

# The Case for Alternative Social Media

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## Abstract

What are “alternative social media”? How can we distinguish alternative social media from mainstream social media? Why are social media alternatives important? How do they work? Why do people make them? What do they tell us about contemporary corporate social media and its related phenomena: surveillance, privacy, power, self-expression, and sociality? This essay answers these questions by theorizing alternative social media. The empirical data for this alternative social media theory are drawn from previous work on alternative sites such as Diaspora, rstat.us, Twister, GNU social, and the Dark Web Social Network. These cases are used to build a generalized conceptual framework. However, this article does not solely theorize from these examples, but rather seeks to contextualize and historicize alternative social media theory within larger bodies of work. In addition to generalization from examples, the theory is informed by two threads. The first thread is the work of alternative media scholars such as Nick Couldry, Chris Atton, and Clemencia Rodriguez, who have done the historical and theoretical work to define alternative media. The second thread is a synthesis of works exploring the technical side of contemporary media, coming from new fields such as software studies. The threads and empirical analyses of sites such as Diaspora, Quitter, and rstat.us are combined into a theoretical matrix that can account for the processes and technical infrastructures that comprise social media alternatives and explain why they are distinct from sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google, as well as why they are important.

## Keywords

alternative social media, corporate social media, alternative media, media theory, software studies

For the past 5 years, a vibrant media format (Siles, 2011) has been developing on the Internet: alternative social media (ASM). Sites such as Lorea, GNU social, and Diaspora have appeared on federated servers across the World Wide Web. The Dark Web—networks only accessible via special software such as Tor or i2p—includes networking sites ID3NT, Galaxy2, and Visibility. And peer-to-peer microblogs such as Twister and SOUP are being developed and installed on phones and computers around the world (see Appendix for a list of ASM sites and URLs). These services allow users to engage in social media activities such as sharing and commenting on digital content, creating personas and profiles, socializing (by following or “friending” one another), and quickly communicating across networks of strong and weak social ties. Of course, all of these activities are possible with Twitter, Facebook, and Google (specifically, Google+). So why speak of ASM?

This essay makes a case for the study of ASM. I first briefly lay out alternative media theory as it existed prior to the dominance of Facebook, Google, and Twitter. Alternative media theory was built to respond to older mass media, considering how media power accrued to large, conglomerated broadcast media companies at the expense of broader democratic communication and sense-making.

I next consider the ways in which alternative media theory thinks about mainstream social media. I argue that those working in the alternative media tradition have an ambivalent relationship to social media. On one hand, they are eager to see social media as the answer to their long-standing calls for broader participation in media production and distribution. On the other hand, there is no denying that the dominant sites—Facebook, Google, and Twitter—have retained or even intensified some of the problems of mass media power and anti-democratic communication that traditional alternative media theorists have described. This leaves alternative media theory in a double-bind: social media allow for people to be producers, certainly more so than traditional media, but they are owned by for-profit firms who can be hostile to alternative ideas, discourses, and organizing—especially when those practices challenge corporate hegemony. Indeed, I suggest we call these sites corporate social media (CSM).

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In contrast to CSM, I suggest we focus on the emergence of ASM as better implementing these imperatives. I draw on interviews with 10 ASM site makers and users, 2 years of participant observation in 11 ASM sites, close reading of site interfaces and policies, and the S-MAP, an archive of ASM screenshots located at <http://www.socialmediaalternatives.org/archive>. I will echo the alternative media theory literature's repeated call for scholars to pay attention to media processes over content, arguing that ASM can be seen as a critical response to CSM that not only allows for users to share content and connect with one another but also denies the commercialization of speech, allows users more access to shape the underlying technical infrastructure, and radically experiments with surveillance regimes. If alternative media theory is correct in orienting us to production—the how of media, rather than the what—ASM, not CSM, offer a more fitting suite of tools for people to both make media and shape media distribution infrastructures. In other words, this essay hopes to get us beyond the “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” perspective that alternative media theory has about CSM while furthering the calls for “do it yourself” media production (Ratto & Boler, 2014).

## Alternative Media Theory Before Social Media

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's (1970) important essay “The Author as Producer,” Chris Atton (2002) argues that alternative media “are crucially about offering the means for democratic communication to people who are normally excluded from media production” (p. 4). That is to say, alternative media are defined as much by their content (i.e., radical, progressive, socialist, anarchist, feminist, queer, or anti-racist) as by the contours and practices of their underlying conditions of production, which are meant to allow democratic participation in making media. Alternative media theory is thus closely tied to theories of radical democracy: the equalization of power hierarchies, the correction of structural inequalities across institutions, and the challenge to proprietary logic (Pickard, 2006). This radical democratic theory can be seen in Clemencia Rodriguez's (2001) concept of “citizens' media,” media that turn “participants into active citizens. In other words, citizens' media is a concept that accounts for the processes of empowerment, conscientization, and fragmentation of power that result when men, women, and children gain access to and claim their own media” (Rodriguez, 2003, p. 190). In this sense, it isn't the medium that is the message as McLuhan (1994) famously states; rather *the process of producing media* is the message as Benjamin (1970; See also Waltz, 2005) argued, whether the media in question be print, radio, TV, or online.

