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The Performance of Participation in Russian Alternative Media

Discourse, Materiality and Affect in Grassroots Media Production in Contemporary Russia

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Abstract

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This doctoral dissertation analyzes participation in alternative media, taking the reader to the Russia of the late 2010s. Bringing together discourse theory, media and communication studies and political theory, it approaches participation in media production through the lens of performativity. The conceptualization of participation as a performance helps explore the material, embodied and spatial enactments of discourses that sustain the fragile and unstable process of production.

The data of this study comprise several months of participant observations, interviews with media producers, and textual analysis of media content. The research employs a case-study method and focuses on media that explicitly delegate their participants the right to co-decide on matters of content production and internal organizing process. The three cases under study are Russia's oldest anarchist medium Avtonom, the student medium DOXA, and the web-based zine Discours. Data analysis integrates qualitative content analysis and a discourse-theoretical approach, informed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory alongside its subsequent developments within the Essex School.

The study looks into the distribution of power in alternative media amidst an internal diversity, material constraints, and an antagonistic relationship with the state. The analysis constructs a model of participation, which shows its embeddedness into multiple and partially overlapping communities. A vibrant sociality and the potential for a further expansion of the media communities emerge as two of the key conditions of the participatory process. Furthermore, participation is supported by an ongoing performance of a multiplicity of identities, in which the more elitist articulations of journalism are intertwined with some empowering and counter-hegemonic notions of media production, media producers, and the audience.

Retaining a critical-explanatory focus, the dissertation explores the limits of power-sharing, such as the persistence of journalistic professionalism, the scarce resources of the media and vulnerability inflicted by the state. The static representation of the state as the major confronting force reveals the paradoxical nature of social antagonism: while mobilizing the limited resources, it also reduces participatory intensities and triggers a politics of trust that restricts access to media production.

This dissertation offers a number of theoretical and empirical contributions to several fields. Some of its key insights relate to participation beyond institutional politics, the hybridity of mainstream and alternative media, the interconnection of discourse, materiality and affect, and an empirical applicability of discourse theory.

Keywords: discourse theory, performativity, participation, alternative media, journalism, state, materiality, affect

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*To my mother Irina
and my sister Ilona*

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Acknowledgments

The main interest in life and work
is to become someone else that
you were not in the beginning.
– Michel Foucault

As I am writing these lines, the world is grappling with the uncertainty, anxiety and isolation brought upon us by the global pandemic. In an odd way, this may echo some of the feelings of a 5-year immersion in a doctoral study. In reality, however, this is a path one does not walk alone. The completion of a PhD project – and the transformative role it has on your life, beliefs and imagination – is the result of support, encouragement and guidance of the people you know and meet along the way. I cannot begin to tell this story without thanking them first, even at the risk of forgetting some names.

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Abbreviations

AD	*Avtonomnoye Deystviye* (Russian anarchist movement)
DT	Discourse theory
DTA	Discourse-theoretical analysis
QCA	Qualitative content analysis

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1.   Foreword and research questions

Participation and alternative media are two notions that have received substantial attention in academic debates in the past few years, from two opposite perspectives. Let us begin the story with participation. Two recent journal issues within communication and media studies are particularly noteworthy in regard to this ongoing polemic. One was the issue of *Media and Communication Studies*, published in late 2018[1] and containing a series of articles that focused on the dangers and pitfalls of participation in the digital age – such as misinformation, intolerance and harassment. One text that quickly gained a substantial amount of citations was tellingly entitled "Dark Participation" by Thorsten Quandt (2018), though there were others (Anderson & Revers, 2018; Westlund & Ekström, 2018). In response to these points being raised, the Portuguese journal *Comunicação e Sociedade* ran a special issue under the title "Rescuing Participation."[2] The journal's editorial explicitly challenged the pessimistic view on participation, stressing its "intrinsically ethical nature" (Carpentier et al., 2019, p. 31). Participation, the article argued, despite its limits, nonetheless ensures public accountability, diversity of voices, and the ultimate stability of society.

Although the debate rings a familiar tune,[3] it is indicative in a few important respects that conveniently initiate our discussion. First, the very object of the debate appears unstable: although concerning one and same signifier – participation – there is a significant fluctuation of its meaning. What some label as participation on the web, others see as mere online interaction, leading to confusion about the issue at stake. It thus needs to be quickly established that this dissertation applies a particular reading of participation derived from political theory, which connects it to joint decision-making, rather than simply *taking part*.

Furthermore, the debate points to the ambiguity and vulnerability of participation, whose direction – constructive or detrimental – is not predetermined. Instead, the very outcome of participation is shaped through discursive

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[1] See volume 6, issue 4, published in November 2018.
[2] See issue 36 from December 2019.
[3] Chapter 3 of this dissertation will review a similar discord between more optimistic and more skeptical accounts of a broad democratic inclusion within democratic theory.

struggles, and thus the process needs to be analyzed in conjunction with its immediate context. Any participatory process has its conditions of possibility external to itself; not everyone can legitimately take part; not everything can be legitimately decided – and sometimes, an external force may undo the process. While accepting the premise that participation of people in decisions concerning their livelihoods is desirable, a celebratory approach would not do justice to this instability underpinning the process, and therefore its limits.

Media have remained at the forefront of these discussions. After all, the more alarmist notions of participation stem from observations of social media interactions, but also from the rise of right-wing alternative media. While voice – and thus its expressions in the media – continues to be instrumental in redressing power inequalities (Couldry, 2015), by the end of the 2010s, the very discussion around the notion of alternative media has gradually changed. It shifted from their empowering potential – characteristic of the previous scholarship – to the spread of "fake news" and hate speech (Holt, 2018; Holt et al., 2019; Theorin & Strömbäck, 2019). Yet, also here, rather than taking the shift of meaning for granted, we need to acknowledge its embeddedness in discursive struggles – both within academia and in the broader political field. Despite the ever-growing variety of media uses on all sides of the political spectrum, forgetting the origins of alternative media does not do justice either to the rich history of the concept nor to the grassroots still seeking to enact democracy and make their voices heard.

How to untangle the conditions and dynamics of the process while respecting the instability of meaning? I argue that discourse theory, a theoretical framework first outlined by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, is highly suitable for this task. Discourse theory privileges the notion of radical contingency and argues for the primacy of politics, which embeds social phenomena – in our case, participation – in the midst of power struggles in society. Thus, discourse theory offers an ingenious lens which regards the social as a continuous dynamic of sedimentation (i.e., the fixation of meaning) and its reactivation and contestation. As I will argue, alternative and community media[4] in particular present stark examples of radical contingency enacted in practice, which makes discourse theory a suitable framework to employ.

The study takes the reader to Russia, whose empirical context makes it particularly beneficial to use Laclau and Mouffe's framework. One of discourse theory's key distinctions consists in its emphasis on the centrality of conflict for social ontology. Rather than approaching social antagonism simply as disadvantageous and undesirable, discourse theory views it as one of the key conditions for subjectification. With its focus on the complex dynamics of

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[4] As will be explained in chapter 4, alternative media are approached as media outlets that reconfigure the organizational structure of professional media, redefine the professional identity of journalists, and represent voices from the margins of the political spectrum. Representation of marginalized groups is particularly central for the notion of community media, where the focus lies on the empowerment of individuals belonging to the same social group.

conflict, discourse theory is thus well-positioned to untangle the antagonistic relationship between the state and civil society in Russia (see section 1.2), as well as the impact of these tensions on the internal processes within grassroots media production. Furthermore, contemporary Russia offers a particularly promising case for bringing the attention back to the more empowering reading of alternative media and reactivating their radical origin in the academic narrative.

Significant effort has been undertaken in the past 10-15 years to develop discourse theory, particularly within the Essex School grounded by Laclau himself. However, one reasonable point of critique can be raised here: does discourse theory present the researcher with anything but a set of abstract concepts, better adapted for the analysis of text than doing fieldwork? Chapter 2 will mention research that has taken discourse theory into field studies, but such examples are scarce. Besides, the above question exposes what has been considered the Achilles' heel of discourse theory in recent years – the relationship between the discursive and the material. Acknowledging that this relationship still constitutes a theoretical gap (and thus largely affects its methodological affordances), I propose integrating the notion of performance into the analysis, in order to account for enactments of discourses at the level of social practice.

Thus, this dissertation has a triple purpose. Empirically, it aims to analyze the internal power dynamics within media outlets that explicitly strive for maximized forms of participation.[5] Methodologically, it does so by taking the somewhat unusual choice of combining discourse theory with ethnography. Thus, theoretically, it seeks to (a) improve the applicability of discourse theory by bringing performativity into the picture, and (b) to investigate the conditions, dynamics and limits of a rigidly defined participatory process.

Thus, approaching performance as series of non-discursive enactments that identify with particular discourses on participation, the main research question in this project is: *How is participation performed in three Russian alternative media?* The main research question is unpacked through three secondary research questions.

The first secondary research question is: *How do the participants understand their engagement, contribution, and the collective identity of the communities, and how do they materially enact this?* This question brings us to identifications of actors of participatory process, which are further unpacked as subject positions. The main interest here lies in discourses activated in the identificatory processes, embedded in the particular material context of alternative media production. The question offers space for self-reflections and self-interpretations to the actors of the process.

The second secondary research question asks the following: *How are the co-decision-making processes performed in the alternative media?*

[5] For theoretical discussion on forms of participation, see chapter 3.

Approaching participation as co-decision-making, this question allows us to zoom in on the internal dynamics of the participatory process. Again, the logic of this inquiry follows the double purpose of identifying the supporting discourses and activated material objects and practices that enable more maximalist or minimalist participatory dynamics to be enacted on the ontic level.

The final secondary research question is: *What are the limitations of these performances of participation in relation to the presence of a plurality of voices?* This question initiates a discussion on discursive and material constraints and, more specifically, the role of social antagonism in the constitution of identities of the participatory process.

Having outlined the key questions underpinning this research, this chapter continues by setting the context for the study. Such contextualization necessitates a discussion on the key developments in Russia's political and media system in the past two decades. It is to this overview that I now turn.

1.2. Setting the scene: Key developments in Russia in the 21st century

This section provides country-specific context for the analysis in this dissertation. Many elements of this context have a strong significance for the analysis, and certain specific details will be stressed in this section to introduce the reader to the contemporary and historic references that will appear in the empirical chapters. The first part highlights the key political developments in post-Soviet Russia and especially under the presidency of Vladimir Putin. The second part focuses on the changes in the media landscape with the rise of the internet, as Russia transitioned from the dominance of traditional media into a hybrid media landscape. The broader goal of the section consists in a retrospective overview of the gradual consolidation of the state in the Russian political process through the lens of discourse theory, while simultaneously accentuating the limits of the state's agency.

1.2.1. Political developments

Post-Soviet Russia has long been articulated as a "transitional society" (Evans & Whitefield, 1995) moving from the communist system and a planned economy to a democratic rule and free markets. Although the transition to a market economy had been completed throughout the 1990s, a series of developments in the following decade dislocated this narrative, reflecting the limits of authoritarianism/democracy dichotomy that appeared to fail to grasp the complexities and particularities of societies of the former Eastern Bloc. New and competing labels for the Russian political system have emerged, such as neo-

authoritarianism (Becker, 2004), electoral authoritarianism (Golosov, 2011; Reuter & Robertson, 2012; Ross, 2005), informational autocracy (Guriev & Treisman, 2020; Treisman, 2018) and the especially well-established notion of hybrid regime (Colton & Hale, 2009; Ekman, 2009; March, 2009; McMann, 2006; Owen & Bindman, 2019; Robertson, 2010; Shevtsova, 2001). These articulations reflect the interplay of democratic and authoritarian elements in the Russian political society. Petrov et al. (2014) tie the discourse on hybrid governance to three dilemmas related to elections, media, and representative institutions. The Russian hybrid regime, they argue, has neither allowed for free and fair elections, media pluralism, and representative institutions such as parliament, nor completely eliminated them. Rather, the democratic institutions have been "hollowed out" (White & Herzog, 2016, p. 553).

In Russia's domestic politics, the 2000s were characterized by a gradual consolidation and centralization of the state and the decline of the competitive component. Examples include the elimination of gubernatorial elections;[6] increasingly predictable outcomes of general elections with fewer parties represented in the parliament; frequent use of police force against public assemblies; arrests of powerful billionaires and media moguls (such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky), and a tightening legal framework for non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The adoption of a legislation on extremism is worth being mentioned separately, as it will re-emerge in the analytical chapters of this dissertation. The legal definition of extremism, approved in 2006, included a broad range of activities (such as public defamation of state officials by maliciously accusing them of committing extremist acts), while keeping violent acts out of the definition (Richter, 2011, p. 199). Any dissemination of content deemed extremist was also made punishable, thus imposing significant constraints on the work of the Russian media. Two warnings issued to a media outlet by the national telecommunications regulator Roskomnadzor for breaching the legislation could now lead to its closure (Richter, 2011); later, heavy fines for inciting extremism by the media were additionally introduced (Klyueva, 2016). Furthermore, the Russian state of the 2000s has successively consolidated its presence in the media industry, a point which will be specifically addressed in section 1.2.2.

The period of Dmitry Medvedev's one-term presidency (2008-2012), with Vladimir Putin as the Prime Minister, saw a brief *thaw* or *reset* in domestic politics, articulated as modernization and political liberalization (Hahn, 2010; Wilson, 2015). Yet, those reforms have been considered tokenistic and short-lived (Robertson, 2013; Wegren & Herspring, 2010; Wilson, 2015). The "thaw" period came to an end after a series of the largest protests in the post-Soviet history of Russia, following the 2011 parliamentary elections where large-scale fraud was reported (Shevtsova, 2012). Despite initial concessions to the protestors, the rhetoric on modernization was soon abandoned.

