

Rubin, Nick, University of Virginia. “College radio as “alternative media”

For thirty years, college rock radio has played a distinct and vital role in American broadcasting, as seen in such canonizing venues as the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame; yet, academic investigations of the sector remain few. This paper examines practices arising at college stations during the early-eighties, when “college radio” coalesced as a coherent cultural signifier. I address research problematics and provide a glimpse of the archival material related to college radio during this period. The crux of my paper examines college radio practices in relation to scholarly discourses of nonmainstream media, variously termed “alternative,” “radical,” and “citizens” media (e.g., Downing 2001, Atton 2002, and Rodriguez 2001).

For some, alternative media must be independent of “the state and other dominant political institutions and practices” (Melucci, in Atton, 2002), which seems to exclude college stations operating under university auspices, especially state institutions. Further, college radio directors have frequently enacted exclusionary policies of participation, resulting in a staff more homogeneous than the population of the listening area or the licensing institution. However, in opposing commercial radio programming in terms of content and its industrial conditions of production, college stations may enact alternative and radical media traits of “saying the unspoken” and serving the “excluded” (Harcup, 2003 and Castells in Atton, 2002). Likewise, college stations may function as alternative and radical media when they situate themselves in a “shadow cultural economy” and a “parallel discursive arena” (Downing 2001, Fraser in Atton 2002).

While scholars have examined pirate radio and low-powered FM radio through frames of alternative and radical media, U.S. college rock radio has received scant attention in the literature thus far. This paper holds that college radio practices can be analyzed in terms of media alterity, and further, can inform the development of such analytical frames.

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