Alternative media are a challenge to what Nick Couldry (2003a) calls “media power”: the “overwhelming concentration of most, if not all, of societies' symbolic resources in the separate institutional sphere we call ‘the media’” (p. 39). In

other words, we have long endured mass media without mass access to the means of media production. This is an unabashedly political economic perspective: as scholars such as Nicholas Garnham, Vincent Mosco, and Robert McChesney have shown, highly consolidated ownership of media results in a particular vision of the world that is amenable to corporate capitalism, consumerism over citizenship, and political conservatism. Following this, as Deepa Fernandes notes, it is best to refer to such media as “corporate media”—that is, media owned and controlled by transnational corporations (quoted in Boler, 2008, p. 37).

Thus, as Couldry and Curran (2003) define it, “alternative media” are found in “media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take in different locations” (p. 7). That is to say, by offering access to decentralized, democratic methods of media production, alternative media challenge media power both at the level of organization (i.e., ordinary people can control production) and at the level of messages (if ordinary people make media, then their concerns will be privileged, rather than those of capitalists, politicians, or cultural elites). Drawing on these definitions, then, alternative media have a long history and take many forms, from print to broadcast to Internet. As Mitzi Waltz (2005) and Atton (2002) have shown, “alternative media” have always existed alongside hegemonic media. Religious reformers used printing presses to move power away from the Catholic clergy by distributing the Bible. Editors combined the emerging form of newspapers and government postal services to help rural people have access to the same news as urban elites (Starr, 2004). Liberation theologians used radio stations to give voice to citizens and to challenge state power (Rodriguez, 2003). Marginalized populations, such as those with autism, used Web sites to challenge dominant media portrayals of autism (Waltz, 2005). Thus, dissenting views and practices have existed alongside hegemonic ones, reassembling media systems and production to challenge mainstream views. Conversely, of course, alternative practices can be appropriated by the mainstream. “Alternative,” then, is not only a contested term; it is a historically contextual one (Waltz, 2005). But as this admittedly brief sketch shows, whenever media are organized to flatten the producer/consumer hierarchy and thus challenge “media power” in whatever form it takes, such media are “alternative.”

## Contradictions of Participation in CSM

Interestingly for our purposes here, all of this—the collapse of producer and consumer, the direct challenge to media power, and the search for new processes by which media could be made, distributed, and read—reappeared in theories of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005), sites that are now more often called social media. Just over a decade ago, Web 2.0 promised an end to gatekeepers—that is, centralized, concentrated arbiters of what is to be presented in the media and what is

not. Anyone with a computer and a network connection can contribute to social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Web 2.0, the “read/write Web,” was famously marked by *Time* magazine’s “You” as person of the year in 2006 (Grossman, 2006). With social media, people could shift from being passive mass media consumers to active, participatory consumers by selecting content, rating it, and publicly demonstrating preferences through sharing (Jenkins, 2006). Social media users produce a bewildering array of mash-ups, memes, home videos, songs, photos, and blog posts. This is a new way for people to cross the “ordinary/media boundary” (Couldry, 2003b, p. 120) and become media producers. This did not have to be apolitical: journalists hailed various social movements as “Twitter Revolutions,” supported by Twitter founder Biz Stone’s famous promise to “keep the Tweets flowing” (Stone, 2011) in support of free speech. In the years between 2004 and 2012, many media critics proclaimed a promising new mediascape of democratic production and thus democratic organization (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Shirky, 2009)—precisely what alternative media theorists had been calling for in previous decades.

However, the rise of these new participatory media not only attracted those who sought democratic media systems; it also attracted the attention of capitalists who recognized a new market to exploit. In the span of a few years, Web 2.0 sites were absorbed into the Silicon Valley logic of the startup, the initial public offering (IPO), and the buyout, mixed with the advent of surveillance-based capitalism in support of increasingly targeted marketing messages (Gehl, 2014b). Within this larger context, Facebook, Google (YouTube, Google+, Blogger), and Twitter have grown from small projects mocked up on sketchbooks and developed in college dorms to global networks of billions, garnering attention from venture capitalists who invested in pursuit of growth in revenues and profits and ultimately public offerings of stock. Facebook, Google, and Twitter are thus articulated into a particular political economy of the Internet, one dependent on surveillance of user activities, the construction of user data profiles, and the sale of user attention to an increasingly sophisticated Internet marketing industry (Langlois, McKelvey, Elmer, & Werbin, 2009). In this economy, the users do the work of profiling themselves by liking and tweeting, while the site owners sell the resulting user-generated data to marketers and advertisers.