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[6] Governors are the highest officials of the regions of the Russian Federation.

Vladimir Putin's third term as President (2012-2018) laid ground for a new turn of the consolidation of the state, characterized with a toughening legislation that reduced political participation, and a turn to a neoconservative discourse on "traditional values." Stricter penalties were introduced for demonstrations not approved by local authorities, ranging from administrative to criminal liability (Malkova & Kudinova, 2020). Further restrictions were directed at the NGOs: starting from 2012, organizations receiving funding from abroad have been forced to register as "foreign agent" and conduct stricter and more frequent reporting, otherwise risking heavy fines, dissolution or indeed imprisonment (Flikke, 2016). Besides, the very label of foreign agent carried the Soviet-era connotations of spies and traitors – thus, it has been argued, attempting to "cultivate an unfavourable image of rights defenders in society" (Malkova, 2020, p. 201).

Simultaneously, a series of hegemonic interventions was undertaken by the state apparatus to articulate a discourse combining conservative, patriarchal and nationalist elements. In 2013, the State Duma passed a bill banning "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors", further restricting and marginalizing LGBTQ+ activism. A number of studies (Edenborg, 2018; Persson, 2015) analyzed how these ideological interventions of the state constructed a new nationalistic discourse that expressed the Russian geopolitical identity in gendered and sexualized terms, juxtaposing it to the threatening western liberalism and imperialism. Furthermore, the 2020 national referendum was articulated into the conservative discourse, inscribing the definition of marriage as a heterosexual institution in the Russian constitution (Venkatraman, 2020).

Alongside its proactive stance in the discursive struggles, the Russian state initiated a series of prosecutions against some of the more radical activists in the late 2010s.[7] One of the turning points was a terror attack carried out by a teenage anarchist who blew himself up at the local office of the Federal Security Service (FSB) in northern Russia, dying on the spot and injuring three others (Roth, 2018). An investigation of the incident has led to multiple arrests, raids and felony charges against leftist activists across the country (Merzlikin, 2019). The following year, Moscow State University's PhD student and anarchist sympathizer Azat Miftakhov was arrested on charge of involvement in an arson attack against the United Russia party office (RFE/RL, 2019). In 2020, following trials that received significant public attention, two groups of anarchist and antifascist activists were sentenced for plotting the overthrow of Russia's constitutional order and preparation of terror attacks, despite their claims that they pleaded guilty under torture (Roth, 2020; Safonova, 2020). The case of one of these two groups, New Greatness

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[7] Here, only a few key trials that reflected in the empirical data of this study are presented. There have been, however, other notable criminal cases against activists; see, e.g., Human Rights Watch's 2020 report: https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/russia.

(*Novoye Velichiye*)[8], is of particular relevance as it touches on issues of internal group cohesion and trust, addressed in the analysis of this dissertation: the charges against New Greatness were reportedly based on data leaked by a member of their private group chat on the Telegram messaging app (Muratov, 2018). The series of trials demonstrated a continuing grip of the state over radical activism, and its willingness to restrict it.

At the same time, the civil society has occasionally been able to mobilize significant resources and to protest openly. After an apparent consolidation of various groups from both the political Left and Right around the Crimean crisis in support of the government's agenda, the late 2010s saw a retreat to a more fragmented political landscape. Tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets in mass rallies, particularly prominent in Moscow and Khabarovsk, to protest corruption and electoral fraud (Mikovic, 2020; Nechai & Goncharov, 2017). One of the most significant waves of protests, triggered by the rejection of local Moscow authorities to register oppositional candidates (Roth, 2019), will be repeatedly addressed in the analysis of this dissertation. Yet, the protests, arguably, did little to effectively challenge the status quo. In 2020, Russia found itself in the middle of Vladimir Putin's fourth term as president who had just won the referendum allowing him to run for president two more times.

1.2.2. The state and the media

The dominance of the state in the Russian media is a tradition inherited from the Soviet Union. Up until the Perestroika and Glasnost era, launched by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985-1987, the Soviet media structure was designed to ensure an exclusive reflection the Marxist-Leninist view of reality and (at least in theory) a representation of the working class (McNair, 2006). The Soviet state and its various branches held the monopoly on media production: the radio and television were directly controlled by the governing body of broadcasting, *Gosteleradio*, while the newspapers served as the official printing bodies of the central and regional authorities (for instance, *Pravda* newspaper was the official organ of the Communist Party). The published content was subject to tight control and censorship, ensuring its ideological alignment with the official socialist discourse. In this context, the Soviet alternative media emerging in the 1960s, *samizdat*, had to confront both the dominant interpretation of Marxism *and* the state as a primary adversary. Resisting the homogenous discourse of the Soviet mainstream media, *samizdat* disseminated a broad variety of voices, including nationalist (e.g. Jewish, Crimean Tatar or Ukrainian), religious and dissident political views, including those of unorthodox Marxists (Joo, 2004). The ongoing circulation of *samizdat* relied on

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[8] Here and henceforth, I employ a simplified ALA-LC transliteration system.

the reproduction of the materials by their readers by hand or with the help of typewriters or tape recorders, which were further circulated by closed circles of friends. Those suspected of spreading or storing *samizdat* risked house searches, interrogations, detentions, imprisonment and forced exiles (Skilling, 1989, p. 18).

The Soviet media model was shuttered by the Perestroika and eventually collapsed together with the Soviet Union. The new Russian media structure developed in the context of decline of the old state institutions and the birth of free markets, which informed many of the contradictory developments in the media in the 1990s. While official censorship was abolished, the media could no longer rely on public subsidies; advertisement revenues, too, were scarce (McNair, 2000, p. 73). In order to survive, many were forced to accept purchases by the nascent class of oligarchs, increasingly interested in using the media as a tool to promote their financial and political interests (Yablokov & Schimpfössl, 2020). Part of the interests consisted in ensuring the continuity of neoliberal reforms against the backdrop of a looming Communist revival. For instance, Boris Yeltsin's narrow victory against the communist Gennady Zyuganov in the presidential election 1996 has been ascribed to the broad pro-Yeltsin campaign launched in the corporate media (Belin, 2002a). By the end of the century, Russian journalism was freed from direct state control, but found itself at the crossroads of conflicting financial and political interests, with poor legal protection and security (Oates, 2006, p. 43).

The consolidation of the state under Vladimir Putin's presidency and the gradual elimination of pluralism, already discussed in the previous section, brought substantial changes for the media structure. Control was established directly through ownership, indirectly via state corporations, and through informal affiliations of the owners of media companies with state institutions (Kiriya & Degtereva, 2010, p. 40). Arguably, the key moment was the 2001 purchase of NTV, the award-winning television channel most critical of the Russian government, by the state-owned corporation Gazprom. The deal followed an intense pressure on its owner, media tycoon Vladimir Gusinsky. As a result, the NTV management was replaced, and the journalists who openly critiqued the purchase left in protest (Belin, 2002b). When some of them relocated the private television network TV-6, the latter was quickly dissolved following a lawsuit from a state-owned oil company LUKoil and its affiliated pension fund (Belin, 2002b, p. 39). Over the next few years, the remaining voices of dissent gradually left the Russian television (Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2014).

Although television was the primary target of the state's centralization efforts, primarily due to being the preferred medium of the national audience (Vartanova, 2012), this is not to say that the Russian mediascape was under the total and complete control of the state. Professional radio broadcasting and printed media expressing more liberal voices have continued existence despite increasingly tightened legislation, though their audience reach

remained inferior to that of the television (Burrett, 2010; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2019). There have been, however, notable limitations to their counter-hegemonic potential, with certain practices, particularly related to the neoliberal order established in the post-Soviet Russia, remaining largely unchallenged by the alternatives (Baysha, 2014, 2018). As a result, some more radical alternatives – both to the mainstream and the *alternative mainstream* media – have emerged. They provided a response to the institutional instability and economic shocks of the 1990s and the perceived passive adoption of the Western discourse in economics and culture. For instance, in the study of the prominent underground newspaper *Limonka,* produced by the banned National Bolshevik Party in the 1990s-2000s, Fenghi (2017) shows how post-Soviet subaltern publics called into question mainstream cultural and political articulations and aesthetics. They did so by creatively rethinking their contemporary situation through situated discursive and visual forms dating back to the Russian revolution and early Soviet years, as opposed to the language of the new times of liberal democracy and free markets. *Limonka* is one important post-Soviet example, but there are others, one of which, the anarchist magazine *Avtonom,* is part of the case study in this dissertation (see section 1.3). Overall, the consolidation of the state in the 2000s significantly restricted, but never entirely eliminated, the diversity of the Russian media.

The rise of the digital media further complicated and partially reversed the authoritarian trend of the 2000s, bringing more actors and voices that escaped direct state control. Reflecting a rapid spread of the internet in the Russian households (Oates, 2013), the hegemonic discourse on media and political participation that emerged in the late 2000s conceived of the Russians in terms of two opposite camps based on their interactions with media sources. One group, articulated as the older, poorer and less educated inhabitants of rural areas, relied on passive consumption of traditional, state-controlled media, such as television and radio (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016). This rather disempowering articulation has been supported by the continuing material inequalities, primarily in access to the internet (Gladkova & Ragnedda, 2020). The other group, articulated as younger, urban and politically progressive citizens with a more privileged socioeconomic background, was understood to have steadily moved into the digital domain and accessed information from diverse sources (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016). Other studies rejected the binary opposition between the two social identities, arguing instead that consumers of state-owned traditional media complement their sources of information with personal networks, political organizations, and the internet to some extent (Smyth & Oates, 2015).

The internet is still a testimony to the hybridity of the Russian mediascape that has turned into a ground of contestations between the state and civil society. Already in 2011-2012, widespread protests against electoral fraud in Russia's major cities showed the impact of social networking on activism, with Facebook playing a significant role in mobilization and the dissemination of

information (White & McAllister, 2014). Faced with the dilemma to either let alternative voices proliferate and risk the regime's stability, or to shut down the internet entirely and face a widespread backlash, the Russian state has opted for a mixture of legal restrictions and media manipulations in the form of hackers and trolls (Denisova, 2017; Treisman, 2018). The digital policy of the Russian state in the 2010s was articulated in terms of "internet sovereignty", making the case for the resilience of the Russian cyberspace against external attacks (Gabdulhakov, 2020). As part of this discourse on sovereignty, a national Domain Name System was built, ending Russia's dependence on foreign systems; in the end of 2019, the communication ministry carried out tests of disconnection from the global web (Tsydenova, 2019). Furthermore, both national and foreign digital platforms were obliged to store their data on servers within the national borders and share them with the state operators upon request (Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019). Still, this state interference had a limited effect. When the Telegram messaging app, widely popular with the Russians, refused to hand in encryptions keys to the federal security service, *Roskomnadzor* initiated its blocking (Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019). In the following days, *Roskomnadzor* suppressed IP addresses associated with Telegram, while the app successfully moved its addresses around the internet, which caused major disruptions across the Russian segment of the internet (MacFarquhar, 2018). Eventually, attempts to block the app were officially ceased, largely due to their futility (Khurshudyan, 2020). The case of Telegram testifies to the limits of the state in controlling cyberspace, which thus still enjoys a significant degree of autonomy.

Arguably, the three case studies in this doctoral project support the argument on the oft-overlooked diversity in Russian media. To introduce them to the reader, the next section tells their history and the reasons for including them in the study.

1.3. Case studies

The selection of case studies in this research projects comprises three alternative media outlets: *Avtonom*, *Discours*, and *DOXA*. While they may not enjoy a broad recognition in Russia, and remain positioned within their respective (and rather narrow) niche, they have been purposefully chosen due to their distinctive characteristics, which are directly related to this study's main theoretical concern. First, all the three outlets explicitly organize participation on a non-hierarchical basis, having rejected the position of an editor-in-chief (or any of its equivalents) and integrating the principle of equality in their daily operation process. Secondly, all of them proclaim the representation of marginalized and counter-hegemonic voices and demands. Thirdly, they have elaborated tools and procedures for individuals who may not be professional

journalists to contribute to the media production process. Within such a fluid and informal environment, the ongoing construction and enactment of power relations becomes especially visible. Thus, studying and comparing their internal processes may provide important insights into the opportunities for power distribution – in this case, within the field of media production.

The first case study is the anarchist magazine *Avtonom.* It was founded in 1995 to provide media support for the regional anarchist organization titled the Federation of Kuban Anarchists, based in Krasnodar in southern Russia. As the Russian anarchist movement continued to expand, the magazine came to represent the nascent all-Russian movement *Avtonomnoye Deystviye* (Autonomous Action). In 2005, following what is described as "repressions against members of the editorial team"[9] in Krasnodar, the magazine relocated to Moscow. In the early 2010s, *Avtonomnoye Deystviye* showed signs of decline, but its media outlet outlasted the political movement. At present, *Avtonom* defines itself as a "libertarian media group that has evolved from the *Avtonomnoye Deystviye* movement."[10] By 2019, the editorial board, consisting of a handful of activists, had produced 38 issues of the magazine. In addition, *Avtonom* produces online content on its website *Avtonom.org* that features news and essays related to the anarchist movement. The web platform enables internet users to upload self-produced content in the so-called *free news* section, encouraging participation of individuals not directly involved in the activities of the core team of producers.

