

# Introduction

## The Utopia of Independent Media: Independence, Working with Freedom and Working for Free

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*Independence:* The condition or quality of being independent; the fact of not depending on another; exemption from external control or support; freedom from subjection, or from the influence of others; individual liberty of thought or action. Rarely in bad sense: Want of subjection to rightful authority, insubordination.

*Independent:* Not depending upon the authority of another, not in a position of subordination or subjection; not subject to external control or rule; self-governing, autonomous, free.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

Media independence is central to the organization, make-up, working practices and output of media systems across the globe. This collection addresses the notion of independence as a sociopolitical, aesthetic, industrial and rhetorical ideal that has defined how the media operate in a range of national and international contexts. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests, independence is rarely perceived in a “bad sense,” stemming from Western notions of individual and political freedoms that have informed the development of media across a range of platforms: from the freedom of the press as the “fourth estate,” through to the introduction of competitors to break up the monopolies of state broadcasters and Hollywood studios, and more recently its influence on the development of digital culture via such foundational polemics as John Perry Barlow’s *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. For many media independence has come to mean working with freedom: from state control or interference, from monopoly, from market forces, as well as freedom to report, comment, create and document without fear of persecution. As this chapter argues, it is this rhetorical ideal that offers a utopian vision for a variety of independent media formations: impractical, unrealistic, impossible and yet, nonetheless, hopeful.

Just as there are many competing and often contradictory visions of utopia, independent media are envisioned and take shape in a variety of ways in a range of different sociopolitical contexts. Far from a stable

concept that informs all media systems, the notion of media independence has long been contested, forming a crucial tension point in the regulation, shape, size and role of the media around the globe. In the United Kingdom, where freedom of the press has long been established, such liberties have been called into question since 2011 when the phone-hacking scandal at the *News of the World* demonstrated that independence from regulation could push ethical, moral and legal boundaries to the breaking point (discussed by Stephen Jukes and Stuart Allan in this volume). Elsewhere, the meaning and value of independence is still being established. In the emergence of independent media during the Arab Spring, discussed by Gholam Khiabany in Chapter 12, the rush to proclaim the importance of citizen journalism by many inside and outside Iran, Tunisia and Egypt also led mainstream media to fail to verify these independent accounts, creating a tension with the fourth estate that was dramatically exposed by the *Gay Girl in Damascus* blog.<sup>1</sup> In China the establishment of “independent,” yet state-owned, television and news outlets discussed by Anthony Fung, Xiaoxiao Zhang and Luzhou Li in Chapter 11 demonstrates that whilst media independence might be a universal rhetorical goal, its meaning is capable of significant shifts. The dynamic and mutable nature of media independence is, perhaps, most apparent in the way the “New Economy” of the creative industries has increasingly embraced different notions of independence in the move toward outsourcing, freelance and precarious labor. Here, to be independent within the media is to derive autonomy, creative freedom and choice in one’s work in exchange for risk, flexibility and self-exploitation. As suggested by this book’s title, the notion of independence has therefore become a central paradox in global media systems: at once promising and proclaiming the importance of media freedoms whilst simultaneously exposing those who work within them to conditions of free labor.

In this chapter I argue that media independence must be understood as a utopian ideal, constructed across four sites—the sociopolitical, the industrial, the formal and the rhetorical or discursive. It is the final, rhetorical function of media independence that is the most crucial to the formation and role of independent media in the variety of contexts that are studied in this collection and that is the focus of my attention in the following section of this chapter. I argue that media independence functions as a utopian vision of the media’s role in society for those who regulate it, own it, work within it and even study it. This chapter then outlines how the terms “independent media” and “media independence” act as relational qualities before turning to each of the remaining three sites of concern: the sociopolitical, the industrial and the formal. The conclusion looks toward how the utopian promise of media independence might continue to structure our media experiences, and study, in the future.

Before turning to the question of how media independence functions as a utopian ideal, it is worth briefly outlining what we mean by the terms

“media independence” and “independent media,” along with how they can be considered at four interconnected sites: the industrial, the formal, the sociopolitical and the rhetorical.

Whilst, as the definitions from the *OED* at the head of this chapter suggest, the terms “independence” and “independent” have a necessary overlap, we can make some important distinctions in relation to media to clear the conceptual ground for this collection. The term “independent media” therefore refers to the specific, often industrial, media formation: for example, independent cinema, independent television, independent newspaper, independent games, independent music and so on. The term “Indie” is often used in this context to designate a particular set of companies, publications, bands, studios or presses as independent media (King 2013), as well as to demarcate a particular aesthetic style. But the term “independent media” is always a loaded one. We must ask by whom, and for what purpose, is it being mobilized? In turn, “media independence” speaks to the wider role that an independent media might play within society, particularly the functioning of a better, more democratic, diverse, just and open society. “Media independence” operates as a term in conjunction with independent media, functioning primarily in a rhetorical fashion to suggest the kinds of cultural goods that should be produced and the working conditions available to individuals. Here David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker’s notion of “good work” is illuminating for its ability to speak to the kinds of conditions that might be enjoyed by those in the media and creative industries, where working with freedom, dignity and autonomy is aligned with the potential to create cultural products of quality “and their potential contribution to the well-being of others, including (potentially) the common good” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011: 17). In this, its rhetorical and discursive function, media independence often operates as a utopian vision at both a macro and a micro level—tying together the industrial, sociopolitical and formal sites and contradictions at which it operates.

Independence may be present, or contested, at one or all of these sites:

- *The sociopolitical*: independent media are often taken as axiomatic of liberal democracies. In particular, a free press is seen as fundamental to the functioning of democratic societies, acting as a watchdog on the government of the day (discussed by Jukes and Allan). But independent media are further politicized in the way they often provide space for left-leaning critiques of capitalism and the market or issues related to identity politics, such as feminism. However, because independent media are not entirely free from the market they are not *always* radically political in the same sense, unlike alternative media;
- *The industrial*: most crucially such independence operates in terms of economic and regulatory arrangements. In this context independent media are those that operate with “freedom,” from (excessive) state

regulation or commercial imperatives. But independent media are also understood to operate in the creative spaces free from (in reality or rhetorically) the mainstream. This meaning of media independence is intimately connected to the freedoms offered to workers within the media and creative industries, whereby job security and roles within large organizations are exchanged for autonomy, choice and individual independence (Leadbetter and Oakley 1999). Here, working with freedom often merges into working for free;

- *The formal*: whereby independent media produce and mobilize an ensemble of particular aesthetic and taste codes. In this context, heavy emphasis is placed on the “authenticity” of the cultural goods produced (du Gay and Hall 1996). A prerequisite for understanding and appreciating such “authentic” media art forms, therefore, is cultural capital—with independent media often dealing in aesthetic forms that are challenging, innovative, radical and so forth. This cultural capital mobilizes the audiences and producers of independent media, in terms of not only what gets made but under what (industrial) conditions—with the emphasis often placed on creative freedom over and above monetary reward. Paradoxically, as Aymar Jean Christian’s work here and elsewhere suggests (2011), the catering to niche and often elite tastes can prove a profitable business strategy;
- *The rhetorical or discursive*: this register operates across the other three sites and is mobilized by producers, audiences, regulators, businesses and a range of vested interests in declaring this or that formation to be “independent media.” It is here we find media independence most often expressed as a utopian ideal within which a particular “independent media” might operate—for example, the free press, or “Indie” music or film. This ideal is often tinged with a moral or ethical dimension that, as Niki Strange, Andrea Medrado and myself suggest in Chapter 6, guides the business and working practices of companies and individuals within independent media.

