the Media
Consortium includes many that might be seen as more mainstream than alternative
in terms of internal organisation and decision-making (though this is not always
the case, as Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) define alternative media and in Pimlott’s
(2014) continuum of alternative media), efforts at working together are beginning to
have an impact in enhancing the challenge to neoliberal hegemony. This form of the network function eclipses the IMC’s emphasis on direct democracy and prefigurative politics in alternative media.

A strong part of the appeal of the network model is its seemingly ‘leaderless’ and horizontal mode of operations, which is also a potential source of weakness. For example, during the early 1970s, the potential ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ from the shunning of overt leadership was highlighted as a potential problem for social movements.

The attempt to do without structure only prevents the formulation of formal structures.Structures are inevitable. All groups have informal structures; some groups also have formal structures. In those with only informal structures power relations are masked and the rules of power … are only known to the members of the informal elite.

(Landry et al., 1985: 10–11, original emphasis)

Nevertheless, the network function, at least in the abstract, appears to offer the possibility of something more than the sum of its parts. It offers independence and autonomy to each alternative media unit, which while emphasising the media’s autonomy makes it difficult to come to any kind of unanimity in terms of objectives, other than to provide a platform for sharing or coordinating messages. Nevertheless, the latter function is a potential strength of counter-hegemonic social movements.

Public relations

The final function that the vanguard media concept encompasses is that of ‘public relations’, which is the role that alternative media do perform in reaching out to dominant, mainstream media. This function is important because there is a need to establish a presence with mainstream media to counter dominant (mis)representations even when there is little control that can be exerted over the ‘message’. Alternative media practitioners can find themselves either acting as ‘spokespersons’ or ‘representatives’ of social movements, or providing the platforms for certain activists whom mainstream media will seek out given their prominence, especially when there are no ‘leaders’. In addition, establishment media continue to dominate and retain legitimacy in terms of their function as ‘opinion leaders’, and they do hire high-profile critical commentators to enhance both the perception that a range of opinions are provided as well as attracting and retaining those who would otherwise seek news and views from other mainstream or alternative media. For example, we can find a range of critical commentators, such as George Monbiot, Naomi Klein and Laura Penny, in The Guardian (UK).

However, the most interesting engagement in using the PR function, without compromising its politics, is that of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or EZLN) from the launch of its resistance to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on 1 January 1994, the day the three-nation deal came into effect. By attracting the attention of the world and
through the use of the internet, the EZLN was able to secure fair coverage from established, international (i.e., non-Mexican) mainstream media, and such coverage prevented the Mexican paramilitary and military forces from carrying out massacres of the poorly armed, indigenous rebels in the state of Chiapas (e.g. Wolfson, 2012).

The PR function is an increasingly important part of the role alternative media play. We can see it in a range of handbooks and manuals that range from simple explanations in one-page leaflets to commercially produced books as a means of extending influence (e.g. Monbiot, 2001; Salzman, 2003; Witt, 2011). Ideally, the adoption of the PR function of vanguard media is thinking about the process of reaching out via professional public relations techniques to mainstream media. In the case of the EZLN, its messages were taken up eagerly by alternative media and non-governmental organisations far beyond the borders of Mexico. The PR function, however, can enhance the position of alternative media where mainstream media recognise the credibility, legitimacy and authority of such media because of their standing with others, even as there can be little control exerted over how mainstream media frame them and their message(s).

Conclusion

By reconceptualising the ‘party paper’ as ‘vanguard media’, we can rethink the objectives of communication by and through alternative media, whether to internal or external audiences, whether seeking access to established, mainstream media, other movements or the counter-public sphere. We can also see that some of the five functions of ‘vanguard media’ require or work better with certain media forms, technologies and/or practices which might or might not enhance the means of democratic control, prefigurative politics and/or production of radical and alternative ideas and other content. If we rethink alternative media as vanguard media, we can begin assessing their contribution to the formation and dissemination of news and views with the strategic goal of raising a new awareness or consciousness and/or representations to various publics.

Rethinking vanguard media as strategic communication is to see these functions within a larger milieu, and this activity requires coordinated action. The first stage of such a process is the cross-fertilisation of alternative media audiences that could provide the foundation for alternative media to link across different sectors, including trade unions, social movements and community organisations, to develop a network to bridge issue silos. This interrelationship and networking among different alternative media production and distribution sites could potentially develop into a broad, networked counter-public sphere, which would enable greater public visibility for a range of neglected views. For example, the cross-fertilisation of anti-poverty activists and environmental groups via alternative media would go some way in establishing a dialogue that could bring many of these groups together to see how their issues overlap (e.g. Pimlott, 2014: 300–302). While vanguard media as strategic communication might be the best way to rethink how alternative media could ensure that future social change is driven by the grassroots, the renewed interest in communism and Leninism represents what the concept of vanguard media cannot speak to: a
single, unifying worldview or ideology (even if this ideology was, and is, subject to differing interpretations).

**Further reading**

Although the idea of strategic communication and alternative media is relatively new, there are some key readings to build from. For assessing the party paper and more broadly the Leninist vanguard party, L. T. Lih (2008[2005]) provides an exacting reconstruction of the debates and meanings by which he claims *What Is to Be Done?* has been purposely misrepresented by both Stalinists and Western liberal academics. For different perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of Lib’s reassessment of the vanguard party (and by implication the party paper), see the special issue of *Historical Materialism* introduced by P. Blackledge (2010). J. Dean (2012) offers an argument for rethinking organisation for the Left via Leninism, whereas M. Harnecker (2007) provides an interesting account for a way beyond Leninism via rethinking the problems of ‘actually existing’ Leninism, including most pertinently her chapter on the ‘political instrument’. J. Clark and T. Van Slyke (2010) offers an assessment of the US alternative mediascape and identify some possibilities for developing a more coherent alternative media strategy, as does H. Pimlott’s (2014) overview of Canadian alternative media.

**References**