The second case study is *Discours*, founded in 2015 in Moscow and self-defined as "an open and horizonal editorial team."[11] Like *Avtonom*, it presents itself as both an almanac and a web platform. However, as of 2020, the almanac was yet to be published, and *Discours* operated solely as web platform. The website invites internet users to join the "community of authors" by submitting their textual or visual content for the rest of the community to collectively decide upon, by voting in favor or against (the voting procedure is explained in more detail in chapter 7). At the time of participant observations in 2018, there were about 400 *Discours* community members, based in Russia and abroad.

The third and final case study is *DOXA*, a media outlet launched by a group of Moscow-based students in 2017 to represent the student community, including some of its more radical voices. In addition, *DOXA* functioned as a platform for sharing academic knowledge, publishing works of junior researchers and translations of foreign academic research into Russian. *DOXA* operates as an exclusively digital platform.[12] At the time of participant observations in 2019, it was registered as a student organization at the prominent

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[9] According to the self-description on their website *Avtonom.org*:
https://www.avtonom.org/avtonom (accessed 7 October 2020).
[10] As per the text mentioned in the previous footnote.
[11] As per self-description on *Discours's* website https://discours.io/.
[12] *DOXA's* website address is https://doxajournal.ru/.

Russian universities, which provided them with funding, space and technical equipment. In the end of 2019, the university ceased its support, which prompted *DOXA* to broaden its profile from one specific educational establishment to cover a variety of student struggles in Russia and neighboring countries.

1.4.   Disposition

The dissertation follows a linear internal structure, beginning with an outlay of the theoretical framework, continuing with a discussion of methodology and then proceeding to the analytical chapters, and, finally, the conclusion. Behind the text, however, lies an abductive research strategy: the initial choice of theoretical concepts, which informed the collection and analysis of data, was later fine-tuned, with some new concepts emerging from analysis later additionally elaborated in the theoretical chapters.[13]

The theoretical framework of the study is presented in chapters 2 to 4. Chapter 2 situates the study within social constructionist and poststructuralist ontology. It specifically addresses Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory as the source of key sensitizing concepts to be deployed in the analysis of data, such as articulation, subject position and antagonism. Reviewing the ongoing debates on the traces of the non-discursive in discourse theory, the chapter introduces the crucial notion of performance as a bridge between the discursive and the material. Furthermore, it presents a discussion of affect and power as two supportive notions for the analysis.

Two subsequent chapters do a theoretical re-reading of relevant fields through the lens of discourse theory and performativity. Chapter 3 presents an overview of theories on participation, putting an emphasis on the maximalist models. It offers a theoretical discussion of performance of participation and entwines elements of democratic theory and affect theory to prepare ground for the analysis of internal dynamics of the participatory process.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of alternative media, and is divided into two platforms. The first platform establishes a dialogue between journalism studies and discourse theory, theorizing journalism as a contested discursive field. The second platform brings theories on the state into the frame and outlines the struggle between hegemonic discourses on the state and alternative media practices.

Chapter 5 clarifies the methodology and research design deployed in this study. Organized in two parts, it distinguishes between theory on method that explains and defends particular methodological choices, and a detailed description of a set of procedures undertaken to answer the research questions.

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[13] This iterative process is explained in more detail in chapter 5.

It specifically addresses the questions of the researcher's positionality and ethical concerns taken into consideration throughout the course of the research project.

The analysis comprises chapters 6-8. Chapter 6 analyzes subject positions whose performance structures participation in the alternative media under study. It shows how alternative media production offers multiple intersecting points of identification. This leads to a co-existence of some mutually contradictory positions, most visible in the articulations of the audience. It also introduces the political logics of the (media) community as a condition of participation.

This point is further elaborated in chapter 7, which turns to the inner characteristics of the participatory process. It delineates the process by arguing that sociality within the media community – and the promise of its limitless expansion – stimulates participation in the media. Horizontality (in the sense of collegiality and equality) and respect for diversity are presented as pillars of the process, but also the need for (accountable) leadership is discussed. There are, however, limits to the performance of participation that stem both from discursive structures and material constraints.

The latter point is continued in chapter 8 from a slightly different perspective. The constraints discussed here are imposed by the constitutive outside of the alternative media – the state. The argument developed in this chapter suggests that while the state may harm the process in multiple ways, this antagonism activates resistance by means of an even more active engagement into media production and a broader discursive struggle against the state. At the same time, the antagonism triggers a politics of trust, which appears detrimental to maximalist participation.

The concluding discussion, summing up the research findings and contribution, is presented in chapter 9.

Chapter 2. Poststructuralism and discourse theory

Discourse theory is the overarching theoretical framework in this study, presenting a particular worldview and vocabulary for social and political analysis. In this theoretical chapter, discourse theory is discussed as a poststructuralist ontological framework, drawing primarily on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, which in turn is supported by a series of developments within the established Essex School and the nascent Brussels Group. The discussion introduces a conceptual toolbox – which will be translated into methodology as sensitizing concepts – to operationalize high theory for subsequent chapters. In addition, I draw on a range of theories from continental philosophy, such as Michel Foucault's and Antonio Gramsci's, that support the theoretical framework with concepts that relate to (but may not be sufficiently elaborated within) Laclau and Mouffe's own work. Especially the notion of performance, borrowed from Judith Butler, will be instrumental for raising some of the key theoretical and empirical points in this study.

The presentation of the theoretical framework begins with a broader overview of social constructionism and its challenges to the positivist paradigm within the social sciences. I then proceed to discourse studies as one particular field situated within social constructionism. The focus on the macro-textual and macro-contextual dimension of discourse studies will open the way for the discussion on Laclau and Mouffe's conceptual toolbox. In section 2.4, the key notion of performance is presented as a way to both develop and operationalize discourse theory, leading into discussion on the non-discursive and the affective. Power remains one central contextual notion that will be deployed to approach participation, and is theoretically explored in the final section of this chapter.

2.1. Embedding the study within social constructionism

The conventional way to introduce social constructionism takes us through a discussion of positivism. With roots in modernity, the positivist paradigm prioritizes certainty, control, measurement, causality, logic, and order – the values that have migrated from philosophy into social research (Alvesson, 2002).

Originating in the natural sciences, positivism assumes that a researcher is an objective observer of the reality unfolding in front of them. One of the early adepts of positivism, Auguste Comte (1855/2009) emphasized positivism's mission to explain and predict social phenomena based on an unbiased, value-free approach. The underlying assumption of various strands of positivism is the accessibility of truth, "absolute and objective" (Popper, 1970, p. 56). Popper does acknowledge that social scientists, like all individuals, are caught in the framework of theories, expectations, experience, and language, which can obscure the purity of research – but insists that one needs to break out of it. Similarly, Merton (1968, p. 524), discussing the field of sociology of knowledge, notes that it is "not concerned merely with tracing the existential bases of truth but also of social illusion, superstition and socially conditioned errors and forms of deception." Here too, we see the assumption about the universal and objective truth that waits to be unveiled by the scientist.

By contrast, social constructionists have remained critical of the notion of objective reality and kept a high degree of relativism (Hammersley, 1992). In their paradigmatic work on social constructionism, Berger and Luckmann (1991) suggested the existence of multiple realities (dreams, myths, religious beliefs, etc.), which invite for their multiple interpretations. Social phenomena are thus thought to be not inevitable manifestations of objectivity, but instead as constituted or constructed *post hoc* (Nelson, 1994). As Kukla (2000) summarizes, "we invent properties of the world rather than discover them" (p. i). Social constructionists argue against reading their work as a theoretical account to be judged by its truth or falsity (Hibberd, 2005); instead, they reject the idea of an immediate accessibility of truth and point at the role of the researcher in knowledge construction. Any scientific knowledge is believed to be not a rational or logical extrapolation from existing knowledge, but the contingent product of social, cultural, and historical processes (Woolgar & Ashmore, 1988, as cited in Nelson, 1994). Hacking (1999) describes this logic as follows:

> X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable… X was brought into existence or shaped by social events, forces, history, all of which could well have been different. (pp. 6–7)

This quote highlights both the non-essentialist and anti-deterministic character of social constructionism. Instead of discovering universal laws or a true nature of people and social processes, social constructionists turn their gaze upon an historical study of the emergence of current forms of social life (Burr, 2004, p. 7).[14]

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[14] Key methodological implications of social constructionism will be addressed in chapter 5.

Following Burr, I distinguish between social constructi*onism* and social constructi*vism*. Whereas the former approach analyzes constructions of reality on the macro-level, the latter is focused on an individual construction of meaning. From the discourse-theoretical perspective, social constructi*vism* is problematic due to its strong emphasis on the individual agency at the expense of structural constraints of meaning-making, such as language (Burr, 2004, pp. 19–20). Siding with Burr's reasoning, I rely on social constructi*onism*; however, individual identifications with social constructs still matter, and will be addressed in this dissertation.

One of the key arguments within social constructionism concerns the constitutive role of language, which brings us to discourse as the notion connecting language with social practice. Although the emphasis on the linguistic component is different within the variety of approaches to discourse (as will be shown in the following section), the concept denotes the efforts undertaken "by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves" (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 6). In order to explain the position this study takes in relation to the relationship between language and social structures, I begin by briefly outlining the broader ontology of discourse.

2.2. Discourse studies and ontology

The complexity of the notion of discourse can be untangled in a number of ways. Howarth et al. (2000) suggest a conceptual distinction between the discursive, discourse, and discourse analysis. The discursive is defined as a theoretical horizon constitutive of ontology, linking it to the social constructionist paradigm: "*[A]ll* objects are objects of discourse, as their meaning depends upon a socially constructed system of rules and significant differences" (Howarth et al., 2000, p. 3, emphasis in original). This also emphasizes that discourse mediates signification of material practices, a point I will further unpack in section 2.4.6. Whereas *the discursive* is attributed to the level of ontology, *discourse* is understood as a system of signifying practices that form the identity of subjects and objects (Howarth et al., 2000, pp. 3–4). The latter is a theoretical position that emphasizes the ongoing construction of meaning and highlights the working of power and contingency in the constitution and dislocation of subjects. In order to analytically approach that process, *discourse analysis* is deployed as a set of techniques and methods to analyze raw empirical material (Howarth et al., 2000, pp. 4–5). The presentation of discourse as an empirical method is spared for chapter 5. To introduce discourse analysis as a methodology, one needs to begin with a discussion of its ontological assumptions. This leads us to an exploration of a set of theoretical approaches to language, signification, and social structure.

Discourse analysis as a theory and method has a variety of approaches that differ in their epistemological positions. Carpentier and De Cleen (2007) helpfully situate these approaches in relation to text and context, across the micro-textual, micro-contextual, macro-textual, and macro-contextual axes (see figure 1 below). The definitions of discourse in micro-approaches derive from instances of language use in particular social settings, such as conversations. By contrast, macro-approaches suggest a broader definition of a text, focusing on meanings, representations and ideologies in the broader social realm.
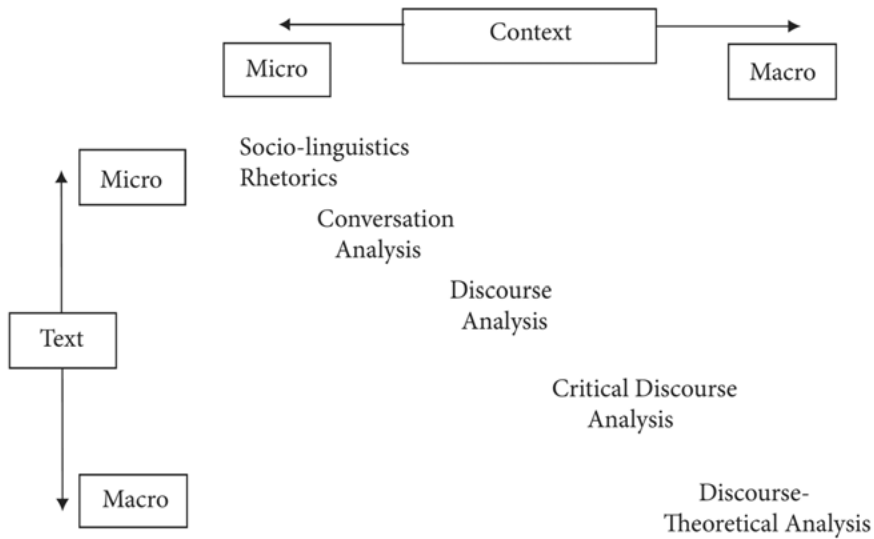
Figure 1. Textual and contextual dimensions of discourse analysis (In: Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007, p. 277).

Similarly, Jørgensen and Phillips (2010, pp. 18–21) suggest two continua of approaches. One locates them depending on the underlying understanding of structure and agency, where one extreme denotes discourse as fully constitutive of social reality and the other one viewing discourse as fully constituted by social processes. Although all approaches, in one way of another, view discourse as constitutive, it is Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory that beholds the most radical view on this matter. The other continuum locates the approaches in relation to their analytical focus. There, discursive psychology leans towards everyday discourse; Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory towards abstract discourse, and critical discourse analysis stays roughly in between.

My reading of discourse is in line with that of the macro-approach, where discourse is seen as the manifestation of power relations and ideologies, largely embedded in language but not strictly confined to it. This theoretical

position evokes a discussion that problematizes signification, taking us through structural linguistics, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis. These three poststructuralist approaches are discussed in the next section.

2.3. Poststructuralist approaches to discourse

Among the variations of the analysis of discourse, Howarth et al. (2000, p. 5) single out Jacques Derrida's strategy of deconstruction, Michel Foucault's archaeology and genealogy, Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between paradigmatic and syntagmatic poles of language, and Jacques Lacan's reformulation of metonymy and metaphor. Saving Foucault's work for a later discussion (see section 2.7), a review of the three other theorists, inspired by the "linguistic turn", will help unpack the notion of the discursive.