These sites overlap and reinforce one another. Thus, David Hesmondhalgh has noted how the emergence of the term “independent” to designate a genre of music in the 1990s was highly significant. It was the first music genre to take its “name from the form of industrial organization behind it,” which at once underpinned its proponents’ claims that its aesthetics were “superior to other genres not only because it was more relevant or authentic to the youth who produced and consumed . . . because it was based on new relationships between creativity and commerce” (1999: 35). In turn, the genre drew on the historical associations of independence with punk activists who had “politicized [the concept] more radically,” with post-punk companies seeing “independents as a means of reconciling the commercial nature of pop with the goal of artistic autonomy for musicians” (ibid.).

As Hesmondhalgh and Leslie Meier contend in this volume, this complex aesthetic, sociopolitical, industrial and rhetorical history of independence within the music industry has made “independent music” perhaps the most important site of independence in the media.

Analyzing independence across these four sites in relation to any media system, however, produces a complex, and at times contradictory, understanding of the concept that demonstrates how different actors within a given media system enlist independence rhetorically and discursively to meet particular ideals. It is not, however, helpful to speak of an “independent audience” or “audience independence.” Thus whilst each chapter in this volume, to greater or lesser extents, shows a concern with the question of who the audience of independent media is, how it interacts with their producers and in what ways it shapes the meaning, value and potential of their independence, this book is not organized around a traditional media studies producer-text-audience triumvirate.

Independent media must, of necessity, have an audience. Moreover, and crucially, independent media must find the right kind of audience—one that is committed to the industrial, aesthetic, ethical and sociopolitical ideals of that media and that is enlisted in the discursive struggle over its meaning and value. This often links independent media to particular subcultures, such as gaming, discussed by Hector Postigo in Chapter 9, which demonstrates how independence is often elided with “alternative” media and audiences (discussed further later). Even though producers and audiences alike may cultivate an “indie sensibility” connected to particular forms of cultural and economic capital and away from the mainstream, this does not, of necessity, mean that the audience for independent media is always or only niche or marginal.

Indeed, discussions of “Indie” music have focused on its status as “opposition ‘within’ popular culture” (Hesmondhalgh 1999: 35). In the case of a free and independent press, the audience must of necessity be the mainstream in order for the sociopolitical role of journalism to speak to the collective and widespread citizenry in order to perform its role in democratic society. At the same time, and as a necessary consequence, however, the independence of the press generally does not extend to its industrial formation: with a free press still dependent on major media conglomerates that can call into question the editorial independence of any particular newspaper. Moreover at the formal level, even as a watchdog, the free press remain dependent on the very sources they promise to watch over for their content—government, big business, political and cultural elites and so on (Couldry and Curran 2003)—in order to bring audiences the stories that help attract them in large enough numbers to sustain newspapers’ business models. Fundamentally, media independence operates relationally—there is always the question of what any individual media formation is proclaiming to be independent of—and as an ideal that discursively shapes media systems around the globe.

## OF INDEPENDENTS, INDEPENDENCE AND UTOPIAS

Utopia means *nowhere* or *no-place*. . . . But it is not every nowhere that can call itself a utopia. . . . To count as a utopia, an imaginary place must be an expression of desire.

(Carey 1999: xi)

If this brief discussion outlines the distinction between media independence and independent media as well as our approach to these terms in this volume, we need to also understand how the former functions as a utopian ideal that the latter attempts to realize. Ruth Levitas, the utopian scholar, posits that utopias are “not just a dream to be enjoyed, but a vision to be pursued” (Levitas 2010: 1). In such visions, utopias become an “expression for a better way of living” (Levitas 2003: 4). More particularly, as Avery Gordon sets out in her survey of the term, the drive of utopianism can be understood as a desire to “create a better and good society . . . Based on a critical diagnosis of existing political and social arrangements and the values which underlie them, utopians always offer alternative ideals and claim these are realizable, often describing new institutional arrangements for doing so” (2005: 363). For those who champion the cause of independent media, these new institutional arrangements must include a media system that is more just, open, democratic and diverse: free from government interference and, at the same time, commercial pressures. Regardless of whether such transformations are achieved, media independence *matters*: as a utopian ideal it motivates and mobilizes people in a belief that, as Richard Dyer has put it, “things could be better” (1985: 222).

In articulating a vision of such absolute freedoms, the utopian—and impossible—nature of media independence becomes clear. As King concludes in this volume, “ultimately, of course, there is no such thing as *absolutely* true independence, in the sense of any form of cultural production that is one-hundred percent lacking in dependence on anything of any sort.” Indeed, independence is often at the heart of utopian ideals and their criticisms: Marx and Engels labeled the utopian socialists as naïve, remaining “suspicious of an individual’s or group’s ability to think and act *independently* of, and ultimately to transcend, the law-like dictates of the capitalist system” (Gordon 2005: 363, emphasis mine). Such a transcendental system was at the heart of John Perry Barlow’s vision for the future of cyberspace discussed by Daniel Kreiss in this volume, leading Kreiss to term it the “myth of independence.” Barlow’s *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace* promised the new digital citizens of the online world a commonweal outside the terrestrial, outmoded structures of state, capitalism and “old media.” Indeed, utopian visions often invoke the notion of community. Drawing on Ernest Bloch’s work on utopias as expressions of what is missing, Levitas suggests that the notion of community appealed to is always ambiguous—sometimes oppositional, alternative or defensive. But “in general,

the language of communitarianism involves a suppression of power relations within so-called communities” (2000: 190–193).

Issues of power, and their ideological and economic underpinnings, are therefore often at stake in the utopian visions of community set out for new forms of independent media. Thus, in this volume, Aymar Jean Christian’s chapter points to the way the emergence and celebration of an online, DIY community of independent TV producers operating outside of the mainstream disguises the imbalance of power between creatives within this community, including the exploitation of free labor in the service of fulfilling community ideals of independence. Thomas Poell and José van Dijck’s examination of the rise of social news, premised on “open development” and “communal evaluation,” highlights how such rhetoric serves to suppress the power of algorithms—and the corporations who own them—that increasingly shape journalistic values and processes. Equally, in Chapter 12 Gholam Khiabany sets out how the ideal of a social media revolution in Iran was one perpetuated by Western media in a spirit of global community and validation of the community of citizen-journalists represented by Iranian bloggers through so-called technologies of freedom (Sola Pool 1983). But the slogan “You are the media” was one that downplayed questions of “who gets noticed, who gets to speak, and who is allowed to ‘represent’ the public.” Finally, Hector Postigo’s contribution notes how not all users within an online community are equal, with leading video game “directors” having the power to shape the aesthetic norms—and economic rewards that follow—of the community. The utopias called forth in relation to particular instances of independent media, therefore, are always an ideal that expresses particular ideological, economic, cultural and aesthetic interests whilst concealing others.