Moreover, the growth of Facebook, Twitter, and especially Google has resulted in a dominant network topology: a star topology where users are increasingly and permanently connected to a core of fewer and fewer media corporations (Gehl, 2012). In other words, the Web as a collection of heterogeneous sites has largely given way to a small number of sites with near-monopolistic control of authentication, search, and content distribution. Facebook allows users to sign in, authenticate, and identify themselves on a range of Web sites, feeding our data to Facebook as we move across the Web. Twitter has become a required service for media

organizations large and small, and news production is being slowly reconfigured around its technical conventions such as 140-character limits, hashtags, and the emphasis on “real-time-ness” (Weltevrede, Helmond, & Gerlitz, 2014). Perhaps above all, Google is the epitome of networked enclosure and centralization (Andrejevic, 2007). A contemporary site or app can be collaboratively planned on Google Docs, have Google Fonts, be found through Google’s domain name system (DNS) servers and Google search, have content culled from YouTube or Google+, enhanced with Google Javascript libraries, analyzed via Google Analytics, monetized with Google AdSense, and be served to Google Chrome on an Android phone via Google fiber—and all the resulting data produced through these acts are stored on Google servers. Admittedly, none of these sites contain the entire Internet, but their dominance and ability to draw increasing amounts of traffic cannot be denied.

Finally, over time, the cost of doing global media business has begun to outweigh the idealism of “The Tweets Must Flow”: censoring and algorithmic manipulation of messages replaced unfettered social streams (Poell, 2014). Twitter rescinded their promise to let all Tweets flow in 2012, noting that the company would censor Tweets by country in order to comply with local censorship laws (*Tweets still must flow*, 2012). Facebook removes or hobbles activist pages if they target corporations who advertise on that social network (Mathews, 2013). In order to satisfy shareholders, Facebook, Google, and Twitter continually seek to increase attention to marketing messages, even at the expense of “ordinary” user content, and they do so through experiments in linking users to brands (Peterson, 2013; Sengupta, 2012) and new ways to push paid content into users’ social streams, a practice referred to as “native advertising” (Smith, 2014).

The result of all of this is that social media’s potential challenge to corporate media was absorbed by informational capitalism; Facebook, Twitter, and Google have become CSM (Langlois, 2014). Perhaps the best indication of the rise of CSM came in the form of *Time*’s 2010 Person of the Year: founder and young billionaire Mark Zuckerberg (Grossman, 2010), a person made rich by the very productivity of You, the 2006 Person of the Year.

## Alternative Media Theory and CSM

However, despite all these problems with CSM, a sober analysis reveals that they do move us closer to the ideals laid out in the past 30 years by theorists of alternative media. The initial promise of Web 2.0—that gatekeepers have their power reduced and that “ordinary” users can make media—is still true, even for for-profit firms such as Facebook and Twitter. We have to recognize that prior to Web 2.0 and social media, “the media” often connoted “mass media,” broadcast from the few to the many. To think about media being arranged otherwise was difficult; as Rodriguez put it in her 2003 exploration of citizens’ radio in Chile,

the only model of communication and media known by the communities involves commercial media and information transmission. A different model in which media are tools for cultural awareness, dialogue, and critical thinking has the texture of an intangible, fantastic utopia. (p. 183)

Certainly, there were moments of possibility when media could have been something other than one-way, centralized mass media (the struggle over the shape of radio being one example; see Douglas, 2004; McChesney, 1993; Pickard, 2015), and there have been traditions of techno-utopianism that have sought to use new media technologies to undermine mass media (Stevenson, 2014; Turner, 2008). But by and large, the model that has dominated the 20th century has been the mass media model. Thus, the affordances and popularity of CSM have provided a new way to think about media. CSM's rise in the mid-2000s reflected what Geert Lovink identified in 2008 as "the desire to create new forms of social networks" (Lovink & Boler, 2008, p. 134), a desire that transcends content, gatekeepers, or vertically integrated broadcast empires and is *seemingly* satisfied with Twitter and Facebook. Perhaps then people (such as the publishers of *Time*) who proclaimed that CSM could fulfill the promises of media democracy were right; CSM are different from mass media, after all.

Moreover, crude monikers like "Twitter Revolution" have a grain of truth: social media have been useful to activists organizing protests and getting their messages out. For example, Greg Elmer and Andy Opel (2014), having noted that protesters have shifted tactics from holding signs to holding cameras, constructed their documentary film *Preempting Dissent* almost entirely from Creative Commons–licensed, crowdsourced footage of police brutality at protests, solicited on a variety of platforms (YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, among others). In this sense, the film assembled the products of countless protests (raw video footage, commentary) after they appeared in their original contexts in CSM into a coherent, progressive message opposed to new police tactics used against peaceful protesters.