The term "linguistic turn" mainly designates the shift of social scientists' attention to the constitutive role of language in the production and reproduction of the social. In this respect, Saussure's (1916/2011) theory of language and his innovative approach to the linguistic sign provides a point of departure. Saussure (2011, p. 66) questions the unproblematic relationship between words and their meaning, arguing that the linguistic sign consists of two parts: a signifier (sound-image) and a signified (concept). His suggestion concerns the arbitrary nature of the sign: there is no necessary connection between the signifier and the signified, which implies that a signifier refers to our idea of reality rather than the reality itself. The meaning in language is structured through relational and differential connections between the signs.

Even though Saussure's focus was the theory of language, his argument about the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign has proven profoundly influential for social analysis and contributed to the development of structuralism:

> He subverts our assumption that words simply denote objects in the world, or that they represent or express our 'inner' thoughts, or that there is a fixed connection between the words we use and the ideas they convey. (Howarth, 2000, p. 28)

Saussure's work marked the steady movement towards a non-essentialist vision of the language. More specifically, Howarth (2000, p. 20) draws two conclusions from Saussure's theory. One is that language is a form and not a substance: it does not possess any inherent characteristics. The second conclusion is that language consists of pure differences with no positive terms. Both prove important pillars of a discussion of the political implications for the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.

Although Saussure put into question the necessary relationships within the linguistic sign, he retained the distinction between the signifier and the

signified and never explored the broader implications of the disconnection between the two (Howarth, 2000, pp. 28–31). The criticism against this rigid dissociation of the signifier and the signified is often linked to the works of Jacques Derrida. He rejected the binary opposition between the signifier and the signified, which was part of his larger problematization of dichotomies typical for western philosophy. For Derrida (1978), these dichotomies do not establish equal relationships between its two parts, but privilege one part over another (essence over emptiness, inside over outside, etc.). The reason for this hierarchy is the presence of a privileged center that organizes the internal order of a given structure (Torfing, 1999, p. 85). A classic example – especially relevant in light of post-Marxism – is historical materialism, where relationships between subjects and their positions in the structure are determined by their location in the relations of production (and are thus fixed), with the base clearly privileged over superstructure. Historical materialism, however, is not the only example. Derrida (1978, pp. 279–280) observes that the notion of a privileged center (or, as he calls it, transcendental signified) has been pervasive over the course of history under different names (essence, existence, subject, God, man, etc.). The strategy of deconstruction is then based on the idea of the fundamental lack of a privileged center that could be imagined in the form of present-being (Derrida, 1978, p. 280).

To return to the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, Derrida's contribution consisted in deconstructing the idea of a transcendental signified that determines meaning. There is no immediate and natural meaning outside of a system of differences, and any meaning is engendered by the relation of difference *and* deferment of certain possibilities, as Derrida (1976) captures with the notion of *différance.* By simultaneously referring to the verbs "to differ" and "to defer" (expressed with the same word *différer* in French), it emphasizes the contingency of signification that is based on active deferring of other possibilities (Howarth, 2000, p. 41). Since signification is informed by *différance*, and no structures can arrest the production of meaning (Derrida, 1988), the ever-slipping signified leads us further into the play of signification and, ultimately, renders signification impossible. Consequently, and crucially for theorizing discourse, the play of signifiers prevents any fixation of meaning; in Derrida's (1978) own oft-quoted words, "everything became discourse" (p. 280) in the system where the transcendental signified is never completely present outside the system of differences. That is to say, discourses are incomplete linguistic systems where the play of differences produces meaning, thereby rendering it open, unstable and exposed to the effects of the outside (Howarth, 2000, pp. 42–43).

The psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan further rethought Saussure's intellectual legacy. Lacan (1993) suggested that meaning is produced by the signifier and not the signified: the latter is but a "sign of an absence" (p. 167), the effect created by the signifier in the process of signification. The signified does not exist outside of language where it is symbolized, which creates a cascade of

significations that ultimately fail to refer to any *objective* reality: "Every signification refers to another one and so on and so forth; the signified is lost in the metonymic sliding characteristic of the signifying chain" (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 26). If the process signification can never be complete, the "reality" created by language is a discursive reality:

> Canceling out the real, the symbolic creates 'reality', reality as that which is named by language and can thus be thought and talked about. The 'social construction of reality' implies a world that can be designated and discussed with the words provided by a social group's (or subgroup's) language. (Fink, 2017, p. 25)

Both Derrida and Lacan, each in their own way, elaborate on the instability of meaning that ultimately fails to fulfil its purpose due to the interplay of the signifier and the signified. Laclau and Mouffe use this as a starting point in presenting their more radical and politically invested version of poststructuralist discourse theory, which is addressed in the next section.

2.4. Discourse theory and its key concepts

Having clarified the poststructuralist ontology in which discourse theory is embedded, I now move on to discussion of the specific concepts within Laclau and Mouffe's framework, as laid out in their seminal work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985/2014). The literature overview is supported by Antonio Gramsci's earlier work (which largely inspired discourse theory), as well as later theoretical developments by Laclau and Mouffe themselves and a range of their followers within the Essex School and beyond. Subsections 2.4.1-2.4.5 each address particular theoretical concepts within discourse theory, which will later be operationalized and used for a hands-on discourse-theoretical analysis. Subsection 2.4.6 examines traces of the non-discursive in discourse theory, in order to initiate a subsequent discussion of performance – the key theoretical concept connected to the main research question of this study.

2.4.1. Discourse and articulation

The notion of articulation is central for the understanding of discourse: in Laclau and Mouffe (2014), the latter is defined as a "structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice" (p. 91). An articulatory practice consists in establishing relationships between diverse linguistic elements, arresting the flow of meaning by fixating it around particular signifiers. Reflecting the fundamental role that poststructuralists attribute to language in shaping social

reality, Laclau and Mouffe (2014) consider any social practice articulatory, going as far as to claim that "the social *is* articulation" (p. 100, emphasis in original).

An articulatory practice necessitates exclusion in order to produce a discourse. The reservoir of available unarticulated and excluded signifiers is called the field of discursivity. It contains *elements* – signifiers whose meanings has not (yet) been fixed – and, once the meaning is arrested (and hence a *closure* is achieved), elements become *moments* of a discourse. The key moments in a discourse are *nodal points*, a concept similar to Lacan's (1993, p. 268) *point de capiton* which he uses to account for the "anchoring points" whose establishment enables individuals to escape psychosis. Laclau and Mouffe (2014) partially share that position, suggesting that "a discourse incapable of generating any fixity of meaning is the discourse of the psychotic" (p. 99); nodal points, thus, enable a temporary arrest of the flow of meaning and the structuration of a discourse.

Discourse theory is informed by non-essentialism in that meaning is understood to emerge *through* the practice of articulation, not *prior* to it. However, there may be different articulations of the same elements, which engenders discursive struggles for signification. The element that is articulated in different – often opposite – ways by two or more discourses is called a *floating signifier* (Laclau, 2005)*.* As Farkas and Schou (2018, p. 302) rightly stress, Laclauian floating signifiers are not simply a case of polysemy, but part of the discursive struggle for hegemonizing the social and ascribing it a particular meaning. Laclau (1990) exemplifies:

> [A] signifier like 'democracy' is essentially ambiguous by dint of its widespread political circulation: it acquires one possible meaning when articulated with 'anti-fascism' and completely different one when articulated with 'anti-communism'. (p. 28)

Democracy in this example is presented as a floating signifier in the midst of political struggles between various ideological projects; as will be argued in chapter 3, participation is another example of a floating signifier, open to a variety of articulations investing it with different meaning. Floating signifiers, however, only ensure a temporary closure. When the meaning no longer can hold together around a particular signifier, the underlying condition of contingency is revealed.

2.4.2. Contingency and dislocation

As temporarily structured totalities, discourses are characterized with an utmost instability, which discourse theory refers to as *social contingency*. Laclau (1990, p. 20) defines it as the impossibility of fixing with any precision either

identities or relations between them. Again, this has to do with the break with the idea of a privileged center in a structure:

> To assert that something is radically contingent, and that its essence does not imply its existence, therefore amounts to saying that the conditions of existence of an entity are exterior to it. (Laclau, 1990, p. 19)

An important development of the notion of contingency was undertaken by Glynos and Howarth (2007), making it fundamental for what they call the logics of critical explanation.[15] Radical contingency of social relations, as they prefer to call it, enlists four dimensions: social, political, ethical, and ideological. For the purpose of the point being made, the former two present a particular interest. The social dimension refers to the level of sedimentation – Husserl's notion adopted by discourse theory to refer to institutionalization of a taken-for-granted "ensemble of rules, norms, values, and regularities" (Torfing, 1999, p. 70). Sedimentation can be understood as "forgetting the origins" (Laclau, 1990, p. 34), where "the origins" refers to the inherently contested nature of any discursive order.

This brings us to the political dimension of radical contingency. It needs to be briefly specified that *the political* in this conceptual definition is different from politics. Politics refers to the more narrow understanding of a set of institutions and practices through which a social order is created (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9). Unlike politics, the political

> cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution, or envisaged as constituting the specific sphere or level of society. It must be conceived as a dimension that is inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition. (Mouffe, 1993, p. 3)

Within the political dimension, the driving logic is reactivation, where "contingent foundations" (Butler, 1991) of a discourse are brought to light, exposing the limits of a social formation. This happens through the dynamic of dislocation – an abrupt external event incommensurate with the existing discursive framework, such as a sudden crisis or loss. Glynos and Howarth (2007) define dislocations as "moments in which the subject's mode of being is disrupted by an *experience* that cannot be symbolized within and by the pre-existing means of discursive representation" (p. 14, emphasis in original). Sedimentation and reactivation are thus two sides of the same coin: no sedimentation is irreversible, and the political origins of social practices and structures can be re-activated through new contestations and dislocations.

Glynos and Howarth's above-quoted definition of dislocation helpfully brings the subject into the picture. Dislocation, as is argued within the Essex

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[15] The methodological implications of contingency are addressed in chapter 5; here, I retain the focus on ontology.

School, is one concept which is crucial for resolving the tension between structure and agency. In the following section, I address this theoretical discussion and present the notion of subject positions, which offers one of the key conceptual tools for approaching discourse.

2.4.3. The subject and its positions

The discussion on the subject has been largely informed by Laclau and Mouffe's polemics with traditional Marxists, where they argued against the ontological privilege attributed to relations of production. The argument, essentially, consists in this: the reduction of the subject to one particular position – in this case, the one embedded in social class – is the product of the social logics of sedimentation, which overlooks the inherent multiplicity of the subject positions available within the discursive field. Such approach to the subject prompted Laclau and Mouffe (2014) to assert: "Whenever we use the category of 'subject' in this text, we will do so in the sense of 'subject positions' within a discursive structure" (p. 101). In this sense, they continue, "every subject position is a discursive position" (p. 101), and each discourse contains a number of available subject positions: "We are, therefore, in the field of a dispersion of subject positions" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014, p. 103). This understanding of subject positions is similar to Foucault's (1972), where subject is conceived as a subject of a discourse, rather than a pre-constituted, pre-discursive identity.

In this sense, it is more conceptually appropriate to talk about *identification* as a process, rather than (stable) *identity*, which in discourse theory is equated to subject positions. This is precisely where discourse theory addresses the tension between structure and agency. In the field of radical contingency, the subject can only temporarily behold a particular discursive position. The subject is coeval with the temporality of the structure, emerging at the moment of identification and dissolving together with the structure's dislocation (Hudson, 2006). Dislocation is the moment that activates the agency of the subject: once dislocated, the structure no longer serves as a point of reference, which forces the subject to become a political agent and identify with new discursive structures (Howarth, 2004, p. 264). It is in the process of this dislocation that political subjectivities are formed; once stabilized, they turn into subject positions (Howarth, 2000, p. 109).

One important takeaway for the purpose of my theoretical argument is that the subject cannot be an origin of social relations: individuals *engage* with particular subject positions rather than *become* what these positions represent. Later in this chapter, I will suggest the notion of performance to account for the material and embodied manifestations of subject positions. Yet, first it needs to be clarified that these processes take place in "a field criss-crossed

with antagonisms" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. 137), which further complicates the process of subjectivation.

2.4.4. Antagonism and constitutive outside

The ontology of discourse theory puts a particular emphasis on difference, which largely stems from the intellectual legacy of structural linguistics (see section 2.3). Relations of difference – and, by extension, exclusion – remain the very condition of signification, which extrapolates into social identifications:

> [T]he creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference… every identity is relational and… the affirmation of a difference is a precondition for the existence of any identity, i.e. the perception of something 'other' which constitutes its 'exterior'. (Mouffe, 2005, p. 15)

Mouffe (2005) thus remains loyal to the principle of differentiation when asserting that it is "an illusion to believe in the advent of a society from which antagonism would have been eradicated" (p. 16). Furthermore, divisions are inherent for "the very possibility of a democratic politics" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. xiv), provided that collective identities emerge only when juxtaposed against an externality as its *constitutive outside*.

It needs to be clarified here that by antagonism I do not mean the condition of an *existential* threat to the subject, as opposed to agonism as confrontational politics without a necessary elimination of an opponent (Mouffe, 2005, 2013). My reading of antagonism relies on the earlier work within post-Marxism, especially Laclau's (1990) *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. Here, antagonism is understood as a necessary condition for identification, a we/they demarcation as a prerequisite of subjectivity. Antagonism thus plays both a constitutive and a subversive role in the process of identification: it renders possible an articulation of a subject, but also prevents it from being totally itself (Laclau, 1990, p. 21).

