



Alternative Media

What Makes Alternative Media Alternative?

Toward a Federation of Alternative Media Activists and Supporters — FAMAS

By Michael Albert

Is the *Nation* an alternative media institution? What about *Dollars and Sense* or *Mother Jones*, or, for that matter, *Z Magazine*? Do these institutions make decisions in an acceptably alternative manner? Do they treat workers properly? Do they have good relations with their audiences? Is *Monthly Review* going in a good direction in becoming a collectively organized project, or is it making an unwise choice? What are the problems at Pacifica and do they have anything to do with a contradiction between Pacifica's "alternative" aspects and its lingering (or resurgent) "mainstream" aspects? Are college radio stations alternative? What about micro radio stations? What should an alternative Web Site or Internet Provider look like? What about an alternative video production company? Are we doing all we can to reach non-elite audiences? Within any media institution how do we know what is "alternative" and what isn't? When external conditions force compromises of "alternative" aims, what can outsiders do to help? For that matter, how can we judge whether compromises are sensible responses to external pressure or reflect a lack of internal commitment? Are the ads in *Utne Reader* alternative to those that appear in *Time Magazine*? To what extent should alternative media institutions work together, rather than competing? To what degree can each project be concerned with more than simply preserving itself? To what extent should progressive "media consumers" actively support alternative media? Does getting your critical information free mean you are an astute alternative media consumer?

All these questions hinge at least in part on what makes alternative media alternative? The dominant answer has long been self-definition. If the *Village Voice* calls itself alternative, for example, but is virtually identical in its structure, finances, and decision making with non-alternative institutions, and, moreover, has no intention of making any changes in these aspects, it is still alternative, because the *Voice's* CEO says it is.

A better answer to have would be that an alternative media institution has special attributes. But there has never been widely voiced agreement about what attributes are alternative. At one extreme, "my institution with my preferred attributes is alternative, the rest are not." At the other extreme, the list of attributes that make one "alternative" is so diverse and encompassing that everything is alternative and nothing is more alternative than anything else.

Having avidly consumed and helped conceive and produce alternative media for decades, I am tired of how vague we are on these issues. Decades ago, we used to call this vagueness "being liberal" which meant to let things slide and not take a firm stand for fear of conflict and argument. Ultimately "being liberal" meant to be opportunist and unprincipled. Yes, sometimes people misperceived good manners, honest doubt, or sensible vacillation for this type of liberalism, and that was harmful. Yes, the desire to avoid being liberal often became a tendency to constantly attack and critique and never be supportive. In defensive hands it led as well to elevating marginal political differences into unwarranted political divorce and fragmentation. But, nonetheless, despite the tendency of overly competitive, defensive, or domineering people to abuse it, the insight that to have principled norms is a critical aspect of making progress, was a good one. If corporate media mavens say that their projects are alternative, this type of liberalism says that no one should contest that self-definition. Well, in the name of having an alternative media worth supporting, I am going to contest that claim.

What makes alternative media alternative can't be its product in the simplest sense. For it certainly ought to be possible to have alternative newspapers, radio, or video about social concerns, or that is artistic, or that deals with some political or non-political area of analytic study. With any sensible definition there should be the possibility of a mainstream *Scientific American* but also an alternative periodical that covers the same ground—a mainstream *PC World*, *Time*, *Mother Jones*, or *Z*—and also an alternative version of each, covering the same ground.

Being alternative can't just mean that the institution's editorial focus is on this or that topical area. And being alternative as an institution certainly isn't just being left or right or different in editorial content. Being alternative as an institution must have to do with how the institution is organized and works.

A mainstream media institution (public or private) most often aims to maximize profit or sells an elite audience to advertisers for its main source of revenue. It is virtually always structured in accord with and to help reinforce society's defining hierarchical social relationships, and is generally controlled by and controlling of other major social institutions, particularly corporations.

In contrast, an alternative media institution (to the extent possible given its circumstances) doesn't try to maximize profits, doesn't primarily sell audience to advertisers for revenues (and so seeks broad and non-elite audience), is structured to subvert society's defining hierarchical social relationships, and is

structurally profoundly different from and as independent of other major social institutions, particularly corporations, as it can be. An alternative media institution sees itself as part of a project to establish new ways of organizing media and social activity and it is committed to furthering these as a whole, and not just its own preservation.