Understanding media independence as a utopian vision remains helpful because it produces real-world consequences, shaping media systems and the lives of those working within them. For example, in his essay for this volume James Rodgers explores the way Russia’s political independence during the 1990s shaped and reshaped not only the economic arrangements for independent newspapers and broadcast outlets, but also a generation of journalists’ approach to news reportage and their work in Russian media. At the time of writing, the ongoing conflict between the Ukraine and Russia over Chechnyan independence—told through the claims to independence of both countries’ newspapers as well as wider Western media—demonstrates why such utopian visions of independence matter. As the emerging crisis in Ukraine vividly demonstrates, independence can prove a concept equally unstable and changeable in both political and media spheres.

In this sense the utopia of media independence is often premised on what Marxist utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch argued was the ability of such visions to fill in “what is perceived to be missing” (Bloch 1986). In such visions, Bloch argues, utopias function as a form of hope that mobilizes action. Here the sociopolitical function of independent media is to the fore,

such as in the range of independent voices harnessed by Barack Obama's social media campaign in 2008 (Kreiss 2012), or in the IndyMedia Collective's (discussed further later) attempt to bring about direct change on a range of political issues from climate change to the financial crisis. In turn, therefore, Bloch's description of utopia as a vision that promises to fulfill that which is perceived to be missing helps understand the way media independence often functions as an argument and a call to action, to create space for new, diverse and divergent voices within a given media system. Thus in Chapter 3, I explore how the call for—and rise of—independent television in Britain can be understood as a direct response to a perceived need for more varied voices that reflect an increasingly multicultural Britain populated by minorities of race, ethnicity and sexuality that require on- and off-screen representation by and in the UK television industry.

More widely the growing ubiquity of digital media in terms of platforms and tools has led to a rise of new voices within the media stream, which has often been understood as offering new forms of independent media (discussed by Khiabany, Christian, Postigo, Poell and van Dijck in this volume). Recognizing the role hope plays in shaping media systems, therefore, is a challenge we need to take up in understanding how media independence functions at both a micro and macro level. Hope, as Helen Kennedy concludes in her study of ethics and values in Web design, is “a strategic as well as an empirical necessity, because it suggests the possibility of agency, and of action which is not in the service of capital” (2012: 216). Thus, as Fung, Zhang and Li hope in their entry to this volume, the “passionate and educated media personnel” working in Chinese television who believe in “a greater degree of media freedom . . . might not be influential now. But they will be in times to come.”

Indeed, the utopian visions of media independence are far from settled. Utopia is, after all, a flexible concept that is “conceptually as well as substantively contested” (Levitas 2000: 5). Independent media themselves act as sites of conflict over different values and levels of independence: industrially, politically, formally or rhetorically. Thus within any given media platform there may be a range of different movements, studios, labels, companies or individual actors laying claim to be “independent media” or, as discussed later, exhibiting different levels of independence.

However, as a utopian vision that promises artistic freedom and independence from commercial pressures, media independence is almost always in crises or compromise. This may be part of wider social shifts marked by neoliberalism and a turn away from a concern with collective well-being, replaced with a focus on individualism. Thus Zygmunt Bauman has applied his (over-used) notion of liquid modernity to analyze utopian aspirations in the age of neoliberalism to suggest they have become “imagination privatized,” in which “happiness has become a *private affair*; and a matter for *here and now*. The happiness of others is no more . . . a condition of one's own felicity” (Bauman 2003: 12–14). But the crisis of media independence may also be because of

some of the inherent contradictions found in aesthetic notions of independent media as expressions of “authentic” culture. Thus Kurt Cobain’s suicide note

began by discussing his inability to square Nirvana’s vast commercial success with what he called the “ethics involved with independence” . . . it was impossible for an “alternative” rock band to become as successful as Nirvana had without losing something important in the process.  
(Petridis 2014)

Cobain’s suicide was, to an extent, indicative of the wider problematic: funding truly independent media away from either the market or the state makes independent media an inherently precarious enterprise, particularly if a large audience is sought. Moreover, as independent artists or movements achieve recognition and a larger audience, their perceived independence—from the mainstream—is often compromised. Here the label “sellout” functions to deride and devalue those who fail to reach or maintain the utopian ideal of media independence (see Hesmondhalgh and Meier’s contribution to this volume). But media rarely operate, or should be understood, in such black and white terms.

The challenge, for both makers of independent media and scholars, is to reconcile this process of crises and compromise with the utopian visions of media independence. Here we can often see that independent media exist—and produce—new hybrid arrangements that offer genuine—if not absolute—alternatives to the mainstream. Thus independent media can often be understood in terms of hybridity across their industrial, sociopolitical and formal structures. For example, Fung, Zhang and Li’s chapter discusses Chinese independent television in terms of new economic and regulatory arrangements between the state and the market, whilst Hector Postigo demonstrates how independence can be negotiated between individual and platform owner; or as Strange, myself and Medrado explore, between profit and public service. Whilst it is easy to see these hybrid arrangements as irrevocable compromises in the pursuit of media independence—as Cobain arguably did—these hybrid arrangements can also be understood to help independent media balance the financial and regulatory pressures pragmatically with the individual and creative freedoms sought.

Perhaps, then, more than anything else media independence should be understood in the utopian terms as originally proposed by Thomas More: “a good, but non-existent and therefore impossible society” (quoted in Levitas 2010: 2). As a utopian ideal, media independence must remain either permanently out of reach or ultimately compromised. This collection, however, suggests that not only can these compromises be productive of new hybrid arrangements that do produce “good work,” aimed at creating a better society, but also that an approach to utopia that recognizes it as “the expression of desire for a better way of being” is itself productive (ibid.: 9). Thus whilst how media independence functions and what independent

media are is subject to significant variation and contestation in the chapters that follow, I suggest that the utopian ideal remains present throughout as a motivating factor and discursive structure that influences media systems, and the individuals who work within them, around the globe. As Levitas explains: “whatever we think of particular utopias, we learn a lot about the experience of living under any set of conditions by reflecting upon the desire which those conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled” (ibid.).

## A RELATIONAL QUALITY: INDEPENDENT OF . . .

As King argues in this volume, “‘independent’ is always a relational term—implying independent *of* something, more or less specific—it is also often a *relative* quality rather than one that entails absolute or clear-cut distinctions between one thing and another.” This collection seeks to understand independent media in these relative terms—with authors offering a range of perspective on the way independent media function in particular industrial, sociopolitical, aesthetic and rhetorical spaces. The primary relation against which independent media are set is “the mainstream.” The notion of independence is, in turn, often constructed in terms of binaries, most obviously to not be dependent (OED). But a series of further oppositions are also in play, as set out in Table 1:

*Table 1*

Independent	Dependent
Niche	Mainstream
Authentic	Fake/Commercial
High culture	Mass culture
Radical	Popular
Libertarian	Regulated
Free market	Monopoly
Nonprofit	Free market
Free	Controlled
Left wing	Conservative
Neoliberal	State
Small scale	Media conglomerate
Craft	Industrial
Ethical	Exploitative
Low budget	High budget
Credible	“Sellout”
Innovative/Experimental	Formatted/Predictable
Subculture	Dominant

Whilst media may rarely operate in such black and white terms, these binaries often shape the utopian ideals of media independence. Some of these oppositions coalesce to create powerful ideological rhetorical arguments for the need, role and scope for independent media. An independent press is, perhaps, the most famous and widely understood example of independent media—being necessary to act as a watchdog on the government of the day (see Jukes and Allan in this volume). It is premised on mobilizing notions of freedom, the free market, libertarianism and authenticity (the journalistic truth) against control, monopoly, regulation, the state and the inauthentic (propaganda).