Thus, given the contradictions of participatory CSM, it is perhaps not surprising that alternative media theory has had an ambivalent relationship to CSM. For example, in a 2007 interview with alternative media scholar Megan Boler, McChesney notes that the media reform movement has used "new media—podcasting, blogging, YouTube, MySpace—to popularize the issues and to bypass the traditional media" (McChesney & Boler, 2008, p. 62). Yet in that same interview, McChesney also notes that market-based media on the Internet will never challenge the power of corporate media. Boler (2008) herself expresses ambivalence about CSM, noting that these media allow for new, alternative narratives that challenge traditional media while also being readily absorbed by mainstream media; that is, to participate in them is to "contribute" in the sense Jodi Dean (2010) speaks of. Similarly, Ratto and Boler (2014) note the tension between

using CSM to distribute ideas while having to hew to the self-promotional, marketing logic that those sites privilege. Alternative media scholars saw potentials in social media but were justifiably leery of their for-profit nature.

Ultimately, then, Web 2.0 and social media illustrate well Des Freedman's assertion that the best approach to studying power in media is to consider contradictions between corporate media's desire for hegemony and narrow consensus and those moments when radical practices and alternative ideas emerge into mainstream discourses (Freedman, 2014, p. 13; see also Hesmondhalgh, 2002). We can read the history of CSM in this way; they provide new ways to think about who can make and distribute media, but they also intensify media centralization, control, and commercialization. In response to these contradictions, one approach scholars can take is to focus on content and seriously study how activists and ordinary citizens are using CSM to politicize and organize despite the problems of centralization, censorship, surveillance, and the bending of interaction toward consumer messages. Indeed, this is what many contemporary alternative media scholars are doing (Penney, 2014; e.g., Poell & Borra, 2012; Porter & Hellsten, 2014; Terranova & Donovan, 2013). Another approach is to take seriously the affordances and limitations of CSM's interfaces and architectures and to see how activists and coders are reverse engineering (Gehl, 2014b) ideas from CSM to produce a new alternative media: ASM. This is what I will do here.

## Toward a Theory of ASM

In order to explore ASM, I first take up the call from alternative media theorists such as Atton (2008), Rodriguez (2001), and Pickard (2006) to pay attention to the underlying organizational dimensions of such media and to see how those structures may encourage or discourage democratic media production. In the case of ASM, organizational structures are intimately overdetermined by their technical architectures. As Geert Lovink argues, "activists really need to understand the limits and the possibilities of software and network architecture" (Lovink & Boler, 2008, p. 129). For him, software and network architectures provide infrastructures of possibility. In other words, interfaces, database structures, mechanisms of connection all shape social activities, including activism and the organization of media production. ASM bring to the fore technical aspects such as digital network topologies, links, cryptography, interfaces, and databases.

To understand this, we can turn to the emerging field of software studies. Software studies focuses on a range of artifacts, including network topologies, interfaces, operating systems, algorithms, lines of code, machine languages, the software/hardware relationship, and, in some cases, the hardware platform itself. Software studies disentangles these layers of abstraction while articulating them into others, including social relations, spaces, politics, organizational forms, conditions of production and consumption, and

semiotics. This field has already been taken up to study the contours of CSM (Bucher, 2014; Gehl, 2014b; Langlois et al., 2009; Weltevrede et al., 2014). I will borrow from it here to study ASM.

Mixing traditional alternative media theory with the sociotechnical emphasis of software studies brings forward three key features of ASM: their anti-advertising stances, their pedagogies of network topology and code, and their particular deployment of surveillance practices.

### Alternative Like Economies

A key feature of most ASM is a refusal to participate in the dominant political economy of the corporate Internet, a refusal that is most clearly marked by the lack of advertisements on sites such as GNU social, Galaxy2, Diaspora, and Lorea.

This is a content issue, to be sure. Refusing advertising is refusing to privilege moneyed speech. The increasing equation of money with speech—that is, those with the most money can be the loudest and most persistent voices in contemporary media—is denied when advertising is refused. As an admin of the dark Web site Galaxy2 argued, advertising

allows those with money to make more noise, or to have more impact than those without money . . . I don't want a system where if you have money, you have more influences/right/privileges than those who either choose not to pay, or those who cannot afford it.

Instead, ASM operate on the principle that each user has an equal chance to speak (assuming, of course, said users have access to the site and the skills to use it, a point I have to set aside here). Paying for privileged positions, either in sidebars in the interface or in “native advertising” in the social stream, is actively denied.

But perhaps more important than a content issue, refusing advertising in ASM is also both a *technical* and an *organizational* issue. First, putting an ad on a modern Web site is not simply a matter of adding a hyperlinked <img> tag to the site's HTML; it is an extremely technical achievement, mixing together first-party content with third-party ads from multiple servers (Turow, 2011). Moreover, advertising online is largely based on user behaviors, which depends on extensive data collection. By monitoring users across the Web, advertising sales networks build profiles of users and then sell their attention to marketers in nanosecond-scale auctions as pages load. In order for all this to work—in order for this to be profitable, in other words—a complex system of surveillance, standardized ad exchanges and formats, and standardized Web site appearance have to be in place (Gehl, 2014b). CSM sites such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter are a large part of this logic, both because of their power to monitor users across the Web and because user's attention paid to these sites is a valuable commodity to be sold to marketers.