The productive role of antagonism is crystallized in the notion of *chain of equivalence* – an equivalential relationship that constitutes the collective subject manufactured by the antagonism (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, pp. 111–112). A chain of equivalence articulates distinct elements into a single ensemble, where their difference is temporarily suspended in the face of a common adversary. The notion is particularly useful in the analysis of political struggles, where Laclau and Mouffe are indebted to the intellectual tradition of the Left, and particularly to Antonio Gramsci. In an interview with Cammaerts and Carpentier, Mouffe (2006) emphasized that

the need to create, what we call, a chain of equivalence between the different democratic struggles… establish ways in which, for instance, the feminist or the anti-racist movement could work together, avoiding their neutralisation. (p. 971)

The emphasis on a plurality of progressive struggles evokes Mouffe's (1979/2014) early work on Gramsci, in which she built bridges between his conception of hegemony and what would later become post-Marxism. In the following section, I review the roots of hegemony in discourse theory and introduce the Gramsci's key notions of the war of maneuver and the war of position. The latter enrich the notion of political struggles by bringing the state into the antagonistic equation, and will be instrumental in analyzing the relationship between alternative media and the state in the empirical part of this study.

2.4.5. Hegemony and war of position

The notion of hegemony is part of a long intellectual tradition on the Left. It first appeared in this context in Pavel Axelrod and Georgi Plekhanov's account of the extraordinary historical situation in early 20th century Russia, where one class (the proletariat) needed to carry out the task of another (the bourgeoisie) in destroying the feudal order through a revolution (Torfing, 1999, p. 107). Across the subsequent theorizations of hegemony on the Left (for genealogy of the concept, see Torfing, 1999, pp. 103–109), one particularly relevant contribution can be found in Gramsci's (1971) *Prison Notebooks*. In a nutshell, Gramsci's argument consists in the need for a transformation of the political struggle from an approach embedded in material forces of production into a broad unity between economic, political and intellectual objectives. While remaining a Marxist thinker insofar as he saw moral-intellectual leadership as the goal for the working class, Gramsci went further by including the state and civil society in the analysis, which would together partake in the formation of a new hegemonic block – a *collective will*. The manufacturing of this new hegemony requires the development of an *organic ideology* that can organize the masses into a new historical bloc and produce a new ruling class identity.

Although Mouffe and Laclau critiqued what they called the remnants of essentialism in Gramsci's thought (namely, the privilege he leaves with the category of class), they embraced his notion of hegemony as production of new collective identities. Understood in a broad sense and deprived of its focus on the issues of class, hegemony can be expanded to account for the "terrain in which a political relation is actually constituted" (Laclau, 2000, p. 44). Torfing (1999) suggests a metaphor of horizon, defining hegemony as

the expansion of a discourse, or a set of discourses, into a dominant horizon of social orientation and action by means of articulating unfixed elements into partially fixed moments in a context crisscrossed by antagonistic forces. (p. 101)

Although the discussion of hegemony in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* mainly consisted in polemic with Marxists about the privilege of class, we need to be reminded of the importance of the state in Gramsci's thought in relation to hegemony. A convenient starting point would be the distinction Gramsci draws between the political society and the civil society, both of which underpin the state: political society relates to the coercive apparatus of the state, whereas civil society refers to the network of voluntary social institutions through which the popular consent is established. Given that hegemony is enacted through consent rather than force (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 275–276), one has to address the level of the civil society to meaningfully change the status quo.

This brings us to Gramsci's military metaphorics, particularly the war of maneuver and the war of position. The war of maneuver relates to the revolutionary strategy of a frontal attack against the repressive apparatus of the state (i.e., the political society). Such an attack, however, would do little to change the hegemonic order embedded in the civil society. Comparing the state to a "forward trench" on the way to the "fortress" of civil society, Gramsci (1971) writes: "[W]hen the state tottered, a sturdy structure of civil society was immediately revealed. The state was just a forward trench; behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements" (p. 238).

A different revolutionary strategy invites for siege warfare – a protracted struggle against state institutions, crystallized in the notion of the war of position. Unlike a quick and localized attack against the political society characteristic of the war of maneuver, a war of position presents "a revolutionary strategy… that would be employed precisely in the arena of civil society, with the aim of disabling the coercive apparatus of the state, [and] gaining access to political power" (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 7). In this sense, the war of position is *organic*, as it encompasses the entire social formation of the enemy: "War of position in fact does not consist solely of a set of actual trenches; it encompasses the entire organizational and industrial structure of the territory that lies behind the arrayed forces" (Gramsci, 2007, as cited in Egan, 2016, p. 37).

The enactment of the war of position brings us back to the concept of articulation. Hegemonic struggles, Mouffe (1979/2014, pp. 193–194) argues, do not consist in the confrontation of two elaborated worldviews.[16] Rather, it is the struggle for appropriation of ideological elements, which might lead to *disarticulation* of previous ideological terrain and *re-articulation* of existing ideological elements into a new collective will. This leads Mouffe (2014) to

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[16] This position would be rejected as an essentialist presupposition of the existence of pre-discursive formations.

suggest that the "process of disarticulation-rearticulation constitutes, in fact, the famous 'war of position'" (p. 197).

Understanding the war of position through the dynamics of articulation implies that the struggle against the state is, above all, discursive. As Mouffe (2018) writes elsewhere, "[t]he objective is not the seizure of state power, but, as Gramsci put it, one of 'becoming state'" (p. 47). "Becoming state" can thus be understood as the redefinition of the previously taken-for-granted positions and spaces where the power of the state is exercised:

> What is at stake is not the 'withering away' of the state and of the institutions through which pluralism is organized, but a profound transformation of those institutions to put them at the service of a process of radicalization of democracy. (Mouffe, 2018, p. 47)

The discussion on the state will be continued in chapter 4, where Gramsci's work will be instrumental in theorizing discursive boundaries of the state. At this point, one needs to emphasize that Laclau and Mouffe brought the logic of the war of position beyond the state, applying it to all ideological struggle permeating society. The key takeaway from Gramsci in discourse theory consists in the acknowledgement of the contingent character of social formations, where no necessary links exist between the different elements of signifying chains that sustain them.

2.4.6. Towards the non-discursive in discourse theory

One prominent point of critique leveled against Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical position relates to what they assert as their rejection of the "distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. 93). They claim to juxtapose this position against Foucault's, pointing out that the supposedly non-discursive institutions and techniques in Foucault's work are already constituted as an object of discourse.

Laclau and Mouffe's point triggered a series of critical responses, in which the post-Marxist position is interpreted as idealist (Geras, 1987; Joseph, 2003). Even some more neutral accounts unproblematically accept the idea that Laclau and Mouffe reject the non-discursive, which brings additional confusion; for instance, when suggesting that discourse theory views "social practices as fully discursive" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2010, p. 70). Those defending Laclau and Mouffe's position (Carpentier, 2017, pp. 34–38; Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 109; Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 3), point out that, rather than being idealist, Laclau and Mouffe assert that material world is made internal to the discursive processes of signification. One (lengthy) excerpt from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is particularly frequently quoted in this discussion, as it helps clarify the point:

> The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God' depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertions that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence. (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. 94, emphasis in original)

One recent development regarding the interconnection between the discursive and the material in discourse theory can be found in Carpentier (2017) who reconciles Laclau and Mouffe's framework with its critique from the new materialism perspective. Carpentier argues that discourse theory already contains a number of traces of the material, although acknowledging the imbalance between the discursive and the material (see also introduction in Van Brussel et al., 2019). It is suggested that dislocation is one particularly important bridge between the two:

> [T]he material can dislocate discourses by confronting them with the limits in representing a social reality and/or their internal contradictions, unless discursive repair takes place. In a more positive version, the material can also invite for the *activation of particular discourses*, when the material becomes aligned with a particular discourse, easily allowing for its articulation in a discursive-material assemblage. (Carpentier, 2017, p. 71, my emphasis)

The point on activation of discourses, emphasized in the above quote, brings up the theoretical puzzle on the dynamic between material objects or embodied acts and the discourses enacted. Simply put, how are discursive articulations materially supported? As I will show in the following section, this dynamic has been addressed by a number of poststructuralist thinkers, primarily through a scholarly dialogue between Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau. The key notion connecting a discourse and its activation is performance.

2.5. Performance as discursive-material bridge

The concept of performance evokes a variety of articulations in theoretical literature, which are worth mentioning to avoid possible misinterpretations of the argument laid out in this dissertation. In sociology, it is primarily connected to Goffman's (1956) work on self-presentation in social interactions. Although Goffman is obviously rather far from poststructuralism, his elaboration on social interactions invites for thinking of individuals as not being

fully aware of their subject position: "A performer may be taken in by his own act, convinced at the moment that the impression of reality which he fosters is the one and only reality" (Goffman, 1956, p. 49).

Another influential body of work on performative acts comes from speech act theory. In the book *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin (1962) argues against the essentialist view on language as something that simply names or described the material world. Instead, utterances such as "I do", pronounced at a marriage ceremony, or even "I name the ship Queen Elizabeth", are performative in the sense that they simultaneously *do* what they name.

Austin's non-essentialist approach largely informs Butler's poststructuralist rethinking of the notion of performativity as a link between language and materiality, which is the one to be deployed in this study. Before proceeding to the theoretical discussion, the distinction between performativity and performance needs to be drawn for the sake of conceptual clarity. Performativity, Butler (1993) argues, "must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (p. 2). Performativity, therefore, is attributed to the level of ontology and brings attention to the workings of the discursive.

Performance (or performative acts) is located at the ontic level of individual subjects who *materially enact* discourses. Here, Butler takes a step further than Austin, arguing that "performativity is not only speech, but the demands of bodily action, gesture, movement, congregation" (Butler, 2015, p. 75). Discourses, in other words, are performed through words, but also a variety of material and embodied acts. Butler's early work is particularly focused on the embodied enactment of gendered discourse: "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler, 1990, p. 136). Her exemplification of the contingency of gender with drag performance, which we find in *Gender Trouble*, accentuates the embodied acts that express a particular subject position within the gendered discourse – and, through parody, demonstrate its very "contingent foundation" (Butler, 1991).

The example of drag is also important in that it problematizes the subject behind the performance: "Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by the subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler, 1990, p. 25). The subject's identity is thus activated through the material and embodied acts constitutive of the performance – "the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (Butler, 1990, p. 142). More lately, Butler (2015) explored the bodily enactment of a people as a collective identity, exemplifying her point with protests on Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt: "Sometimes the simple act of sleeping there, in the square, was the most eloquent political statement – and even must count as an action" (pp. 89–90). Analyzing the uprising, she asks the question on the "bodily conditions for the enunciation of 'we the people'" (Butler, 2015, p. 177). It is assembly – as a physical gathering of bodies in a public space – that acts as a performance of the popular identity.

The discussion of the doer behind the deed also invokes what Butler names the constraints of performance. If subject positions are embedded in discourse, an individual performance becomes not a "fully individual matter" (Butler, 1988, p. 525). As she argues elsewhere, again in relation to gender, "[g]ender performativity does not just characterize what we do, but how discourse and institutional power affect us, constraining and moving us in relation to what we come to call our 'own' action" (Butler, 2015, p. 64). Continuing with the theatrical metaphor, "the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene" (Butler, 1988, p. 526). While the agency of the subject is not fully denied – as the drag example shows, the performance carries a potential for subversion of the sedimented discursive order – the agency is inscribed in the existing discursive structures. It is in this sense that one may understand the definition of performance as an "improvisation within a scene of constraint" (Butler, 2004, p. 1).

The notion of performance was applied in a variety of fields far beyond gender studies, insofar as it suggests the view of "the world… enacted in practice" (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014, p. 879). In dialogues with Butler and Žižek, Laclau (2000, p. 78) points out that, "if sufficiently universalized", Butler's notion of a parodic gender performance is constitutive of any social action, as long as it maintains the analytical distance between the performed action (at the ontic level) and the discourse being enacted. Laclau's dialogue with Roy Bhaskar is particularly illuminative of his point, where he suggests that a performance of a discourse is, in fact, its integral part:

> [I]f I'm going there and I open the door, on the one hand I want to open the door, on the other this forces me to a material act, which is to open the door. The performance of that act is what I call discourse; it is not that discourse produces some kind of material effect, but that the material act of producing it is what discourse is… [T]he performative dimension is inherent in the discursive operation – it is not something added to it – and that is why I said that finally discourse and practice are a single category. (Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998, p. 13)

A trace of a similar position can be found, again, in Butler's (1990) work when she suggests that embodied performances are interwoven with discourse:

> [A]cts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through *corporeal signs and other discursive means.* (p. 185, my emphasis)

As I am going to argue in chapter 3, this non-essentialist perspective provides a fresh conceptual lens to look into practices of democracy and participation as a performative assemblage. As it will be repeatedly pointed out, the political is a domain invested with passions, which feed into the variety of

enactments of discourses on participation. To initiate that discussion, we need to start with a theoretical discussion on the interconnection between affect, discourse and performativity.

2.6. Affect, discourse and performativity

The relationship between affect and discourse theory has remained largely undertheorized, and Laclau and Mouffe themselves rarely indulge in such discussions. Nevertheless, discourse theory's engagement with subject formation, with roots in the works of Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan, offers a number of helpful clues for theoretical bridges between discourse and affect, while affect theory brings us to discussions on the material.