However, not all these oppositions are mobilized in each particular context and, indeed, some of these binaries are not only contradictory, but also oscillate according to what kinds of independence are being declared. Thus whilst many independent media formations and movements are radical *and* left wing, this is not a necessary consequence of independence: independent press can be of left- or right-wing persuasion; independent and niche film movements circulate around fundamentalist religious ideals as much as they do around progressive sensibilities. Equally, Daniel Kreiss demonstrates in this volume that the “New Communalists” of early “cyberspace” collected around a vision of the Internet as a space free and independent from government control, but perfectly in hock with a neo-right, neoliberal agenda. Moreover, independence might differ in degree and kind across the four sites discussed earlier. Thus, whilst a strong rhetoric of independence can be found in American cinema, there is much lower formal and industrial independence found in those films generally termed “Indie” (King 2014). As Janet Staiger astutely concludes in her analysis of the term “independent cinema,” practices independent to the mainstream are not “*in themselves* [a] guarantee that alternative is better,” and can often reinforce dominant ideologies and hegemony (2013: 25). These oscillating binaries, therefore, have much to do with not only by whom the notion of media independence is mobilized, but also the fact that is not just the mainstream against which independent media are defined. Here we need to understand that a third term is in play in the way independent media are defined in relation to: “alternative media.”

We might conceive independent media as existing on a continuum between mainstream and alternative, operating on a sliding scale between dependence and independence, freedom and control, nonprofit and free market, center and margin: often invoking hybrid arrangements in order to continue to operate in the space between these other media sources.

Alternative Media ————— Independent Media ————— Mainstream

The literature on alternative media tends to concentrate on the industrial and sociopolitical. But as discussed earlier, these overlap with issues of rhetorical and aesthetic independence. This is perhaps most evident in the case of music and film, where “alternative” and “independent” are sometimes

used interchangeably (Newman 2009) to designate a particular aesthetic style that is closely connected to a specific industrial organization of companies operating outside of the mainstream. Here the status of alternative media as a challenge to the mainstream by producing counter-hegemonic works is especially important for the way such media speak to individual subcultures. For the sake of clarity of argument, this notion of alternative and the link to subcultures is discussed in relation to aesthetics further later. For now, I want to concentrate on issues of power and the rhetorical goals and ideals of alternative media wrapped in questions of sociopolitical and industrial independence.

Nick Couldry and James Curran define alternative media as “media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take in different locations” (2003: 7). In contrast to independent media, alternative media tend to be leftist, if not socialist, in orientation and predominantly take the form of initiatives in journalism or informing and mobilizing a political public: they are inherently participatory, grassroots, counter-hegemonic, nonhierarchical, one-to-one, small scale and on the margins. Particularly through digital tools and technologies, alternative media—in their utopian visions—promise to provide marginalized and disenfranchised groups with a platform and a voice. Here there is a close link between independence and diversity, discussed further in Chapter 3. In this sense, whilst alternative media promise participation *through* the media, independent media are still more likely to conform to promoting participation *in* the media (Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier 2007: 11). That is, independent media tend to be professional—although perhaps not exclusively so—and dictate the terms on which non-professionals have access to the platform. This can mean that independent media operate with less flexible industrial and formal structures—for example, privileging particular sources within a news bulletin—which, to many, can compromise (in a negative sense) the sociopolitical power of independent media. However, it can also mean that alternative media are reliant on free labor to an even greater extent than the fragile economies of independent media (Hesmondhalgh 1999). As Nick Couldry notes, production must happen in people’s spare time—restricting access to those with the resources available to give up time in this way (2003: 47). This is an issue that shall be returned to later.

From a social-reforming, liberal or social democratic point of view, alternative media are necessary because, as Richard Johnson has argued in his history of the term “alternative,” “it is not enough . . . to criticise or to protest; we must develop alternatives . . . the failure to do so is the characteristic flaw of the ‘impossible’ left and its intellectuals” (2005: 4). In such a view, the compromises independent media make in their utopian visions of transforming society into a more just and open system in order to secure audiences, funding and revenue, therefore, are failures to think outside that system: a “sellout,” if not a cop out. In turn, the way independent

media function within capitalism and current political arrangements—even if in hybrid form—means they operate more within hegemony rather than against it. For avowed supporters of alternative media, the compromises of independent media are indicative of the mantra “There Is No Alternative (TINA),” which came to the fore in the neoliberal economics of the 1980s in the United States and Europe. Thus, as Johnson demonstrates, “alternative” marks the need for a political extension beyond the ruling elite, usually referring to better public policies (*ibid.*). In the context of the media, Couldry and Curran argue it is insufficient for the (independent) media to be there solely “to guard us against the overweening influence of other forms of power (especially government).” Rather, “media power is itself part of what power watchers need to watch” (2003: 4). In turn, such a view necessitates that another form of media must exist to keep a check on the (mainstream) media itself: alternative media.

To better understand the relationship between independent and alternative media it is worth briefly exploring one of the most frequently cited examples of alternative media: the IndyMedia collective (IMC) (Couldry 2003; Milioni 2009; Platon and Deuze 2003). Emerging in 1999–2000 out of coverage of protest movements in Seattle against the World Trade Organization and in Washington against the World Bank and International Monetary Funds, the IMC has avowedly socialist and anarchist beginnings. Indeed, citing Atton’s work, Christian Fuchs has noted that “alternative media studies are strongly connected to Anarchist perspectives” (2010: 174). Milioni (2009) argues there are three functional differences between the IndyMedia model and mainstream journalism. First, the exemplary function, which concerns the structural, ethical and normative characteristics of IndyMedia production—such as its explicitly political character, its editorial independence from state or commerce, its nonhierarchical, non-professional news gathering structure and the consequential promotion of diverse voices. Second, a competitive function, which might include using and commenting on mainstream news. Third, a supplementary function, “which allows users to reframe news stories and check on the authenticity and objectivity of the media, thus limiting their [mainstream media’s] power over the construction of reality” (2009: 419–420). The IMC thus describes itself as a nonhierarchical collection of organizations and journalists “offering grassroots, non-corporate coverage . . . [as] a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth” (IMC n.d.).

Such a radical critique of not just the mainstream media, but also independent media, however, risks a precarious position: one in which it is possible for media to work with freedom of expression in terms of state regulation, as well as freedom from the demands of profit, but at the expense of not being heard or paid. The position of alternative media is, therefore, perhaps an even more utopian and impossible vision than that of independent media. Thus the FAQ page for the IndyMedia collective espouses an

ideal form of independence in response to the question “of what are you ‘independent?’”

No corporation owns Indymedia, no government manages the organization, no single donor finances the project. Indymedia is not the mouthpiece of any political party or organization. . . . Anyone may participate in Indymedia organizing and anyone may post to the Indymedia newswires.