This is reflected in CSM organizations, as practices such as engineering, marketing, data analysis, and sales become intimately intertwined.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one could argue that the networking imagined by CSM is less networking between peers and more networking between consumers and brands; as Facebook Director of Ads Engineering Adam Bosworth (2014) puts it, the goal is “meaningful connections between people and businesses.” By denying this logic, by denying advertisers access to their users, ASM refuse the entire technical and organizational infrastructure of online behavioral advertising.

ASM site admins and creators talk about their anti-advertising stances often. For example, an admin of a dark web social network<sup>2</sup> told me, “ads are not here because I gain flexibility . . . if I had ads I would have to listen to advertisers.” When asked what made his site different from other social networks, the admin of Galaxy2 replied, “[this site] doesn't datamine to collect personal data to sell to third parties. There's no ads.” Both of these admins hint at the powerful influence marketers can have over sites. Carol Nichols of the Twitter alternative rstat.us makes this explicit: Twitter is “actively ignoring the needs of their users in order to serve the needs of their advertisers and shareholders.” In contrast, she argues that rstat.us is more concerned with user expression. Similarly, Hannes Mannerheim of Quitter notes that

A social network that has the users' interests in mind would look completely different than today's Twitter and Facebook. It would be designed to help you with your social interactions, quickly and efficiently, not trying to make you spend maximum amount of minutes on the site. Facebook, and increasingly Twitter (as their owners have started demanding profits), are doing the opposite. They . . . steal your time, make you do pointless stuff, filter in advertising in your news feeds, delete pages and users organising protests etc, mine their “big data” to find the best ways to use our weaknesses for pointless click-bait . . .

Here, all of these ASM site developers note the outside influence of marketing over contemporary CSM, whose designs are implemented in order to support marketing efforts. In contrast, the developers argue that their alternatives are designed for mediated acts of socializing—indeed, the very socializing we ideally associate with Facebook and Twitter—while not being concerned with bending the arc of that socializing toward connections between people and brands.

This is illustrated by considering ASM appropriation of CSM conventions, including those that were originally designed to intensify attention to marketing messages. One key example is the Like Button. Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) note that Facebook's dominance online has resulted in a “Like Economy,” that is, an economy built around the binary signal of liking digital artifacts, where a user's collection of likes becomes a proxy for that user's desires and socioeconomic status. Through the Like button—which is now installed on a huge range of Web sites—“User activities are

of economic value because they produce valuable user data that can enter multiple relations of exchange and are set up to multiply themselves” (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013, p. 13). These data are collected by Facebook and sold to marketers who seek access to users’ attention; with more data, their advertising messages can be more precise, and the Likes serve as further feedback on how specific appeals resonated with users (Lipsman, Mud, Rich, & Bruich, 2012).

However, as Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) point out, this Like Economy is not all about marketing: Liking is also positive, affective, and spontaneous, a signal and social counter of approval and affection. As one member of a dark web social network put it, “Incoming likes support your ego in thinking that some things need to be said, while outgoing likes are an instrument to show your support to other people’s activity.” We might then see in ASM an *alternative like economy*, one that centers on affective exchanges between users as opposed to user-to-brand exchanges that are privileged in CSM. Indeed, most ASM have binary affirmative signals despite not selling that attention to advertisers. When ASM use Like buttons yet refuse advertising—and thus the technical logic that advertising carries with it, including collecting user data, targeting advertisements, and giving moneyed voices more volume—they allow their users to engage in affirmations of one another without tying these affirmations to a profit motive.

Thus, ASM designers present their sites as spaces in which users can engage in the format of social media (by friending, liking, following, and sharing) but without serving those users to marketers nor building out the highly complex technical and organizational infrastructure needed to serve ads. As an admin of a dark web social network told me,

I . . . don’t want [advertisements] . . . because this can limit the freedom I have to do whatever I feel [is] needed to do. I don’t want to guide my actions based on what advertisers would appreciate more, rather I prefer to be 100% independent and take actions I believe are better for the ideals our project represents . . . [this site] is about refusal, it’s about principles.

To be certain, developers’ narratives about CSM being entirely beholden to marketers might be overstated, and their own anti-advertising narratives might simply be means by which they can lay claim to their sites being “alternative” and thus attract a particular user base. Their motivations might be altruistic, idealistic, or simply self-serving, but regardless, their refusal of advertising does have consequences: their sites do not give in to the technical, infrastructural, or organizational demands that marketers would make upon them.

### Network and Code Pedagogies

Whereas ASM’s refusal of advertising and its attendant technical and organizational logics are obvious, less so are their specific practices regarding the relationship between users

and the underlying technical structures of the sites. ASM have a radically different understanding of networks and code than do CSM: they are built in order to allow users access to more than just interfaces. ASM seek to guide users beyond filling in profiles, sharing, friending, and liking to practices such as coding, administering, and organizing the very systems that allow for those interface-level activities.