The very notion of subject positions draws on Althusser's concept of interpellation, a process that transforms individuals into subjects of ideology. The affective component of interpellation was brought up by Althusser (1970/2014) himself with the metaphor of hailing:

> There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: 'Hey, you there!' One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that 'it really is he' who is meant by the hailing. (p. 191)

The key condition for interpellation, therefore, is the subject's self-recognition in the appeal – "yes, it really is me!" (Althusser, 2014, p. 267).

Žižek's (1990) critique of Laclau and Mouffe's work contains an invitation to expand the reading of the subject beyond subject positions by integrating Lacan's psychoanalysis. In the works of the Essex School, we find such reconciliation in a way that highlights the workings of affect for the political order. The Lacanian notion of the split subject is the starting point here, bringing us to the continuous attempts of the subject to cover its void through affirming its positive identity; or, when this inevitably fails, through continuous identificatory acts (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008). Affect is located on the level of enjoyment (*jouissance*): the subject's identificatory acts are driven by the desire for this enjoyment, which amounts not to a simple pleasure but to the (imaginary) fullness of the subject itself through the possession of the object of desire, *objet petit a*. However, the paradox of identification consists in the impossibility of truly experiencing a lasting enjoyment of the *objet petit a*: "That's not it' is the very cry by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected" (Lacan, 1998, p. 111). The logic of desire therefore necessarily invokes incompleteness: ultimately, "we desire *not* to satisfy our desire" (Glynos, 2001, p. 201), emphasis in original). What causes the subject to nonetheless pursue the attempts to reach *objet petit a* is fantasy as

the "construction that stimulates, that causes desire, exactly because it promises to cover over the lack in the Other, the lack created by the loss of *jouissance*" (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 46).

Two major affects that stem from the Lacanian reading are satisfaction and frustration (Solomon, 2015). The subject experiences satisfaction by partly identifying with the signifiers of *objet petit a,* and frustration due to never being able to fully achieve it. Thus, 'enjoyment' may be experienced as "pleasure and pain, fulfillment and frustration, security and insecurity" (Solomon, 2015, p. 48).

Taken into political analysis, fantasy has been deployed as an explanatory notion for why particular practices "grip" the subject. We find it in the psychoanalytic strand of discourse theory under the label of *fantasmatic logics* of critical explanation (Glynos, 2001; Glynos & Howarth, 2007), as well as the more recent attempts to theorize the field of critical fantasy studies (Glynos et al., 2019). Here too, the notion of fantasy is not understood in terms of an illusion that distorts the *objective* image of the world, but rather as the driving force of the subject (in the quest for enjoyment) that conceals the radical contingency of social relations – a dynamic in which the subject itself is complicit. Fantasmatic logics may thus "help explain why certain demands… succeed in gripping or interpellating" (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 107) individual or collective actors, and will be instrumental for analyzing the social dynamics in the alternative media under study.

The notions of enjoyment, desire, and fantasy present a case for affect as a necessary condition for the formation of the subject. As Laclau (2004, p. 302) himself acknowledged in his later writing, "the dimension of affect is not something to be added to a process of signification but something without which signification, in the first place, would not take place." Mouffe (2005), too, has written on the centrality of passions for the political. In her more recent work, she has addressed discursive practices through the entanglement of "linguistic and affective components" where she speaks of "*discursive/affective* signifying practices" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 73, my emphasis).

Affect as an entanglement has also been addressed by affect theory – or, in the words of Seigworth and Gregg (2010, p. 12), "affect theories" – which bring materiality into the frame. Ahmed (2010) invites for thinking affect as an assemblage – "what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (p. 29). Body is central for experience of affect, with the bodies' "capacity to affect and be affected" (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 2). At the same time, there is a distinction drawn in the literature between affect and emotion. Hook (2011) writes that whereas affect escapes signification as a "bodily intensity resistant to domestication", emotion is attributed to discourse in that is represents "assimilation, a closure and containment of affect within symbolic means" (p. 109). Affect activates certain material objects, triggers particular enactments, and enables their signification within available discursive frameworks.

Affect has been theorized in relation to a broad variety of topics, such as neuroscience, cybernetics, and psychology (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). In this study, I focus on a more political reading of affect. Chapter 3 will address affective investments in participatory processes. With a detour via political theory, I am going to argue that participation is sustained by a series of affects, where fantasmatic logics plays an important role, but is further supported by other affects that help structure discourse on participation.

2.7. Power

The final theoretical concept to unpack is power, which permeates discourse-theoretical ontology and supports this study's theoretical approach to participation. I primarily draw on Michel Foucault's conceptualization of power as a mobile network of relations activated within particular discourses – contrary to other approaches that view power through the lens of dominance and possession.

Lukes (1974) proposes a convenient conceptualization of power consisting of three dimensions. The so-called one-dimensional approach articulates power through coercion; additional nodal points are influence and control (Polsby, 1963). Dahl's (1957) definition of power illustrates this model: "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (p. 201). An exercise of power in this model implies an open conflict, with the actors of the power relationship having opposing perspectives on their interests. Furthermore, this implies that power is a process that may be empirically observed.

A two-dimensional approach to power, articulated by Bachrach and Baratz (1962), repeats many of the same points. Power here is understood to entail an overt conflict as well as influence, manipulation, authority, and force. What differentiates it from the one-dimensional approach is that an observable decision-making is not necessary for the exercise of power; it may be also practiced in situations where potentially dangerous issues are prevented from being raised in the first place. Decision-making and non-decision-making are the inseparable "two faces of power" (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962, p. 952), which gives the name to the approach.

A three-dimensional approach to power, put forward by Lukes (1974), brings in a much-welcome structural perspective, critiquing the behaviorist focus on the two previous models. Power can be still articulated as a brutal oppressive force, but the latter is often unnecessary for a successful enactment of a relationship of power: "A can also exercise power over B by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants" (Lukes, 1974, p. 23). This approach, certainly, echoes the Marxist concept of ideology and especially its development in Gramsci's notion of hegemony, whose consensual character is

emphasized (see section 2.4.5). Arendt (1970) concurred with this position, arguing that "power and violence are opposites" (p. 242). Also for Parsons, power and coercion are disarticulated: "The use of coercive measures, or of compulsion… should not properly be called the use of power at all" (Parsons, 1957, p. 331, as cited in Lukes, 1974). Lukes (1974) concludes: "The most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent… conflict from arising in the first place" (p. 23).

The internal dynamics of power, hidden within the social structure, brings us closer to the poststructuralist approach of Foucault (also utilized by Laclau and Mouffe). For Foucault, power is neither limited to a system of domination nor a group of state institutions and mechanisms that ensure the popular obedience. The Foucauldian analysis of power rejects the idea that power has any central point from which it emanates; in fact, power is everywhere and comes from everywhere, being "rooted in the whole network of the social" (Foucault, 1982/2002, p. 345). Furthermore, power "is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations" (Foucault, 1978, p. 94). Power, in other words, is rearticulated from a possession into a process embedded in discourse – it is "exercised rather than possessed" (Foucault, 1977, p. 26). To be sure, agency is still interwoven with power, which is "exercised by some on others" (Foucault, 1982/2002, p. 340) in a non-egalitarian fashion. Yet, the analysis of power shifts the focus to the discursive level that conditions the apprehension of particular social relations as those of power and domination, but also subjectivates individuals within the discourse. At the same time, power has a material dimension, and is localized and enacted with(in) particular institutions, spaces, and bodies.

Power, in this sense, is inscribed into the very social fabric: "A society without power relations can only be an abstraction" (Foucault, 1982/2002, p. 343). For Foucault, power is not only a force of prohibition, "a law that says no" (Foucault, 1977/2002, p. 120). Power also has a productive function: "it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault, 1977/2002, p. 120). The mutual constitutiveness of power and knowledge is particularly emphasized:

> [P]ower and knowledge directly imply one another… there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (Foucault, 1977, p. 27)

This idea, emerging in *Discipline and Punish*, reflects Foucault's interest in exploration of what he later labelled *regimes of truth* – "the types of discourse [each society] accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault, 1977/2002, p. 131). What interests Foucault is not the matter of the truth as such, but

historical explorations of how effects of truth are produced within discourses that in themselves are neither true nor false. Foucault's relativism in relation to the notion of truth partly explains his reluctance in using the Marxist concept of ideology, which, as he explains, "always stands in virtual opposition to something else that is supposed to count as truth" (Foucault, 1977/2002, p. 119).

The productive effects of power extend to the production of resistance, whose inevitability whenever power is at play Foucault (1978, p. 95) enunciated. Power is exercised from a multitude of points, but so is resistance. And, much as power forms a network passing through apparatuses and institutions, points of resistance tend to unite across stratifications and individual unities. Like power, resistance lacks a locus, being mobile and transitory:

> Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities. (Foucault, 1978, p. 96)

Given the mobile and dispersed character of power relations, Foucault avoids any search for a ruling law of power and domination. Rather, his interest lies in showing the most immediate and most local power relations at work, which make possible certain kinds of discourses and which are supported by these discourses (Foucault, 1978, p. 97). Foucauldian analysis of power stresses the dynamic character of the exercises of power:

> The exercise of power is not a naked fact, an institutional given, nor is it a structure that holds out or is smashed: it is something that is elaborated, transformed, organized; it endows itself with processes that are more or less adjusted to the situation. (Foucault, 1982/2002, p. 345)

To analyze power relations applied to each particular situation, Foucault (Foucault, 1982/2002, p. 344) suggests establishing a number of points: the system of differentiations that permits one to act upon the actions of others (differences of status and privilege, linguistic and cultural difference, and so on); the types of objectives pursued by the actors; instrumental modes of power exercise (threats of violence, effects of speech, means of control, surveillance, rules, etc.); forms of institutionalization, and the degrees of rationalization.

Foucault's perspective on power shares some ontological concerns with discourse theory. Laclau (1990) concurs with Foucault that power is the origin of any objectivity and, furthermore, "the condition for society to be possible" (p. 33). For Laclau, power is an indispensable part of social analysis: "[T]o study the conditions of existence of a given social identity,

then, is to study the power mechanisms making it possible" (Laclau, 1990, p. 32).

In the next chapter, the notion of power is integrated into the analysis of one particular social field: democratic participation. Inspired by Foucault's approach to power, my suggestion is to view power as an immanent condition of participation embedded in its very definition, rather than as a mere object of the struggles.

Chapter 3. Participation and its performances

Participation is word used so widely that, in the words of Carole Pateman (1970), its "any precise, meaningful content has almost disappeared" (p. 1). Pateman's critique is an interesting starting point for theorizing participation: should one seek stabilization of its meaning or, instead, embrace the political logics of radical contingency? The second approach, which I am going to take in this chapter, suggests that the notion of participation is itself a floating signifier whose meaning is ultimately impossible to stabilize amidst the discursive struggles (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007, p. 279). Building on the conceptual toolbox presented in the previous chapter, this one revisits these various positions.

At the same time, participation is grounded in a series of material, embodied and affective practices, which invites for thinking it in terms of assemblage (Carpentier, 2017; Stage & Ingerslev, 2015). The logic of assemblage implies that these various practices on the micro-level level activate particular discourses. To account for this process of activation, I take the poststructuralist concept of performance into the theoretical discussion on participation. This will allow me to connect the ontic level of the material with the ontological level of the discursive – and, furthermore, bring affect into the framework.

In addition, this chapter argues for a political-driven reading of participation where power – understood as a practice rather than a possession – is the keyword (see section 2.7). With a detour across democratic theory, it looks into participation as a practice of inclusion exercised in a variety of social fields beyond institutional politics, including the media. Applying the notion of performance to democratic processes enables a more focused analysis of objects and practices at the ontic level that enact participatory discourses, shifting them to more minimalist or more maximalist intensities.

3.1. Defining participation through power

One way of approaching the discursive struggles around the meaning of participation is to invoke the notion of power. While it may be deployed by a wide range of approaches to participation, it does not always become the nodal

point. Often, participation is invoked only in instrumentalist terms. For instance, organizational studies may articulate participation in terms of achieving organizational purposes such as increase of employees' motivation and performance (Bolle de Bal, 1989; Heller, 1998). Practices as diverse as consumption, attending museums or reading newspapers may all be labeled as participatory, as long as power stays out of the analytic frame and participation is understood as *taking part* (Carpentier, 2016).

Within the more critical approaches, participation is ascribed a political meaning. First, it is articulated in terms of equalization of power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors (Carpentier, 2016). Secondly, decision and decision-making become the two keywords in the operational definition of participation (Likert, 1961; Pateman, 1970). In addition, Carpentier (2012) proposes a triangular model of Access, Interaction, and Participation (AIP), arguing that access and interaction are two necessary conditions for participation, but they should not be conflated with power-sharing as such. While the latter remains the nodal point of participation, access implies a material presence (of people, technology or content) within media organizations, and interaction focuses on the establishment and maintenance of socio-communicative relationships.

Carpentier advances his argument on participation by focusing on its difference from access and interaction – understandably so, since the point consists precisely in the protection of participation's conceptual autonomy. Yet, I am going to argue for the protection of the centrality of interaction in the analysis, too – while simultaneously respecting its conceptual difference from participation. Bringing interaction into a community setting, I will approach it through the related notion of sociality, which highlights the aspects of commonality, co-productivity and intersubjectivity within interaction (Long & Moore, 2012).

While sociality will emerge later in this dissertation as a condition of power-sharing,[17] I will for now continue with a further unpacking of the notion of participation. A delineation of participation as an autonomous object of analysis necessitates a theorization of the various extents of power-sharing. This concern is helpfully addressed by the notion of participatory intensities, explored in the following section.