To return to the notion of hope within such utopias, it is instructive to note the way alternative has been enlisted by a range of sociopolitical movements to promote a way of “‘Living differently’—more co-operatively, less competitively or hierarchically for example—[which] has been seen as expressing hope for the future, but also as a kind of direct action” (Johnson 2005: 5). Alternative media often operate with such direct causes, such as the IndyMedia collective, seeking to effect sociopolitical change from a radical, alternative, often Socialist perspective (Hesmondhalgh 1997).

However, taken to the extreme of their own logic of independence, such political projects demonstrate the ultimate futility of the utopian vision of alternative media. Sara Platon and Mark Deuze have argued that whilst IMC’s independence from commercial, corporate and government interests is to the fore, “they are not independent in the strictest sense of the word. Often the code and content of the news are made and regulated by people that are, in one way or another, affiliated with many movements providing their own content” (2003: 338). Even in such avowedly radical and anti-mainstream practices such as IndyMedia, therefore, independence might remain a myth.

As Christian Fuchs has admitted, “alternative media studies . . . tend to idealize small-scale production and tend to neglect orientation towards the political public” (2010: 174). Similarly Bailey, Cammaerts, Carpentier suggest that “fighting a war of position on numerous fronts has left the alternative media movement in a rather problematic, vulnerable and isolated position” (2007: 31). By privileging small-scale, local organization, alternative media are often trapped in an economic dilemma that can force the “the adoption of commercial media formats in their efforts to survive” (2007: 15): a compromise frequently equated with failure, or a loss of the radical, alternative voice once promised. That is, the “sellout.”

The problem for alternative media is to always be on the margins—and thus not be heard. As Tanja Dreher argues, media power involves not only the power to speak, but also to listen—and ignore:

we might also analyze the refusal to listen on the part of the dominant as active, as a refusal to quiet the inner voice or to open up a possibility of active engagement with the other . . . Media power might entail the privilege of choosing to listen or not, the power to enter into dialogue or not, to seek to comprehend the other or not.

(Dreher 2010: 100–101)

Consequently, alternative media's reliance on community volunteerism, donations and gifts ensures they remain relatively small, operating at the margins of the global media ecology and society more generally. In contrast, independent media achieve greater reach and impact through compromise and the development of hybrid arrangements to ensure larger audiences and relative economic stability—although, as discussed later, this does not prevent them from existing in a state of near perpetual (financial) crisis. This is not to suggest that independent media are necessarily any less of a utopian ideal than that of alternative media, but rather to stress the way compromise, challenge and change are met is different in each of these sectors and their study. In the following section, I turn to the sociopolitical terrain of independent media to set out why independence matters—even if the utopian vision is invariably compromised.

### WHY INDEPENDENCE MATTERS: THE SOCIO-POLITICS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA

If, as I suggested earlier, the utopian function of media independence posits it as an unrealizable idyll, this has not prevented it from having real impact on the way media operate in societies around the world. The term “independence” calls up an imaginarié of ideals, particularly sociopolitical ones, which have shaped media systems around the world: most obviously, and famously, the American *Declaration of Independence*, where the first amendment has been taken to enshrine a free and independent press (Schudson 2002). More widely, and more recently, independent media—or at least the call for such media—has been part of the processes of decolonization of many former “subject nations” in Africa and Asia, as well as the movement away from autocracies and totalitarian regimes, in South America, Asia and Eastern Europe.

The utopian notion of media independence is nonetheless a vision that inspires action. In this light, the rhetorical and discursive level of media independence can be seen as intimately connected to the sociopolitical: independent media have been seen as crucial to these political movements. Francis Kasoma has argued, writing amidst the turbulence of African countries' emerging independence from their colonial masters during the 1990s, “there is a causal linkage between a free press and democracy” (Kasoma 1995: 539). Thus, any search for “media independence” in global newswires finds a continuing concern with the state of the free press in emerging democracies: for example, in June 2013 an international delegation from the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers and the Ethical Journalism Network went to Myanmar to call for greater reform to enable media independence (*States News Service*, June 7, 2013). In 2012–2013 alone, *BBC Monitoring International Reports* detailed calls for or concerns over independent media in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Tunisia, Bulgaria, Turkey,

Macedonia, South Korea, Thailand, Pakistan, Syria and Iran. The previous year, 2011, Reporters Without Borders named “Crackdown” as the word of the year, declaring, “Never have acts of censorship and physical attacks on journalists seemed so numerous. The equation is simple: the absence or suppression of civil liberties leads necessarily to the suppression of media freedom” (BBC 2012).

In 2013 Freedom House’s *Freedom of the Press Report*, which measures press freedom in terms of legal, political and economic environment, posited that just 32 percent of nations had a “free press” (Deutsch-Karlekar and Dunham 2013). Whilst all of Western Europe and North America’s press were included in this figure, their report surmised that in population terms this meant that just 13 percent of the world’s population experienced a free press, with 45 percent found to be living under conditions defined as “not free.” In those countries deemed “the worst of the worst,” including North Korea, Belarus, Turkmenistan, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea and Iran, “independent media are either nonexistent or barely able to operate, the press acts as a mouthpiece for the regime, citizens’ access to unbiased information is severely limited, and dissent is crushed through imprisonment, torture, and other forms of repression” (ibid.: 4). Yet the relationship between independent media and democracy is not always so straightforward or one way. James Rodgers’s chapter in this volume demonstrates that independent media as a replacement for state-run monopolies is no guarantee of politically unbiased reporting—with mutually advantageous relationships emerging in post-Soviet Russia that benefited both journalists and the reigning government as preferable to a return to communism.

More widely than the freedom of the press that is at stake in the earlier discussion, and to return to the theme of utopia, media independence might matter in terms of the kind of society we (want to) live in. Charles Leadbetter and Kate Oakley’s survey of the emergence of the “new independents” in Britain’s creative economy concludes that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between democracy and an independent creative sector that benefits both:

Creative industries thrive in an environment that promotes openness, free speech, diversity and expression. Our [Britain’s] capacity to breed businesses based on creative independent thought is intimately linked, in the long run, to the strength of our democratic traditions of self-governance and freedom of speech. That is why these industries are vital not just for jobs and growth but to the quality of our lives as citizens as well.

(1999: 49)

However, whilst Leadbetter and Oakley may trace an indelible link between independent media and democracy, the story of liberalizing authoritarian states’ control of the media in favor of a more free press has not

always resulted in a more democratic or broad-based public sphere. Thus whilst Kasoma's account in the mid-1990s may have welcomed commercial media as an independent voice compared to the mouthpieces of state-controlled radio, television and press, Chin-Chuan Lee's work on Taiwan (2003) has shown that liberalizing the communications and media market may diminish the prospects for democratic change. Here, global media corporations—particularly Rupert Murdoch's Star TV—can dominate the market, offering little space for counter-hegemonic voices that are splintered into increasingly marginal spaces.

Thus far I have been concerned to discuss the role of media independence at the macro level. However, beyond the hope for a better society that might be created through an independent media, the notion of freedom promised by media independence has been held up as an idyll for the individual in relationship to their working lives, particularly in creative industries. As Angela McRobbie has argued:

In fields like film-making or fashion design there is a euphoric sense among practitioners of by-passing tradition, pre-empting conscription into the dullness of 9–5 and evading the constraints of institutional processes. There is a utopian thread embedded in this wholehearted attempt to make-over the world of work into something closer to a life of enthusiasm and enjoyment.