This desire to allow users access to and control over underlying technical infrastructures can take different forms. First, ASM sites are often (although not always) distributed or federated. “Distribution” refers to peer-to-peer technology, wherein there are no central servers. Twister, a microblogging service built on top of Bitcoin and BitTorrent protocols, is one notable example; users can install Twister on their phones and connect with one another without any central mediator (Freitas, 2014). Federation, on the other hand, is the practice of installing social media software on Web servers, linking them together, and connecting to them with clients (i.e., browsers). GNU social, rstat.us, Lorea (Cabello, Franco, & Haché, 2013), and Diaspora (Sevignani, 2013) are key examples here. In either case, the goal is to allow users to install ASM “closer to home,” either on their own devices or on Web servers they trust. This decentralized approach is in response to the highly centralized structures of Facebook, Twitter, and Google, quintessential “cloud” companies with data centers that are “material hubs for global information and communication traffic” (Mosco, 2014). Such data centers are far away and alien to the vast majority of Internet users, even as they reach out and enclose the devices we are so intimate with (Andrejevic, 2007). Peer-to-peer or federated software brings ASM closer in geographic terms.

However, such decentralization does not necessarily lead to more user control of ASM. In addition to decentralization, ASM offer access to their underlying technologies because they are built with free or open source software. GNU social founder Matt Lee explains,

Free software is software that can be controlled by the users of the software, rather than the developers. Users of a free program can run, copy and modify the program to suit their own uses, and share copies with friends and colleagues. GNU social is a little different in that it is primarily used in a web browser, so we used a special free software license that extends these freedoms to users in a browser.

The federated rstat.us is open source because, as rstat.us developer David Wilkinson notes,

It is important that rstat.us is, albeit not technically the case by law alone, controlled by the community and not by us . . . Basically we are pro-people vs being simply anti-corporate . . . We would rather build a simpler project that people can extend and use in a variety of ways without consulting us.

Indeed, rstat.us takes this idea even further: not only is its code in the public domain (licensed as Creative Commons

0—No Rights Reserved), its design and logos are as well. This means that users build new systems from it and use or alter rstat.us’ design and logos. In essence, rstat.us provides users, coders, and culture jammers with raw material to work with; this is in addition to rstat.us’ affordances for microblogging.

ASM architectures and practices are not homogeneous. The distinction between distribution and federation, as well as between free software and open source software, foregrounds the fact that ASM approaches differ quite a bit and reflect different politics. As Loncke van der Velden (2013) notes in his comparative study of Diaspora and Lorea,

These two social networks could be analyzed in terms of their push of different (political) agendas: Diaspora being closer to a liberal notion of the individual subject and manifesting a legal understanding of how to organize human rights within the social networking world, and [Lorea] expressing a more rhizomatic point of view of the world in which various experimental nodes can be productively interconnected and in which the status of the individual and the law is less explicitly defined. (p. 317)

However, although their approaches are different, one thing ASM have in common is their emphasis on *network and code pedagogies*: that is, trying to help users become coders and technicians, “sociologists of software,” to draw on Simondon (2010), who are far more able to shape ASM to meet their needs. Thus, developers of ASM do more than just make media systems; they teach others how to use them and modify them. As Matt Lee of GNU social argues,

it is vitally important to me that anyone can set up a GNU social server on virtually any web hosting. I also want to make it as easy as possible to set up and install. To that end, I will personally help anyone who wants to get set up.

Lorea’s developers have a similar ideal. As Cabello et al. (2013) note, Lorea developers offer

a high number of workshops . . . to activists for free. This clearly takes into account the need to develop a dynamics based on inclusion, and the understanding that people who do free software development and system administration (sysadmin) work for a community. (p. 344)

This is not simply technical instruction—this is an organizational choice made by ASM developers. This is precisely what alternative media theory calls for: media technologies, organizations, and practices that value critical inquiry, pedagogy, and citizenship (Rodriguez, 2003). Admittedly, teaching billions of Internet users these skills is extremely difficult. But the overarching ideal here is to move users past simply using social media to being active contributors to the design, development, administration, and implementation of social media. This is not possible with Facebook, Twitter, or Google, which are far more closed in terms of code and tend to rely on aggregated, interface-level actions as signals for

potential technical changes. ASM offer radically different forms of network and code pedagogies.

### *Surveillance Democracy*

Given Barrett Brown and Anonymous’ revelations about corporate spying in 2010 and Edward Snowden’s revelations about government spying in 2013, as well as the general backdrop of Google, Facebook, and Twitter’s monitoring of user activities, we might conclude that ASM must be anti-surveillance. Twister’s homepage, [twister.net.co](http://twister.net.co), for example, promises “no spying” and “no IP [Internet Protocol] recording.” Diaspora ([diasporafoundation.org](http://diasporafoundation.org)) promises, “with diaspora\*, your friends, your habits, and your content is your business . . . not ours!” The dark web social networks Galaxy2 and Visibility, which exist as Tor hidden services and on the i2p network, respectively, are at first glance anti-surveillance because IP addresses of both clients and servers in these systems are obfuscated.