Of course, there may be mitigating circumstances constraining the extent to which an institution seeking to be progressive can forgo profits and surplus, avoid commercial advertising, reach beyond elite audiences, remove typical hierarchies, and actively support other like-motivated projects. Social and particularly market pressures may make it hard for people to push in alternative directions on all fronts at all times. But surely trying to make progress on these fronts should be a condition of being alternative, or we should find another word to describe ourselves.

If the phrase "alternative media" is to have any social implication, it must have some substance. But we mustn't make the mistake of thinking that having broadly defined what media choices are alternative, we should then use our definition to attack others and, for that matter, ourselves as well. The purpose of discerning what it means to be "alternative" and how to become more alternative is not to attack or bemoan other's or our own shortcomings, but to realize where we need to improve and to embark on mutually supportive efforts to do so.

At least some of the practical meaning of the injunction to be alternative is clear in light of the above clarifications. To the extent that conditions permit:

- Income differentials among those working in alternative media institutions should steadily decline, and those that persist (if any) should have legitimate justification and not endow some with more power than others.
- The conditions of work in alternative media institutions should not be widely disparate. That is, given the different tasks to be done, the overall quality of work life should be comparable for all workers and to the extent it isn't (if at all), those with worse work situations should receive offsetting rewards, not vice versa.
- Typical hierarchies of power and influence over decisions should be reduced and, to the extent possible, eliminated. This has a two-fold practical meaning. Means of decision making should be participatory and democratic with the goal, broadly understood, that participants should affect decisions proportionately to the degree they are in turn affected by them. But also, circumstances of work (and training) should empower all participants so that their voting rights are not a formality but instead each participant has the information, confidence, time, and security to develop their opinions, present them, and effectively champion them, when need be.
- There should be steadily diminishing gender and racial divisions of labor, even against difficult obstacles, meaning that the culture of these

institutions, their actual populations, and the job roles of the actors should embody feminist and multicultural aims.

- Relations with audience should respect and promote the same values and norms internally pursued, particularly those of openness, dialogue, and full communication. The audience sought should be broad and socially relevant (not merely those with disposable income and attractive to advertisers).
- Relations to other alternative media projects should be supportive. The agenda should not be solely self-preservation, but the advance of the alternative project as a whole.

Virtually everyone who works in what is currently called an alternative media institution may already realize that their workplaces and products should not reproduce the kinds of oppressive gender and racial structures and divisions of labor and reward so common in the broader society. What the above definition adds to this awareness is a sensitivity to issues of class relations and economic structure and a sense of mutual solidarity and outreach.

I think that a media institution is more alternative the more it accomplishes these ends. No doubt the aims could be further refined and clarified, and there are certainly other accomplishments alternative media should strive for. Most important, there are lots of ways to pursue these goals. Not only will different types of alternative media (audio, video, print) have different attributes, but two different radio projects, video projects, or print projects will often find quite different ways to accomplish the same aims. Nonetheless, isn't rejecting profits and surplus as a guiding goal, diminishing or eliminating advertising as a revenue source, reaching out to broad non-elite audiences, developing structure that challenges race, gender, and class hierarchies in work roles, norms of remuneration, and decision making, and avoiding compromising corporate entanglements while pursuing the alternative project what makes an alternative media institution alternative?

On the assumption that the answer is yes, imagine that alternative media institutions banded together in a federation such that to be in this federation became a kind of "union label" indicating the media commitments of members. The federation needn't be overly narrow, restrictive, or purist, but it would have to demand that all institutional and individual members adequately pursue alternative media goals. With this definition the federation could be a vehicle of mutual support, promotion, activism, sharing of resources and lessons, crisis management and mediation, and help with the kinds of questions noted at the outset of this article.

But where does such a federation come from? The good news is that media activists in Toronto, Los Angeles, New York, Boston, and quite a few other cities are now creating bottom-up local alliances of media workers and activists for mutual support. People working in media in these cities, intent on creating alternative outcomes, are meeting and discussing how to work together.