(2002: 521)

However, in this new utopia, McRobbie suggests, there has actually been a move away from what she terms “independent work.” Tracing the decline of the independent fashion scene—replaced by the high street behemoths and the neoliberal drift away from support for the arts and crafts—there has been a “shift from there being ‘independent work’” to freelance work, accompanied by a “shift in the balance of power from a social ‘milieu of innovation’ to a world of individual ‘projects’” (2002: 524). Although “independent work” has not been a concept widely taken up by media and cultural studies (although there is a burgeoning literature on the subject in education), the shift that McRobbie points to has been explored through work on precarious, self-exploitation and freelance labor in what Andrew Ross has termed “the new economy,” of which the creative industries have been emblematic (2004). Here the role of work is intimately linked to autonomy and personal freedom.

For its celebrants, the new economy's freedoms are easily aligned with the perceived benefits and utopias of independence. As Mark Deuze argues:

The worker of today must become an enterprise of her own: perfectly adept at managing herself, unlearning old skills whilst reflexively adapting to new demands, preferring individual independence and autonomy over the relative stability of a life-long work style.

(Deuze, quoted in Kennedy 2012: 6)

Autonomy bleeds seamlessly into the ideal of independence at a micro level. This “creative class,” as Richard Florida terms them (2003), are flexible, self-enterprising citizens on whom the future of creative industries and national economies relies (Hartley 2005).

But such autonomy is not without risk. As Leadbetter and Oakley admit:

Life as an Independent is not nirvana, nor even necessarily a recipe for making money. It can provide choice, autonomy and satisfaction but it also involves constant uncertainty, insecurity and change.

(1999: 15)

For other scholars, therefore, the promise of working with freedom is too easily elided with the need to work for free. Andrew Ross’s classic formulation of the dilemma posits that with the freedoms of the new economy comes the drive for “employees’ free-est thoughts and impulses in the service of salaried time” (Ross 2004: 17–19). In such a neoliberal economy the distinction between work and leisure, office and home is elided so that, as Nikolas Rose argues, work has been redefined as “a capacity for self-realisation which can be obtained only through individual activity” (1999: 145).

More recently, work by scholars such as David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2011), David Lee (2012), Mark Banks (2006) and others has provided a more nuanced account of work within the creative industries that attempts to balance the positive aspects of freedom and autonomy found in such work with the way it can be exploited as a pool of free labor. As Gholam Khiabany argues in this volume, the post-Foucauldian and autonomist-Marxist critiques of the cultural industries’ celebrants focus too overwhelmingly on the question of “working for free.” In so doing, they ignore “the varying composition of work, production, and control” experienced by those within the media industries—*independent and otherwise*. Moreover, as my own chapter with Niki Strange and Andrea Medrado demonstrates, paying attention to the operation of a “moral economy” can help us understand how those within independent media negotiate the risks of working with freedom against the pressure to work for free by focusing on how the drive for independence can manifest itself in the production and experience of “good work.”

But what remains evident from these debates is that independent media—and work within them—are inherently precarious: they attempt to balance the ethical, aesthetic, sociopolitical drives of independence with the economic realities of media production. Thus there is an important limit to the rhetorical and discursive calls for freedom in understandings of media independence to bear in mind: a free press, or creative freedom, does not equate to free media—as in free beer. The economics and industrial structures of independent media mean companies and individuals operating within the sector must turn a profit—and this can bring with it crises and compromises in ethics, aesthetics and economics.

## INDEPENDENT MEDIA INDUSTRIES: CRISIS, COMPROMISE AND HYBRIDITY

Ostensibly “independent media” would have no ties with media conglomerates, the state or other mainstream sources of funding. As Michael Newman argues, extrapolating from independent cinema,

indie culture . . . derives its identity from challenging the mainstream. This challenge is figured first of all from an economic distinction between modes of production. “Indie” connotes small-scale, personal, artistic, and creative; “mainstream” implies a large-scale commercial media industry that values money more than art.

(2009: 16)

As Newman goes on, however, the term “indie” has come to “far exceed the literal designation of media product that are made independent of major firms” (*ibid.*). I hoped to have demonstrated, however, such a position remains a utopian goal rather than a reality, and to exclude all those companies and individuals who have any such economic or industrial ties would risk too marginalizing an approach to “independent media.” Indeed, this is the problem of alternative media formations I outlined earlier. For example, Jennifer Waits’s study of U.S. college radio in the late 1990s demonstrated how a policy to bar music from any artist who had any connect with major label distribution meant that resident DJs tied themselves in knots over their playlists. In particular, as “alternative” bands like Nirvana became increasingly mainstream, what was permissible as “Indie” became an ever-decreasing selection of music (2007).

Another way to understand the utopian visions of media independence, then, is to recognize that—almost as a necessary consequence of their refusal to occupy the margins of radically alternative media—independent media are in a nearly perpetual state of crises. Such crises may be economic—in terms of lack of funding as well as ethical or sociopolitical judgments over sources of funding—or formal—in terms of the kinds of cultural goods produced and their appeal to an (economically viable) audience. As Geoff King has argued elsewhere, independent cinema—as with other media—can often be considered as simultaneously in crisis and renewal. However, “the two positions are mutually implicated rather than simply opposed,” so that whilst such cinema might appear “in a state of close-to-permanent crises of one kind or another,” it also retains “some potential either to continue to thrive . . . or to undergo a revival at some point in the future” (2013: 45).

Tim Wu suggests this movement between crisis and renewal is characterized by a shift from “open to closed” media systems. Terming this process “the cycle,” Wu argues that the development of almost all media can be understood as a shift from state-owned monopoly, to competition, to oligopoly or commercial monopoly. Whilst Wu’s argument is perhaps too totalizing

an account of how media systems develop and undergo transformation, it usefully returns our attention to the utopian role media independence has in shaping the industrial organization of media. Without directly invoking the notion of utopia, Wu's argument is suggestive of the role that hope plays in media histories: "each new communications technology inspires dreams of a better society, new forms of expression, alternative types of journalism. Yet each . . . eventually reveals its flaws, kinks and limitations" to consumers, industry and regulators alike (2010).

Whilst the utopian phase often promises independent media, via a process of deregulation and the promotion of the free market in opposition to state-run media, Wu suggests, at a later point a new monopoly or oligopoly will be permitted in the name of creating a more "orderly and efficient regime for the betterment of all users" (*ibid.*). He uses the story of the American telephone industry to exemplify this. During the early 1900s hundreds of independent firms had blossomed after the expiration of the monopoly based on Bell's patent in 1894. However, competition did not bring a better system as variable line services and disconnected local networks proved unprofitable for businesses and unreliable for customers. In turn, a new state-sanctioned commercial monopoly emerged that enabled the Bell Company to return to a position of total market dominance in exchange for undertaking a duty to carry all competitors' services on its networks. As Wu explains, CEO of the Bell Company Henry Vail sacrificed greater profits for economic security in the moral belief that competition meant "strife, industrial warfare [and] contention, [which were] giving American business a bad name." Such decisions are arguably at the heart of how individuals and companies navigate the compromises necessary to turn a profit whilst simultaneously pursuing the utopian desire for independence (see Chapter 6 in this volume).