All of this might lead to the impression that ASM must be dedicated to anonymity. This is not the case. To “do” social media is to publicly perform for invisible audiences by posting images and links and commenting on other people’s posts. Being social in social media means accumulating accolades: likes, comments, and above all, friends or followers. All of this involves the mediated construction of a coherent identity, articulated through the formatted conventions of social media. This is as true of ASM as it is of CSM.

Thus, a central tension in ASM is one between surveillance and public performance. What I suggest here is that ASM are experiments that mix together practices of surveillance, privacy, and identity in different ways. These experiments are meant to go beyond and against the hegemonic CSM model, a model that commoditizes the products of its own surveillance and, in a bid to keep doing business in various contexts, accedes to state surveillance.

For example, we can consider the contrast between ASM, which allows users to have pseudonyms, and Facebook, which demands users sign up with their real names. Since they are not invested in producing users-as-profiles which can be targeted by marketers, ASM allow far more play with identity than in a site such as Facebook. As one dark web social networking site user told me,

I could be an engineer, a business mogul, an artisan. I could be a novelist or a teacher. I could be a teenager who’s blowing smoke about being an “old fart,” or I could be pushing fifty. I take care to type “recognise” one day and “recognize” another. I’m equally familiar with Washington and London. For the record, I’m American, but am I even in America?

For this ASM user, such identity-play is not antithetical to the main act of social media, socializing. The user even argues that pseudonyms beget deeper social interactions:

when the mask goes on, many of our daily masks come off. We tend to shed layers of societal convention and become closer to who we really are. Humans are social creatures. A psychologically well-adjusted person will seek out others of his peer group . . . coming to know the individuals behind the masks, names or no names, was the most important. My life is richer for having “met” them.

In contrast to such pseudonymous social networking, Facebook is notable for its longstanding emphasis on real identities and social connections. This emphasis has made the site extremely attractive to marketers who seek to target ads as granularly as possible. Facebook’s refusal to allow for pseudonyms—most notably among trans and genderqueer users (Carroll & Holpuch, 2015)—reinforces “real” identities as the ideal in CSM. ASM do not enforce real world identity policies and thus allow for the sort of experimentation the dark web user described above.

Beyond experimentation with pseudonyms, ASM administrators negotiate their surveillance practices with their users. On the Dark Web Social Network (Gehl, 2014a), a user and admin co-wrote the privacy policy publicly, with users and other admins debating its content before agreeing on a final policy. During this process, admins received many pointed questions about the social network’s data retention and monitoring practices. This is part of the larger open source ethos; software codes and social codes are equally seen as objects to publicly debate. Contrast this with the policies of Facebook, Google, or Twitter, which appear to be written more in consultation with marketers and law enforcement. In a sense, then, administrators enroll their users’ concerns about surveillance and try to turn those concerns into “sousveillance” (Mann, 2004) or the skeptical monitoring of administrative action.

Conversely, while ASM administrators accept the need to have their actions and decisions questioned, they also encourage users to hide their activities from administrative oversight. On Galaxy2, a Tor-based social network, the founder posted a guide that teaches users how to easily encrypt their communications with one another. As he argues, “of course I don’t read private messages, but why should members trust me?” In doing so, the admin is eliminating his ability to read private user messages (assuming users follow his guide). Distributed and federated systems like Twister, rstat.us, GNU social, and Diaspora take this further. They are designed so users can install them on whatever server they please; doing so reduces the makers of these systems to *users* rather than powerful administrators. In other words, if I install Twister on my own computer, even the program’s creator cannot access it unless I allow it, and those who I allow are subject to my administrative oversight. This is the heart of the decentralized model: the power to watch others is disaggregated from the centralized, star topology of Facebook and Google and is redistributed back to individual servers, client devices, and users-cum-administrators.

What all of this reveals is that ASM are not simply anti-surveillance; the practices of social media necessarily involve surveillance. Surveillance, watching, and performing are always part of any social networking site—or indeed, any social activity. What matters is the specific technical and social configuration of surveillance practices and privacy, how information flows and gazes are put to work to produce a culture, and how power relations are configured—or fragmented, to use Rodriguez’s (2003) term—to mitigate against abuses. In this sense, what is happening on ASM is experimentation with surveillance power and anonymous freedom. This is precisely what Christian Fuchs (2012) calls a “socialist conception of privacy”: power relations through watching are inescapable, so ASM involve new structures of power relations by experimenting with alternative acts of looking and hiding, all directed toward dissolving surveillance capitalism (Foster & McChesney, 2014). This is a form of “participatory surveillance” (Albrechtslund, 2008), one that is not amenable to surveillance capitalism but is instead amenable to what might be called *surveillance democracy*: a wider negotiation of flows of vision and obfuscation than is allowed in CSM.

