

# Islands in the Privately Dominated Sea of Capitalist Media

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## Abstract

*This paper outlines the problems that arise from capitalist media markets and sketches alternative forms of organization. To gain insight into the problems alternative media face on a regular basis, particularly in relation to their funding, we invited four such organizations: Argia (Basque Country), The Barricade (Eastern Europe), Radio Orange 94.0 (Austria), and The Press Project (Greece).*

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# 1 The Capitalist Media Market

The media market in Europe and many countries around the world is highly concentrated; at the same time, mistrust of large media outlets is increasing globally (Shaller 2023). This tendency was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and is further being fueled by increasingly frequent takeovers of media by super-rich individuals: In October 2022, billionaire Elon Musk acquired Twitter for \$44 billion. Subsequently, waves of users and advertisers withdrew from the platform. Musk responded to these developments by offering new paid services and even considered charging membership fees from all users. Public outrage was high. What was publicly commented on and criticized in this case, however, is already a reality elsewhere: *The Washington Post*, for example, was acquired by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos in 2013. Similarly, tech billionaire Marc Benioff took over *Time* magazine in 2018. Due to the super-rich's apparent penchant for buying large media outlets, the latter often become closely tied with their other, non-media-related businesses.

This development is not exclusive to the US: In Austria, the largest private bank Raiffeisen owns almost half of both the newspaper *Kurier* as well as the magazine *Profil*; the beverage giant Red Bull holds all shares in one of the most important private TV stations, Servus TV; and the real estate investor René Benko controls almost one fifth of *Kronen Zeitung*, *Kurier*, and *Profil* (Seethaler and Beaufort 2021; Trappe 2019; Steinmaurer 2003; Ferschli et al. 2019). The power of nationally dominant media outlets and their dependence on super-rich owners lead individual journalists to select the issues to report on and present the news in a way that underpins the political positions of their owners and – on a larger scale – undermines the plurality of opinion and media (Weitz et al. 2019). Moreover, the rise of digitization in recent decades has challenged the conventional practices of media organizations and journalism worldwide. Although TV remains the main source of news in Europe, other channels such as social media or audiovisual services are becoming more important for news dissemination and provision. The former in particular promises easy access to news and lowers the barriers of entry for new players in the

media sector. However, similar concerns about media plurality must be raised regarding the algorithms used to disseminate content on social media, which promote or demote content in ways that are in many cases not transparent to an outside observer or even to those who developed them. Although concrete economic and political interests are easily concealed, it is evident that this form of media control has a decisive influence on online content. In summary, given the importance of the media in shaping public opinion, the abuse of power in the media sector by the super-rich on the one hand and algorithms on the other has far-reaching consequences for public discourse as well as for democratic practice.

This trend toward ownership concentration in the media sector is reinforced by liquidity challenges facing traditional media outlets in particular. For example, traditional advertising revenues have been declining in recent years, most drastically during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, many smaller media outlets are either being bought out by larger competitors or simply going bankrupt (Carlini and Bleyer-Simon 2021). Meanwhile, online advertising revenues are captured to a significant extent by large digital companies such as Google or Facebook that control vast data ecosystems on the Internet (Newman 2022). Problematically, these businesses generate profit by exploiting and selling user data for advertising purposes or political campaigns, which has repeatedly led to public outrage, for example in the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

These issues – concentration of ownership, influence of economic interests on media, control of information by algorithms, and financial problems facing traditional media – are commonly discussed under the umbrella term »media crisis«, to which a variety of remedies have been proposed. The European Union, for example, aims to increase the international competitiveness of domestic media outlets in order to ensure their liquidity, safeguard their respective markets and ultimately prevent concentration tendencies. We as authors are convinced, however, that such approaches to the media crisis are seriously flawed as they address neither the issue of ownership nor the question of how media content is influenced by financial dependencies.

## 2 Examples for Alternative Media

Alternative media occupy a niche in markets dominated by capitalist and privately organized outlets. They can be seen as the communicative dimension of the counterpublic, in which criticism of and alternatives to the mainstream are presented and discussed (for a more precise definition, see Fuchs 2010). But in our current media system these alternatives are not yet common and do not yet receive enough attention. However, it is important to consider such alternatives in the capitalist media market to learn more about alternative ways of organization. According to Erik Olin Wright (2017), it is important to look at islands in the existing (media) system and help them become bigger islands in the privately dominated media sea. Taken together, they could form a real utopia here and now, shaping institutions, relations, and practices in the spaces and cracks of the existing (media) landscape, all in anticipation of a possible future alternative media system. Their efforts must be linked to an overarching strategy that aims to fundamentally transform the entire system from the ground up. From their successes, but also mistakes and problems, we can learn and improve (*ibid.*).

To facilitate discussion, we invited several media outlets that are experimenting with potential solutions to these problems, focusing on questions of ownership, control and funding, to the Netzwerk Kritische Kommunikationswissenschaft (Network for Critical Communication Research, KriKoWi) conference in May 2022. It was important for us to emphasize not only the theory of alternative forms of ownership and organization in media, but also the practice of existing alternative media projects. On a joint panel – supported by the progressive science think tank Transform Europe – we talked to media activists from all over Europe about the forms of ownership they have adopted and the successes as well as problems they face.

In selecting the alternative media to be presented in this chapter, particular care was taken to ensure the greatest possible diversity among the various outlets, especially in terms of 1) most diverse in geographical location (Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western Europe), 2) most diverse in ownership and funding structure (cooperatives,

crowdfunding or donation-based, non-profit, community-funded) and 3) most diverse in terms of publication method.

That is why we chose *Argia*, *The Barricade*, *Radio Orange 94.0*, and *The Press Project* to contribute to our conference. *Argia* is a Basque weekly news magazine. It is officially organized as a company, but its funding model is community-based and the salaries of its editors are determined by a democratic process. *The Barricade* is a publication founded by a group of political activists from across Eastern Europe – Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, and Serbia – that focuses on presenting left-wing positions. An English-language website was recently launched to reach a wider audience and to provide the international community with first-hand descriptions and careful analyses of the difficult challenges facing Eastern Europe. *Radio Orange 94.0* is an independent, community-based radio station from Austria founded in the 1980s. Since then, independent radio has been an important counterpart and an indispensable complement to public and private commercial media in Austria, that focuses heavily on community-specific information. *The Press Project* is a cooperative media platform based in Greece which was founded in Athens in 2010 and has focused since then on investigative journalism.

In the following chapters, the various media outlets report on their experiences, recent or current challenges, and present us with the utopias they have created here and now. Their short practice reports portray diversity with regards to their histories and backgrounds, types of organization and challenges they have faced and continue to face. Some have a long history, others are new. Some are organized in hierarchical structures, others adhere to the principles of equal pay and flat hierarchies. What all the media outlets presented here have in common, however, is their dedication to their audience and their ambition to provide independent and high quality content. They also share a concern for their financial independence. However, the strategies that are used to address this issue vary widely. Some rely on advertising, others on fees, and still others are supported by private sector companies.

The challenges faced by the media outlets presented in this chapter as islands of real utopia in the capitalist media system are many, and there is no single solution for all of them – but we can learn from

the experiences of these projects and perhaps avoid repeating their mistakes. This will hopefully make us stronger in the future – and eventually allow us to slowly take over the capitalist sea.

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