Coming out of the last Media and Democracy Congress, an organization of progressive media institutions, The Independent Press Association, IPA, formed. The IPA has either already provided or is working on: a Web Site free to all members where info on the publication can be posted (www.indypress.org); a listserve discussion of matters of concern to the alternative press; a variety of technical assistance programs ranging from collective paper buying to help with renewals and mailings lists; an internship program to locate, train, and place talented progressive journalists of color; a series of discussions and meetings aimed at bridging the gap between the ethnic press and the progressive press; raising money to provide low-cost or free (and low-hassle) loans to IPA members to be used for things like direct mail efforts; a national advertising campaign to inform the American public about the many fine progressive and alternative magazines out there; writing a series of how-to manuals covering everything from distribution to bar codes; training in how to turn subscribers into supporters. (And the Zapatista international initiatives described in this issue point in similar directions.)

Perhaps one thing that has been missing from these efforts, however, is a coherent set of goals and evaluative norms—not so restrictive as to be alienating, not so judgmental as to be debilitating, but also not so vague as to negate their alternativeness. Thus, we close with a continuation of a proposal that we made in *Z* many months back, incorporating some content from that earlier piece, this time in the form of a possible mission statement for a possible federation. We hope people will discuss and improve these ideas as a basis for moving forward. Should we opt to build it, a federation needs to be inclusive enough to have power sufficient to grow and diversify, but to be worth growing and diversifying it must also define a real alternative media identity.

Mission Statement for FAMAS

FAMAS is a federation of alternative media projects and institutions plus individuals in support of alternative media. FAMAS might include producing organizations (such as publishers, radio and recording projects, film companies, watch dog groups, media institutes), distributing organizations (such as alternative book stores, speakers' bureaus, radio stations, organizations and conferences, etc.), producing individuals (such as writers, film makers, cartoonists, reporters, researchers, web spinners, speakers, photographers, performers, folk artists, comedians), and also progressive and alternative media "consumers" (such as readers, listeners, viewers). FAMAS organizational and individual members are committed not only to their separate agendas, but also to work together to:

- Define by our actions what alternative media is and why it is worth supporting.
- Strengthen alternative media outreach and impact and mutually benefit one another's efforts
- Assist those who try to utilize mainstream media for positive social change

- Enhance communication between alternative media and audiences who use their products

Structure

FAMAS has two types of members: alternative media institutions, and individuals who support alternative media. Every organizational and individual member of FAMAS commits to FAMAS's shared guidelines regarding internal structure, pay scale, and decision making of alternative media, to:

- Reflect the values we hope to achieve in working for a better society
- Counter the corrupting and biasing pressures in society on our media work and agendas
- Overcome inequalities of our own workers
- This means all FAMAS organizational members are committed to reducing and ultimately eliminating hierarchical divisions among employees and volunteers along lines of class, gender, sex, race, ethnicity, or other cultural identification, as well as by differences in empowerment or quality of worklife.
- Regarding race and gender, FAMAS affiliates agree that jobs should not incorporate cultural or kinship characteristics reproducing racism and/or sexism by reward or by their implications for behavior or the consciousness of people at work.

Regarding class, FAMAS affiliates agree that two known means of working to attain the above goals are: (1) in the case of smaller projects and organizations, to operate as a collective, often incorporating a high level of overlap in jobs and lots of rotation; and, (2) in any size operation, to incorporate balanced job complexes to ensure that each worker has a combination of responsibilities and tasks comparable in its empowerment effects and in its quality of life effects to all other workers.

FAMAS affiliates also agree that one clear sign of structural success or failure in incorporating positive values is income distribution. Reducing the spread of wages from the lowest to the highest and ensuring a just logic for any remaining differences in remuneration is a goal of all FAMAS organizations. FAMAS members, therefore, work toward realization of the remunerative norm that pay should be according to effort and sacrifice with attention to special need.

FAMAS affiliates agree, therefore, that while these goals may take time to attain, ultimately the only logic justifying differential wages in an alternative media institution would be that those receiving more were either working harder or longer, or (for some very good reason) enduring a job that was less fulfilling, or had some pressing need that was being addressed. In such a context, the ratio of the highest to lowest hourly wage would never be very wide.