## Conclusion: Future ASM Work

As an admin from a dark web social network told me,

Facebook, Google, and Twitter have terrible privacy policies, we’re built around the idea of anonymity. They tend to monetize your experience (or eventually find a way to inject some form into it), we will never. They troll for data, we don’t, we try and protect it. You get the idea, we’re basically the antithesis of the likes of Facebook and Google.

Certainly, ASM are heterogeneous; there are many “antitheses” to Facebook, Google, and Twitter to be found among them. Just as what counts as “alternative media” is a matter of historical and local contexts, the same is true of ASM. Not all ASM will implement features such as refusing advertising, teaching users how to modify underlying software, or experimenting with flows of vision in the same way. There are competing ways to engage with complex socio-technical practices such as mediated identity formation, social interactions, software interfaces, and network topologies. Moreover, ASM may never reach the sheer size of the CSM they seek to challenge.

However, despite the challenges of exploring these heterogeneous systems, and despite the fact that ASM are not as popular as CSM, ASM are worthy of scholarly attention because they give us new ways to think about media, media infrastructures, and mediated social interactions. Alternative media theory is primed to explore these new ways of thinking and being. The important scholarship of Rodriguez, Atton, Boler, Pickard, Downing, and Couldry (among many others) has paved the way for considering how the infrastructural and organizational elements of ASM diverge from those of CSM. In particular, alternative media theory provides normative



lenses to consider issues such as site administration and design, specifically how those elements encourage or discourage users from being more involved in both media content production and site construction.

Here, I suggest that to further explore the articulations between alternative media, radical democracy, and software, alternative media theory would be wise to draw on new fields of scholarship, such as software studies, which have developed approaches to software- and network-mediated systems such as social media. Indeed, this work has already begun; Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch's (2013) collection *Unlike Us Reader: Understanding Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives* is a key work in this area.

Moreover, critical social media scholars should also pay attention to ASM. Like any alternative media, ASM are not ideal, and each specific system has specific power relations, cultures, and practices in need of critique. The critical concepts and techniques derived from years of analysis of sites such as Facebook can be taken up and applied to ASM. However, the difference between critiquing ASM and CSM may well be that ASM administrators will listen to critical social media scholars to try to improve their systems, while Facebook, Google, and Twitter will likely only listen to major shareholders and advertising networks.

Mixing these fields will advance scholarship on ASM. Indeed, this article only scratches the surface of this area of study. More work needs to be done to refine normative ideals and to test specific ASM sites against them.

Finally, I would also suggest that alternative media practitioners would benefit from ASM. CSM provide channels for messages, no doubt about it, and alternative media content producers use them all the time. But for alternative media practitioners and activists, the underlying technical and organizational problems of CSM should outweigh their reach. In the absence of alternatives, activists would simply have to accept the negatives of CSM while trying to take advantage of them. But alternatives exist and are thriving. So, how might activists use ASM to achieve their goals of political organizing, advocacy, or persuasion? What if *Democracy Now* recommended to its listeners and viewers that they talk about stories and debates on Diaspora instead of Facebook? What if The Yes Men's *Action Switchboard* offered links to Lorea? What if *Truthout* shared stories via Quitter? What if protest groups coordinate with Twister? The combined network effects of alternative media content producers, scholars, activists, and ASM systems would present a far more viable challenge to CSM—and indeed, more broadly, corporate mediated thinking—than any of them would alone.

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### Notes

1. For example, consider Facebook's use of the phrase "Ads Engineering"; see <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/Facebook-ads-engineering-perspective>
2. Due to an agreement I made with members of these sites, I will refrain from naming dark web social networking sites by name or revealing pseudonyms of the admins I quote here unless I have explicit permission to do so.

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## Appendix

### Alternative Social Media URLs

#### WWW sites

GNU social: <http://gnu.io/>

- This is the codebase for a large range of federated microblogging sites.

Independent Microblogging Service: <https://indy.im/>

- This is an example installation of GNU social.

Quitter: <https://quitter.se/>, <https://quitter.es/>, and <https://quitter.is/>

- Quitter is a specific version of the GNU social software, meant to closely mimic the interface of Twitter.

Twister: <http://twister.net.co/>

Lorea: <https://n-1.cc/g/lorea>

Diaspora: <https://diasporafoundation.org/>

- Like GNU social, Diaspora is a federated system. It is installed on a range of servers around the world.

rstat.us: <https://rstat.us>

- rstat.us is also a federated system.

#### Eepsites

These sites are only accessible with the i2prouter installed. Learn more about this software at <https://geti2p.net/en/>

ID3NT: [id3nt.i2p](http://id3nt.i2p)

Visibility: [visibility.i2p](http://visibility.i2p)

#### Onion sites

These sites can be accessed using Tor. Research for this article was drawn from interviews with several Tor hidden service-based social networking site users and administrators. With one exception, these interviews were conducted on condition that I do not publicize these sites.

Galaxy2: <http://w363zoq3ylux5rf5.onion/>