3.2. Participatory intensities

One of the key works to critically approach the variety of practices labeled as participatory was Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation" consisting of eight rungs. "Obviously", Arnstein clarified, "the eight-rung ladder is a

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[17] This point will be developed in section 7.1.

simplification, but it helps to illustrate the point that… there are significant gradations of citizen participation" (p. 217). Analyzing practices ranging from "non-participation" to "degrees of tokenism" and "degrees of citizen power", Arnstein maintains that citizen participation requires redistribution of power and achievement of *decision-making* authority.

Arnstein's spectrum of (non-)participatory practices inspired numerous developments, adaptations and critiques (Burns et al., 1994; Choguill, 1996; Collins & Ison, 2009; Hart, 1992; Tritter & McCallum, 2006; Whitman, 1994; Wilcox, 1994). The idea that participation can be related to various degrees of influence over decision-making can also be found in Pateman's (1970) distinction between full and partial participation. Partial participation is characterized with a mutual influence of two or more parties in the making of decisions, yet the final power to decide rests on one party only. Full participation, by contrast, is "a process in which each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions" (Pateman, 1970, p. 71). From the organizational perspective, Likert (1961) explored the link between a participatory type of leadership and the character of decision-making processes in organizations.

More recently, the notion of participatory intensities (Carpentier, 2011; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013) was coined to account for the diversity of participatory practices. Within the variety of intensities, Carpentier (2011) suggests locating participation on a maximalist-minimalist axis. While maximalist participation is probably more helpful as a Lacanian fantasy than empirical reality (see Carpentier, 2014, and section 3.3 of this dissertation), the approach brings in a number of elements that are designed to broaden the scope of its application – specifically, by focusing on *the political*, multidirectional participation and heterogeneity. By moving away from the narrow understanding of politics in terms of representational institutions, the model speaks to discourse-theoretical understanding of the *political* as a multiplicity of discursive struggles on many levels of society (see section 2.4.2). There is, therefore, a strong emphasis on social antagonism here: "[E]very social process… has a political dimension as it… is invested with power and conflict" (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 269). Thus, rather than ascribing participatory agency to a handful of actors, the maximalist model embraces their diversity. This leads us to the multidirectionality of participation, which emphasizes the variety of social domains where participatory discourses could be performed.

The oscillation between maximalist and minimalist participatory intensities is indicative of the inherent contingency of democracy and the ongoing process of its construction. The meaning of democracy, and the variety of practices attributed to it, have changed throughout the history and cultures (Andrews & Chapman, 1995; Van Reybrouck, 2016). Neither is democracy necessarily limited to the field of politics. For instance, the New Left, of which Carole Pateman is one important thinker, were keen on democratization of industrial relations. Later in this dissertation, democratization of

communication – by means of alternative media production – will also be addressed. The tension between minimalist participation reduced to elite actors versus a broad inclusion of unprivileged actors into decision-making is present in a variety of social fields. Democracy then, to borrow Macpherson's (1977) expression, appears more of a "kind of society [and] a set of moral ends" (p. 78), rather than simply characteristic of a political system. A theoretical discussion of representative and direct models of democracy would be a helpful entry point into a broader conversation on participation.

3.2.1. Representative models of democracy

On the minimalist dimension of the participatory intensities spectrum, we find a series of representative democratic models, of which there are two prominent examples. One is liberal minimalism, advocated by a number of scholars attributed to the competitive elitist school of thought. Participatory intensities here are reduced to competition among political elites, chosen by citizens at the ballot box. A deeper involvement of citizens into the political process is deemed undesirable; voters in this model are unfavorably characterized as "generally weak, prone to strong emotional impulses, intellectually unable to do anything decisive on their own and susceptible to outside forces" (Held, 2006, p. 144). One of the most influential champions of competitive elitism, Joseph Schumpeter (1943) wrote that "[d]emocracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them" (p. 285), effectively approaching participation in a form of what Touraine (1997) called a "political supermarket" (p. 9). Sartori (1962) further asserted the inevitability of a constellation with "minorities who count for much and lead" and "majorities who do not count for much and follow" (p. 98). The underlying assumption in this model is that liberty is achieved through the balance of autonomous, countervailing elites that would prevent each other from concentrating power in their hands (Kane & Patapan, 2012, p. 16).

The elitist bias of liberal minimalism was contested by democratic pluralists (Dahl, 1956; Parsons, 1959; Truman, 1951). They pushed the articulation of political participation beyond elections, suggesting the need for a multiplicity of active minority groups engaging in the political process on a non-hierarchic basis. Democracy is then articulated as a value consensus on a broad range of issues, rather than merely a system of checks and balances, as suggested by competitive elitists. However, even in the pluralist model, a broad and vibrant citizen participation is not only seen as unnecessary for a healthy functioning of a democracy, but even as potentially detrimental to it. Berelson (1952), for instance, argued that democracy is dependent upon a particular "democratic character" of its participants, which includes personality traits such as responsibility, self-control and self-restraint:

Certain kinds of personality structures are not congenial to a democratic society, could not operate successfully within it, and would be destructive of democratic values. (p. 315)

This view of competitive elitists and pluralists has been challenged within scholarship leaning towards direct forms of democracy. Held (2006, p. 156) argued that the keenness of competitive elitism to protect the political system from an overly active involvement of citizens puts into question its very claim to be democratic. Pateman (1970) problematized Berelson's notion of a pre-existing "democratic character", arguing that democratic attitudes are developed throughout the participatory process, not prior to it (I will return to this point in the next section):

> The major function of participation in the theory of participatory democracy is therefore an educative one, educative in the very widest sense, including both the psychological aspect and the gaining of practice in democratic skills and procedures. (Pateman, 1970, p. 42)

Contrary to the representative models suggesting minimalist participation, democratic theory offers a set of examples of direct democracy that fosters a broadened inclusion of citizens into the political process. Below, I address several examples stemming from anarchism, the New Left, radical and deliberative democracy.

3.2.2. Maximalist-participatory models of democracy

In the discussion on participatory intensities earlier in this chapter, I listed multidirectionality, heterogeneity and the focus on the political (as opposed to politics) as the key characteristics of maximalist participation. They can be found in a number of articulations within democratic theory, suggested by a series of approaches that lean towards direct democracy as the normative model.

One model to begin with is anarchism, which informs part of the findings in this study and is therefore especially worth considering. Privileging bottom-up organizing, anarchists reject political representation through state institutions in favor of delegation (Bakunin, 1992). Decentralization is the keyword, with the concept of organization being of particular concern here, due to its tendency to produce bureaucratic rigidity and corruption of those on top (Ehrlich, 1996). Instead, participatory communities are proposed as forums where issues are discussed and decided upon. Apart from self-management, participatory communities are meant to foster the communal spirit and the enactment of anarchist ethics that put a particular emphasis on equality, justice, and collectivity (Kropotkin, 1924/2020). In addition, the participatory communities emphasize the principle of impermanent organization. The latter implies that

organizations are formed to solve particular problems, but its members disband when it is no longer of utility (Ehrlich, 1996, p. 59).

Another school of thought within maximalist-participatory paradigm was represented by the New Left, primarily in the works of Pateman (1970) and Macpherson (1977). The argument here follows the logic of multidirectionality, suggesting expansion of the democratic contestation beyond representative institutions. Pateman's concern is that minimalist versions of participation hinder the development of political efficacy and a set of psychological qualities and attitudes that underpin behavior of responsible participants of the democratic process. Contrary to the essentialist notion of the "democratic character" discussed by competitive elitists, Pateman argues that democratic attitudes are something learned by individuals, and maintains that civil education is the central function of participation that cannot be realized by simply showing up at the ballot box once every several years. Consequently, representative institutions at the national level are insufficient for democracy and participation has to transcend institutional politics. The industry is the key area for such development, fostering workers' performance, self-esteem, and well-being, as well as acting as acting "as a 'training ground' for participation in the wider political sphere" (Pateman, 1970, p. 97). Family, in Pateman's work, is named as another example of a social institution where democratic practices could be enacted.

The idea of heterogeneity is central in Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) notion of radical and pluralist democracy, where "pluralist" stands for a multitude of political identities articulated into a chain of demands. All of these demands only have a partial character, without a single privileged position from which the chain could be sustained. The chain of demands is thus equivalential (insofar as it treats the various constituents of the chain as equally important) and egalitarian (as the model strives for eliminating their subordinate positioning in society). Examples of these demands include those of anti-capitalists, anti-racists, and feminists. By encouraging participation from a variety of subject-positions and spaces, radical and pluralist democratic model invites for a broad diversity of actors involved in the political process. At the same time, participation should not be approached deterministically:

> The democratic revolution is simply the terrain upon which there operates a logic of displacement supported by an egalitarian imaginary, but that does not predetermine the direction in which this imaginary will operate. (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. 152)

To some extent, the model of deliberative democracy can be included in the discussion on maximalist participatory models. The shared point of departure with the other models here is the concern for disconnection between individual citizens and their representative institutions. While some approaches within the deliberative democracy model accept representational institutions

and minimalist participation (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 30), others redress the issue by calling for more direct inclusion of citizens into the political process. Civil society is deemed instrumental as an alternative site for democratization beyond state institutions (Dryzek, 2002; Habermas, 1989). Critical accounts, however, have pointed at certain constraints of the participatory opportunities of deliberation. As Fearon (1998, as cited in Kane & Patapan, 2012) pointed out, deliberative democracy risks enacting a mere consultation unless collective decisions are taken; Przeworski's (1998) image of a "consultative dictator" also comes to mind. The limitations of deliberative democracy point to the importance of the abovementioned distinction between interaction and participation, as well as the potentially detrimental role of leadership in the democratic process.

3.2.3. Participation and democratic leadership

The notion of leadership creates certain tensions with the discourse on participatory democracy. In its most authoritarian performances, leadership may destroy the participatory process altogether (Harms et al., 2018). At another extreme, we find models that eliminate leadership entirely, such as in anarchism that equates it with coercion (Ward, 1966). However, as is the case with democracy, the meaning of leadership is not fixed but is discursively, historically and contextually constituted (MacKillop, 2018). Among the diversity of articulations, we find examples that integrate leadership into participatory democratic models.

One such model is democratic leadership, first put forward in Lewin and Lippitt (1938). Gastil (1994) unpacks the notion in three ways. One concerns distributing responsibility, thereby fostering decision-making capacity within the demos. This notion comes close to, although does not entirely overlap with, the model of distributed leadership (Woods, 2004). Another articulation of a democratic leadership links it to empowerment, by means of developing individual members' skills and protecting their emotional well-being. Support for deliberation is the third articulation. Democratic leadership solicits advice, opinions and information from the group (Bass & Bass, 2009, p. 617).

When understood in terms of deliberation, leadership is articulated as facilitatorship. The facilitator's position may be performed through keeping deliberation focused and on track; encouraging free discussion and supporting marginalized voices; and ensuring respect for, and even enforcement of, commonly adopted norms and rules (Gastil, 1994). A similar position can be found in Hardt and Negri (2017), for whom leadership is deemed necessary for decision-making and assembly, but does not have to be enacted from a privileged core. Rather, leaders find themselves in a continuous interaction with the *multitude*, acting on its wishes:

[S]uch 'leadership' must be constantly subordinated to the multitude, deployed and dismissed as occasion dictates. If leaders are still necessary and possible in this context, it is only because they serve the productive multitude. This is not an elimination of leadership, then, but an inversion of the political relationship that constitutes it, a reversal of the polarity that links horizontal movements and vertical leadership. (Hardt & Negri, 2017, p. xv)

It is clear that, while strong forms of leadership may be at odds with participation, its specific forms are subject to a variety of possible articulations, which may obstruct or enable more maximalist participation. Enactments of specific forms of leadership largely inform the vector of the entire process.

3.3. Participation as a performance

As argued earlier, participation is an assemblage of discursive articulations and a range of individuals, bodies, material objects, spaces, and affects. In chapter 2, the notion of performance has already been explained as an iterative practice that brings discourse into *being* in the material world. To explore performance of participation, there is a need to account for the non-discursive practices by which actors symbolically identify with discursive structures and perform particular forms of participatory intensities.

To be sure, a number of approaches already suggest the view on participation as a practice. The classical work by Verba and Nie (1972), for instance, defines participation as "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take" (p. 2). Matynia (2009) brings the performative dimension into discussions on democracy, which enables her to emphasize the non-institutional dimension of democracy:

[I]t does indeed reduce the distance between elected representatives and the people, and brings the people themselves closer together, thriving as it does on a rich practice of face-to-face meetings and ceaseless discussions. (p. 5)

Approaching participation as a performance allows the avoidance of a number of pitfalls of the existing approaches. First, these approaches tend to impose a particular reading of participation rather than emphasize the ongoing construction of its very meaning. Second, actors of a participatory process are seen in static, pre-defined and unproblematic roles of citizens, public officials, etc. By offering the notion of the subject position, the poststructuralist framework provides tools to analyze how identities are enacted, overlapped and reflected upon in the process. Third, little attention is paid to supporting discursive conditions that structure meaning in the process, but also limit it. These conceptual shortcomings allow social fluidity to slip away from the focus of

research where well-defined models are privileged over the political logics of their construction.

The notion of decision is a helpful entry point into a poststructuralist and discourse-theoretical reading of participation. Here, decision is understood as more than the act of deciding *per se*. Laclau (2000) maintained that any decision is internally split: "[I]t is, on the one hand, *this* decision (a precise ontic content) but it is, on the other hand, *a* decision (it has the ontological function of bringing a certain closure to what was structurally open)" (p. 79, emphasis in original). In other words, the notion of decision can signify both the act of deciding *and* a temporary closure of a discourse.