Decision Making

Ideally, and within the limits allowed by resources and external constraints, people in FAMAS institutions make decisions about their organizations and actions (and within FAMAS) in proportion as they are affected by the outcomes of the decisions.

With decisions affecting only him or herself, as in how one will arrange one's desk, for example, the individual has virtually dictatorial say since no one else is significantly affected. With other decisions, however, where many people are affected, the best approach might be one-person one-vote with various determinations for deciding outcomes such as 50 percent plus one, two-thirds, consensus, etc. If a decision primarily affects a work team, it may be that broad guidelines have been established by the whole project within which the team then decides implementation schemes on its own.

FAMAS doesn't sanction one particular voting procedure for all decisions but instead agrees on: (1) striving for the participation of all those affected in proportion as they are affected, and (2) ensuring all workers on-the-job empowerment so that when participating everyone can partake with similar confidence that their desires will impact outcomes.

Decision-making input in proportion as one is affected plus comparable workplace empowerment for all involved is hard to implement perfectly, especially in our society, for diverse reasons. But much progress can be made and active commitment to the opposite mainstream norms of exclusion of workers from proportionate decision making influence and differential (elitist) distribution of the knowledge and skills associated with organizational decision making, are fairly easy to discern.

FAMAS's Program

FAMAS membership would become sort of like wearing the union label—a sign of the organization's values and commitments. As its on-going goal, the Federation should seek to enlarge and enhance alternative journalism and media communication of all kinds, within the mainstream or via alternative structures.

As FAMAS grows, pressures should rise for all media that considers itself "alternative" to struggle with and improve on the values and commitments of FAMAS. Affiliate organizations and projects should come to see the advance of the whole of alternative media and education, as their advance, and likewise for individual members. FAMAS becomes a hedge against seeking only self-preservation. Thus each member organization and individual should promote and otherwise try to benefit all other FAMAS organizations and individuals, as conditions permit. This may involve efforts to help one another's outreach and promotion by reviews, ads, commentary, etc., or more complex arrangements of sharing and coordinating resources or content, as well as individual's choices of what to consume, help distribute, etc.

FAMAS shall function democratically, challenge hierarchies, develop alternative participatory decision making, and pursue its own enlargement and the enrichment and enlargement of the experiences and affectivity of all its members.

As one obvious project, FAMAS could have a web site incorporating information about itself and links to or embedded material from all its members. FAMAS could maintain public sites for all its members/projects, turning materials they submit into attractive online pages, etc., promoting the sites collectively and singly.

To make the entire FAMAS community larger and stronger, as well as more than just the sum of its many parts, another project could be to promote the community of institutions to a wide audience in a collaborative manner. For example, FAMAS might initiate a campaign to educate audiences to the general importance of supporting alternative media by purchasing its products, donating to its campaigns, spreading the word about its existence, improving its content through submissions and critique, writing letters to promote debate, etc. Second, FAMAS could sponsor mass mailings, ads, and events to publicize lots of alternative media services at once, with options to subscribe to or to purchase multiple offerings at discounts. FAMAS could also help mediate relations with other industries—eg., printers and stores.

One could also imagine FAMAS spear-heading an attempt to coalesce resources in a shared alternative mass media project, such as a networking of alternative radio stations or creation of a network of regional weekly newspapers across the country.

Another related effort could be to urge (or perhaps require as a condition of membership) all member institutions to make their mailing lists available free to all other member institutions, and to enact a parallel campaign to (1) educate the progressive public that progressive mailings are essential to building alternative media institutions, and (2) educate existing alternative media organizations that it is in everyone's collective interest that each organization and project benefit from the outreach of all; (3) FAMAS could also urge that at public events—concerts, conferences, public talks, rallies, etc—there is always an alternative media presence, and could organize and mobilize that presence in a collaborative fashion.

Similarly, FAMAS could urge that every member organization make its content available free to smaller member organizations with non-overlapping audiences. Thus, monthly periodicals would make their articles available to local weekly newspapers and newsletters or other smaller publications not in the same genre. Major radio stations and producers could make their shows available to smaller stations in other regions, free, after some delay. FAMAS could serve as or could work with existing service bureaus, having all the appropriate materials, written and audio, available to be faxed, mailed, or sent on disk, paper, or any appropriate medium, to any appropriate media outlet

wanting it. Writers would get the initial payment, from the first (largest) publisher (which is all they would have gotten otherwise) as well as great visibility from additional appearances of their work. The increasing size of the alternative media community that FAMAS would promote in this and other ways would, additionally, mean more funds available to pay better fees to writers, program producers, and so on.