Wu's story of the U.S. telecommunications network exemplifies how the ideal of independent media can structure an industry, often producing a process whereby companies, and individuals within them, experience crisis, compromise and renewal—often via the creation of new hybrid arrangements. Thus if the Bell Company's state-sanctioned monopoly seemed unique at the time, it is no longer alone in the kinds of arrangements that typify different forms of independent media. In the United Kingdom, the development of television has been shaped by the ideal of independence, including the original monopoly granted to the BBC in the name of freedom from government interference. As I explore in Chapter 3, the founding role of independence in British broadcasting has brought both new hybrid arrangements—whereby public service and profit are no longer antithetical to one another—as well as a more problematic elision between independence and independents. In China, independent television has another meaning again—producing a system in which privately operated but state-owned companies and networks balance the demands of the political regime with the desire for more oppositional programming. As Anthony Fung, Xiaoxiao Zhang and Luzhou Li explore in this volume, independent television in China must perform a

delicate balancing act between the performance of subservience, editorial freedom and economic returns. Understanding independence as a relational term, therefore, must include acknowledging the hybrid arrangements and compromises that allow independent media to continue to function as businesses—for, as the chapters in Part II of this collection suggest, the economic and creative livelihood and freedoms of those working in independent media remain at stake.

### FORMAL INDEPENDENCE: AUTHENTIC AESTHETICS, TASTE AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

As King is careful to point out, this process of crisis and renewal is not simply a matter of economic or industrial independence, but relates to the formal as well (2013). Here independent media's claims to "authenticity" are understood in equally utopian terms as opposition to the mainstream, mass and commercial: grassroots media with a "do-it-yourself aesthetic at the lower-budget end of the scale . . . [coupled with] a strong tendency to distrust of anything that achieves wider popularity . . . that this must be the result of 'selling out' or diluting the basic principles of the indie aesthetic in some way" (ibid.: 48). For many the line between independence and dependence is a thin one—with many "independent" companies reliant on relationships with the mainstream that compromise their "indie" credentials. As McRobbie noted of the UK fashion industry, "by the end of the 1990s the only way to be 'independent' was to be 'dependent' on Kookai, Debenhams, Top Shop. Indeed the only way fashion design could survive was to sign up with a bigger company and more or less relinquish 'creative independence'" (2002: 521). McRobbie's analysis equates the mainstream and commercial with "tainting" the independent aesthetic that, as discussed later, is closely associated with authenticity, thus reducing the kinds of innovation and creativity she found in her study. For McRobbie, as with others, such compromises and hybrid arrangements undermine the role of independents in creating alternative visions.

But this simply raises the utopian specter again that such a vision is never achievable. In previous work on "Indie" music, David Hesmondhalgh has demonstrated how a "pure" aesthetic, let alone economic, ethos of such music was a fallacy (1997; 1999). As he suggests, "there is now a huge amount of cultural production taking place on the boundaries between sub-fields of mass and restricted production" (2006: 222). Aesthetics are therefore closely linked to the industrial formation discussed earlier, especially in terms of the autonomy of individuals to "work with freedom": "creative autonomy from commercial restraint is a theme which has often been used to mystify artistic production by making the isolated genius the hero of cultural myth" (Hesmondhalgh 1999: 35). As Michael Newman explains, in "independent music and movies, the ideal of separation is most often

figured as autonomy, as the power artists retain to control their creative process. Autonomy, in turn, is seen as a guarantee of authenticity” (2009: 19). Authenticity, in turn, functions as a guarantor of the value of independent media’s outputs for audiences in opposition to the mainstream. Thus, to return to the binaries set out earlier in this chapter, Michelle Wallace “traces how the definition of authenticity relies upon being over-layered by other binaries of value: serious/trivial, authentic/commodified, natural/artificial” (paraphrased in Skeggs 2004: 105).

At a formal level, the result of such binaries is that independent cultural products have often been associated with a low-budget aesthetic. As Hesmondhalgh notes, authenticity in independent music has been closely associated with working-class culture and a punk, do-it-yourself attitude (1997; 1999). The emphasis on self-representation and DIY cultures in independent media brings independent media in close proximity to their audiences. Here the opposition to the mainstream of such independent media is particularly apparent in the way—discursively—they are enlisted by and for subcultures as means of challenging the dominant aesthetics and socio-politics of the center. In turn, we can understand a further bleeding of the goals of independence with those of alternative media—whereby both share a “rejection of the production values of the ‘professional’ working in mainstream media,” in the hope that a space will be created for greater “diversity of formats and genres and . . . experimentation with content and form” (Bailey et al. 2007: 20). Diversity of producers in independent media—as I explore in Chapter 3 on British television—often becomes synonymous with the goal of experimentation in diversity of form, with such media often seen as a “breeding ground for innovation,” defined not only in opposition to the mainstream, but also constantly under threat of co-option by it (*ibid.*).

If financial bankruptcy is always a risk of the creative freedoms of independent media, then co-option by the mainstream represents its polar (financial) opposite: gaining financial stability but losing the artistic credibility of authenticity—that is, “selling out.” But authenticity can be understood as a paradoxical position here, particularly as it is related to the taste cultures of independent media. On the one hand, authenticity can signify artistic value—often associated with cultural elites (discussed further later)—and on the other, it can connote a connection to working-class cultures that are simultaneously devalued as sites of popular, mass entertainment consumption, at the same time as they are venerated as embodiments of preindustrial folk culture. As Beverley Skeggs suggests, the association of authenticity with working-class cultures can easily be treated as “exchange value to others who want to attach authenticity to themselves and to those who require boundary markers to signify their own propriety”: that is, the middle classes (2004: 107). As Skeggs explains, working-class culture becomes:

fixed, but plundered . . . the middle classes appropriate parts of working-class culture as a resource [but] they only take the bits that are useful,

such as the criminal associations, the sexuality, the immoral bits, essentializing qualities with the working-classes . . . the plundered attributes have to remain associated with the “originary” group in order to guarantee the attribution of “the real” and authentic.

(*ibid.*: 187)

As a result, middle-class mobility can only be understood as “progression and progressiveness predicated on holding in place—fixing—that which must signify stagnation and immobility”: the working class (*ibid.*). Understood in relation to questions of taste, therefore, the “authenticity” of independent media can be highly problematic.

As Michael Newman has argued, “the discourse of alternativeness remains central to crafting indie’s appeal to a market ripe for exploitation” so that whilst it claims on the one hand to “counter and implicitly criticizes hegemonic mass culture, desiring to be an authentic alternative to it,” it simultaneously “serves as a taste culture perpetuating the privilege of a social elite of upscale consumers” (2009: 17). As Newman goes on to suggest, “the oppositional stance that defines indie culture is one key to its status as a source of distinction, a means by which its audience asserts its superior taste” (*ibid.*: 22).

Consumers and marketers of independent media turn the oppositions set out earlier in this chapter into taste distinctions of aesthetics that enable them to separate their own—elite—tastes from mass culture. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s work, Tony Bennett and the Center for Research on Socio-Cultural Change’s project on culture, class and distinction in Britain found that class was an important factor in preferences for “art house” films aligned with independence, which “young professionals working in the cultural sector . . . interpreted as a more cerebral or authentic form of participation than the mainstream films associated with multiplex cinema” (Bennett et al. 2009: 140–141). Here the low-budget, experimental, small-scale and diverse modes of production mix with aesthetic markers of authenticity and credibility in opposition to the high-budget, formatted, industrial-scale production of the mainstream’s more “predictable” fare. But this leaves independent media and their audiences in a paradoxical position in terms of their claims to be counter to the mainstream. As Newman summarizes, “indie is at once oppositional and privileged; it asserts its privilege by opposing itself to the mainstream” (2009: 24).

However, it is important to recall that whilst independent media may share some of the same aesthetic registers and sociopolitical goals of alternative media, we cannot simply equate the one with the other or elide the terms. We must understand compromise as a productive and necessary consequence of independence. Thus, as both Hesmondhalgh and Newman have argued, it is possible for independent artists to experience mainstream success without “selling out,” by reaching a compromise with their fans and an aesthetic form that enables both artist and consumer to understand wider

popularity as a form of “infiltration of the establishment [that] recuperates the credibility of the indie artist” (Newman 2009: 22). Or, as Hesmondhalgh puts it, the drive toward professionalization and partnerships with major labels can be understood as a form of opposition “within” the mainstream (1999). It is unhelpful to simply buy into the rhetorical ideals of independence as a somehow more “authentic” or “autonomous” culture separate from the mainstream, which perceives any compromise as a sellout or co-option of “indie” culture. To do so would, to return to Skeggs’s point about class, maintain the “already privileged [independent culture’s] authority to define not only itself, but also its Other,” recognizing its “own agency while configuring the dominant culture’s consumers as passive victims of corporate-consumerist ideology” (Newman 2009: 33). Independence, then, at the formal level is more complex, hybrid and liable to compromise than such absolute distinctions can account for. We must pay attention to not only what “independent media” look or sound like, but also who mobilizes the rhetoric of independence, in the service of what kinds of cultural goods and sectors and for what sociopolitical purposes.

## CONCLUSION: THE HOPEFUL STUDY OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA

*Hope*: Expectation of something desired; desire combined with expectation.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

At the outset of this chapter I suggested that media independence was best understood as a utopia: a desire for a better way of being, which might be achieved through media. I want to conclude this introductory chapter by returning to this notion of utopian desire as “hope” in terms of both the future for independent media and its study.

For Ernest Bloch—drawing on his experiences as a radical German intellectual of Jewish origin who, like Theodor Adorno, had spent the 1930s exiled in the United States—recuperating the concept of utopia within Marxism, at a point when the meaning of communism was being established in the new Soviet Union, meant recognizing that “hope was a practical as well as a theoretical matter” (Levitas 2010: 98). How the utopian desire was discursively shaped *mattered*, which was a creative act called forth from the “Not-Yet-Conscious” part of the human psyche—which is “expressed *par excellence* in the creative arts and is intensely present in times of change, particularly revolutionary change” (ibid.: 101). As the current age seems beset by revolutions of one kind or another, often apparently built on the new creative foundations of digital media, it is worth addressing this question of hope in terms of the digital transitions being experienced across global media systems. Indeed, new media studies have often been at the forefront

of either proclaiming these revolutions or heralding their coming. This can become tiresome, as we are promised yet another radical break with the past and a utopian future soon to open forth.

However, as Helen Kennedy has astutely suggested, the tendency for new media studies to “focus on *what could be*” can be productive. Drawing on Pierre Levy’s discussion of why the virtual is not opposed to the real, Kennedy argues that such visions remain a driving force in how and why companies and individuals work in digital media, “and why, despite the proliferation of empirical studies of what is, the rhetoric of what might be survives” (2012: 10). Read in conjunction with my call to understand independent media as invariably hybrid, and often productively compromised, the hope of what independent media might emerge and what forms they may take must be an urgent area of media and cultural studies scholarship. Fostering the conditions—regulatory, economically, aesthetically, sociopolitically and pedagogically—that might promote independent media is an important task for any media or cultural scholar concerned with how and why media matter to the creation of a “better way of being,” creating a more open, just and democratic society.

This does not mean we should be blind or overly optimistic. New platforms and voices do not necessarily give rise to greater freedoms or democracy. As the Freedom House report on press freedom makes clear, there has been a paradoxical overall decline in world press freedom in the past decade despite the “increasingly diverse news sources and ever-expanding means of political communication” made available through online services. Indeed, the growth of such digital services has also

triggered a repressive backlash by authoritarian regimes that have carefully controlled television and other mass media and are now alert to the dangers of unfettered political commentary online.

(Deutsch-Karlekar and Dunham 2013: 1)

These are trends picked up in chapters from James Rodgers and Gholam Khiabany here and which, as the example of Turkey’s recent “banning” of Twitter demonstrates, continue to have a profound impact on the shape of media systems around the world and the importance of independence to them.

But it is not just authoritarian regimes that have the power to delimit independence as a form of freedom, diversity and challenge in the media. Independence within the new digital economy is equally fragile. As Thomas Poell and José van Dijck’s essay in this volume demonstrates, the promise of more democratic news through social media has so far proved illusory. Rather than creating new freedoms, the architectures of participation (Bennett 2011) of social media platforms actually produce new forms of dependence that insert further commercial constraints and imperatives on independent journalism. As Tim Wu argues, the celebration of new communications

technologies as more open, free and democratic is just “a phase of revolutionary novelty and youthful utopianism” that becomes closed down by a “highly centralized and integrated new industry . . . strictly controlled for reasons of commerce” (2010). Thus whilst new entrants onto the tech scene are often celebrated for diversity, innovation and difference, they are also often the subject of co-option through corporate takeovers from the mainstream conglomerates—such as Google’s purchase of YouTube, Facebook’s incorporation of Instagram and so forth. Where companies resist, such as Snapchat’s decision to turn down a reported £3bn offer from Facebook, they often find themselves powerless in the face of corporate power’s ability to utilize the very freedoms—as in the malleability and openness of computer code—that underpin digital work cultures: thus Facebook and Twitter quickly built Snapchat-like features into their platforms once their offers had been turned down.

And yet, as all these examples also suggest, hope must live on because the utopian desire of media independence is something that cannot be regulated, purchased or otherwise bullied and co-opted out of existence. The desire to create a better way of living through the media is one that motivates many who work in, regulate, finance and study the media. As a utopian promise it remains a vision to be pursued. We hope that this collection helps those interested in studying and making media pursue that vision and that it stimulates further work and debate on this critical area of inquiry. Media independence, after all, matters.

## NOTE

1. The *Gay Girl in Damascus* blog was purportedly written by a twenty-five-year-old half-Syrian, half-American woman living in Damascus during early 2011 at the outset of the Syrian uprising. The views, and interviews, of the blogger were widely circulated by the Western media, especially after guards of President Bashar al-Assad apparently captured the blogger. However, when pictures of the blogger were circulated it was revealed the site was a hoax, written by an American man studying in Scotland.

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