FAMAS could also act as an agent for freelance writers, photographers, audio production people, film makers, performers, web page spinners, artists, etc. Individual freelance producers could submit their materials to be made visible in some simple and indexed manner to all FAMAS member organizations. Member organizations could then request material from the freelance providers and conduct payments straight to them. This could be done in many ways, of course, and the task FAMAS would face, as in other facets of its operation, would be to find a collaborative approach beneficial to all involved.

Another role of FAMAS could be to facilitate mutual support alliances. These could be within a single type media, with the Federation bringing print publishers and local weeklies, etc., into mutual contact, say (an effort that is already underway in the form of IPA), or bringing film and TV producers together, etc. Or it could occur across media. FAMAS could try, for example, to get alternative radio to promote alternative print media in their area, and to get the alternative print media to run the station's program schedules. Or to get speakers' bureaus to promote FAMAS members and media projects, and vice versa. Or to get progressive music performers to have alternative media presence at their shows, and alternative media to review their work. Or to get information providers and creators in touch with telecommunications projects like the Institute for Global Communications, IGC, and ZNet, and vice versa. More generally, FAMAS could facilitate each member bringing other member's offerings to the attention of their readers, listeners, or viewers by referencing, reviewing, reporting on, and otherwise promoting their offerings.

FAMAS could work with alternative publishers, bookstores, and distributors to try to strengthen the network of alternative outlets for political material through stores and agencies, or at events, conferences, and talks, etc., or work to create new ones.

FAMAS could provide a way for national activist organizations and local, community and grassroots projects to communicate their needs to researchers, periodicals, or other information providers, and various relevant magazines, newspapers, and radio shows, as well as a way for the providers to get reports and stories from the grassroots efforts.

FAMAS could also serve as a clearing house for interns and as a bulletin board for jobs. And, more, it could act as a channeling mechanism for each producer to provide lessons to others and learn from the technical, organizational, and social lessons and innovations of others, or even to share technical resources, when appropriate.

Another possibility would be for FAMAS to undertake fundraising for its membership, globally, in one package. The Federation would go to the funding community at large and say support alternative media, support truth in the mainstream media, here, now, through us—or not at all. FAMAS would then channel the donor support in accord with the specific desires of the community of media activists. The Federation would be responsible to disperse moneys raised according to some internally agreed norms, bylaws, or votes, etc., rather than leaving all such decisions to the donors themselves.

As to content, the Federation could propose areas of focus or information campaigns such as keying on affirmative action or on corporate responsibility for poverty, etc., so that there could be a degree of coherence in the member organization's communicative efforts.

FAMAS could also promote free exchange of ideas, fight censorship, fight media monopolization, work to counter mainstream media campaigns and spin, and fight particular Congressional bills, such as the recent telecommunications bill and other reactionary media policy at the national level, and could provide defense for FAMAS members under attack by the Right.

FAMAS's work could be funded by payments from member institutions and individuals. Each person joining as a freelance writer or artist, reader or viewer, could have yearly dues to pay. Each organization could likewise have a fee, pegged to its size and budget. As FAMAS becomes larger, and its financial needs greater, so too will its member organizations' and individuals' benefits.

FAMAS could come into existence via continuation of and enlargement on the work of the Independent Press Association, the local initiatives of media workers in cities throughout the country, the Media and Democracy Congress, and other related ventures.

The Federation we are suggesting would act so that folks now receptive to alternative media become more supportive, so that folks who have yet to encounter alternative media hear about it, and so that every alternative media project and institution, from research groups, to media watch groups, to film projects, to weekly radio shows, to recording artists and companies, to telecommunications projects, to alternative bookstores and distributors, to speakers' bureaus, to publishing houses and weekly or monthly periodicals, each benefit from the growth of all others and contribute to that advancement as part of its daily agenda. Solidarity with autonomy.