Laclau's idea of the structural openness invokes Derrida's (1988) notion of undecidability as a fundamental indeterminacy at the level of social ontology. For Derrida (1992), the moment of *a* decision is seen as a point of break with undecidability. This point was picked up on by Laclau (1996): "The moment of the decision… is this jump from the experience of undecidability to a creative act... [T]his act cannot be explained in terms of any rational underlying mediation" (p. 54). Instead, decisions are informed by power relations and social antagonisms, as Laclau (1990) argues elsewhere: "If two different groups have taken different decisions, the relationship between them will be one of antagonism and power, since no ultimate rational grounds exist for their opting either way" (p. 31). In other words, fixation of the social through decisions entails a suppression of possible alternatives that are not carried out (which is, in itself, an exercise of power). The reverse process – from decision to undecidability – always remains a possibility: as a dislocation of the structure is inscribed in ontology (see section 2.4.3), the moment of dislocation reveals the contingency of decision, bringing it back to the level of undecidability. As Derrida (1992) rather poetically puts it, "[t]he undecidable remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost… in every decision" (p. 24). A decision becomes a way of dealing with the fluidity of the social, of a temporary arrest of the flow of meaning and a production of a closure, "the moment of fixation" (Carpentier, 2016, p. 81). Decision-making, therefore, is instrumental in the emergence of political agents and the creation of new social orders (Howarth, 2004, p. 264).

The question, however, arises about the role of said political agents in the closing of the gap between undecidability and decision, which takes us closer to the notion of performance. Discourse theory problematizes the idea of a unified and autonomous subject (see section 2.4.3). Bringing decision into the frame, we are again reminded of Laclau's (1990) definition of the subject as "nothing but this distance between the undecidable structure and the decision" (p. 30). The point here is that, rather than *taking* decisions in an unproblematically decisionist fashion, a subject *performs* them, activating and enacting particular discourses. To reiterate, the subject is split into a variety of subject-positions provided by a range of discourses. Its decisions, therefore, are constrained by the particular discursive structures in which the subject is

embedded. Laclau (2000) elaborated on this point: "The subject who takes the decision is only *partially* a subject; he is also a background of sedimented practices organizing a normative framework which operates as a limitation on the horizon of options" (p. 83, emphasis in original).

At the same time, the subject has a body, both embedded in a material world – enabled, but also constrained by it. There are limits to what *the material* (body, space, etc.) can do. This condition is further amplified by antagonistic relationships that restrict, discursively and materially, what the subject is capable of doing. Butler (2004) succinctly made this point in relation to gender: "What I call my "own" gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself" (p. 1). It is in this sense – of the limits of the material, but also the social antagonism – that her definition of performance as a "practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (Butler, 2004, p. 1) can be understood.

While constraints remain, the word "scene" is a helpful bridge to space as another, separate material aspect of performance. Space does not remain neutral and partakes in meaning-making alongside other elements of the material apparatus. De Certeau's (1984) distinction between place and space is illustrative of this point, with place associated with stability and space conceived as a type of practice, "a practiced place" (p. 17). Here, one may also invoke Massey's (2005) theorization of space as a continuously constructed product of interrelations, while simultaneously constituted by social interactions; "[s]pace", she writes, "does not exist prior to identities/entities and their relations" (p. 10). Massey is particularly eloquent about the political dimension of space. Her understanding that "the spatial is political" (p. 9) is closely aligned with that of Laclau and Mouffe: space is part of the logic of contingency and remains fundamentally open and unfixed. Space, in this sense, is part of the very same assemblage – activated and ascribed meaning through performance, space is a key material element of discursive struggles.

Taken into the field of participation, this material apparatus of spaces, bodies and objects is integrated into the assemblage that *performs* particular discourses on power-sharing in a context crisscrossed by antagonisms. One more missing element that structures meaning in this process is affect, which the following section will reconcile with the discussion on performance of participation.

3.4. Participation and affect

One final component of the participatory assemblage – affect – is a controversial matter within political theory. Especially post-WWII political science, analyzing the fallout of totalitarian regimes and their popular support, was wary

of the non-rational in the political process. As argued previously in this chapter (see section 3.2.1), democratic theorists such as Schumpeter (1943) and Sartori (1962) saw a prerequisite for a stable democracy in limited forms of participation. Since both were skeptical about the ability of the *demos* to take rational decisions – assuming that the masses are driven by emotions – they considered high levels of mobilizations as potentially dangerous for the democratic order. In a similar vein, Habermas (1989) advocated for a deliberative approach based on a rigid separation of reason from emotion. More recently, political theorists such as Brennan (2016) argued that affect and democracy are necessarily at odds with each other: "[W]hen people are feeling emotional (sad, angry, joyful, etc.), this corrupts their ability to think about politics" (p. 46).

I follow a different approach, one that privileges conflict and dissent as a political ontology and embraces affect as part of the political process. Mouffe (2013) writes about a "passionate affective investment" (p. 44) as a necessary condition for democratic politics, part and parcel of the construction of frontiers within the political field. She suggests that the deliberative model, which understands politics "only in terms of reason, moderation and consensus" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 28), moves us further away from an open expression of dissent and, thus, conceals the existing social antagonisms and unequal power relations. Mouffe's point was echoed in Krause's (2013) plea for embracement of passions in politics:

> Insofar as the moral sentiments are socially constituted and hence affected by existing laws and political practices, they may tend to reflect prevailing inequalities and exclusions, thus perpetuating rather than correcting prejudice. (p. 17)

The psychoanalytic strand of discourse theory (see also section 2.6) unpacked affect in politics from a slightly different perspective, although the underlying egalitarian logic is also present here. Carpentier (2014) approaches participation with the Lacanian notions of fantasy and desire, related to achieving a fully egalitarian society by means of universal power-sharing. Despite the impossibility of achieving the total and complete equalization of power, maximalist participation remains a hegemonic discourse:

> [A] society with totally balanced power relations is an impossible desire, given society's diversity and complexity. Situations of full participation… will always be unattainable and empty, but which simultaneously continue to play a key role as the ultimate anchor points and horizons. (Carpentier, 2014, p. 320)

If participation activates enjoyment as part of its fantasmatic logic, one step further brings us, again, either to frustration triggered by the impossibility of

achieving a fully participatory society, or to satisfaction produced by performance of the democratic discourse.

Let us stay with this latter, more positive affect for a moment. Within the literature on participation, we find empowerment as one key example of the enjoyment produced by participation, together with the associated feelings of self-esteem and self-confidence (Carpentier et al., 2019; Wijnendaele, 2014). Also here, satisfaction can turn into frustration and a series of disempowering emotions such as anger or fear, in case the subject faces inability to fulfil its desire for a participatory society.

The positive affect extends to sociality. Sociality, as has been argued in section 3.1, is an important component of participation, invoking the pleasure of togetherness, friendship and solidarity that may underpin the participatory process in a communal setting. Especially in the Russian cultural context, this pleasure has a particular history. In the analysis of the "last Soviet generation", Yurchak (2006) accentuated the significance of informal hangouts in the Soviet socialization of the 1980s. In the absence of a vibrant public sphere, these hangouts formed, and acted as, micro-publics. Yurchak prefers the Russian word *obshcheniye* (общение) that, although coming close to the notion of hangouts, has a different connotation: partly due to the absence of viable public alternatives, partly due to a particular cultural understanding of camaraderie, this was, he argues, "an intense and intimate commonality and intersubjectivity… both an exchange of ideas and information as well as a space of affect and togetherness" (p. 148). This togetherness created a vaguely defined circle of people labeled with an informal word *svoi*, "the homies", which enacted the enjoyment:[18]

> For many people, belonging to a tight milieu of *svoi*, which involved constant *obshcheniye*, was more meaningful and valuable than other forms of interactions, sociality, goals, and achievements, including a professional career. (p. 149)

Yurchak's astute analysis will be helpful for delineation of the participatory process in the empirical chapters of this dissertation, accentuating the importance of positive affect for structuring the power dynamics and mobilizing resources.

Mobilization is also closely interconnected with more negative affects, where threat emerges as one particularly significant type. The activation of a sense of threat may serve as an effective discursive intervention, as shown, for instance, in securitization theory (Balzacq, 2005; Buzan et al., 1998; Williams, 2003) that challenges the objectivist notion of security and analyzes strategic efforts to elevate the sense of threat in a population. As an affect, threat is

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[18] In chapter 7, I will argue that this enjoyment of the "fullness" of a community structures much of its internal power-sharing.

characterized with a high mobilizing potential. Roe (2008) showed how the stage of identification, where an issue is discursified in terms of security, is followed by the stage of mobilization, when resources (military, financial, etc.) are deployed to combat it. Massumi (2010) points out that threat is experienced prior to its rationalization, in an alarmist *would-have/could-have* logic:

> The affect-driven logic of the would-have/could-have is what discursively ensures that the actual facts will always remain an open case, for all preemptive intents and purposes. It is what saves threat from having to materialize as a clear and present danger—or even an emergent danger—in order to command action. (p. 55)

Threat as an affective condition draws attention to the body and its many fragilities. Vulnerability is interwoven in the assemblage of the corporeal, emotional psychological and affective (Cole, 2016, p. 263). Bodies of the process experience various affects – not only threat, but also pleasure, pain or exhaustion. Yet, the notions of enabling vulnerability (Butler, 1997) and constitutive vulnerability (Cole, 2016) emphasize that this fragile bodily condition is also productive, which brings us to the politics of vulnerability. Ferrarese (2018) asserts that "a large part of our capacities are… set out from a vulnerability" (p. 2). The constitutiveness of vulnerability can be performative: "Being called a name is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language" (Butler, 1997, p. 2). As Butler (2015) maintains elsewhere, vulnerability against an imposed precarity may be "the precondition of any further political claims" (p. 182). The politics of vulnerability emerges as a point of intersection of affect, performativity and the body.

As I pointed out earlier, democracy and participation is not limited to the field of politics, but may be performed in a large variety of social fields. The next chapter addresses media as a contested terrain between privileged actors and multiple political demands. Protecting the theoretical focus on participatory intensities, I will look into the enactments of counter-hegemony by marginalized social actors.

Chapter 4. Alternative media, journalism and the state

Hegemonic articulations, according to Laclau and Mouffe (2014), rely on the pool of "a vast area of floating elements and the possibility of their articulation to opposite camps" (p. 122). Arguably, journalism has remained a terrain for democratic struggles at least since its articulation as a "public sphere's preeminent institution" (Habermas, 1989, p. 181). These "opposite camps" within the discourse on journalism vary depending on the historical moment, or political and cultural context, always remaining subject to discursive articulations. Yet, the floating elements that organize discourses on journalism have arguably remained relatively stable. The first part of this chapter (section 4.1) outlines these elements and their performances, re-reading the struggles around definitions and practices of journalism through the lens of discourse theory and alternative media theory.

Similarly, alternative media have re-activated a range of sedimented practices attributed to the domain of the state. In the second part (section 4.2), I review hegemonic articulations of the state in order to initiate a theoretical discussion on the practices of resistance performed by alternative media, which engage them in a war of position with the state institutions. Through this literature review, the chapter prepares the ground for empirical analysis of subject positions emerging in performances of alternative media practice. Furthermore, it contextualizes the notion of the war of position within the counter-hegemonic practices of alternative media.

4.1. Alternative media and journalism

For the purpose of focusing on power struggles around media production, a helpful starting point is to approach journalism as an ideology. This, following Deuze's (2005) tailored definition, may be defined as a system of beliefs shared by a professional group of people. If "ideology serves to conceal the contingency and contestability of social relations" (Howarth et al., 2016, p. 2), then one may consider journalistic ideology as a sedimented discursive

practice amid a variety of other discursive practices flowing in the discursive field. In other words, suggested by Carlson (2016) journalism is "a set of institutionalized practices embedded within a web of sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting discourses" (p. 353). On this critical note, one may also recall Hanitzsch's (2007) definition of the journalistic culture as "the arena in which diverse professional ideologies struggle over the dominant interpretation of journalism's social function and identity" (p. 370).

As already discussed in chapter 2, individuals are interpellated by discourses and identify with them by acting from particular subject positions. Journalistic roles,[19] as Hanitzsch & Vos (2018) remind us, "have no true essence; they exist because and as we talk about them" (p. 151), to which one may add that journalistic roles exist insofar as they are performed. The discursive field of journalism can then be seen as a pool of meanings deployed in the ongoing construction of the journalist as a subject position. This reservoir of meaning also provides opportunities for counter-hegemonic discourses to disarticulate and rearticulate certain elements of the existing discourses, and for marginalized actors to perform them.

Journalism studies offer a series of articulations of the journalist as a subject position. These articulations will be considered in more detail later in this chapter; for now, the point is to show the variety of approaches to journalistic identity as a contingent discursive formation. Deuze's (2005) definition suggests five nodal points underpinning the professional identity: public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics. Public service here is interpreted as collecting and disseminating information in the public's best interest, thereby performing the watchdog function. The nodal point of objectivity is further articulated through impartiality, neutrality, and fairness. Autonomy is understood as freedom and independence in the journalistic work, whereas immediacy captures the sense of actuality and speed characteristic of news production. Finally, ethics implies the sense of validity and legitimacy.

Hanitzsch (2007, p. 371) brings in further complexity by outlining the discursive field where articulations of the professional subject position are anchored. The field consists of three continua: interventionism, power distance, and market orientation. In terms of interventionism, the range of articulations covers subject positions from a socially committed and motivated journalist to a detached and uninvolved journalist dedicated to impartiality and objectivity. As to power distance, one extreme of the spectrum represents an adversarial articulation of journalism versus loyal journalism oriented towards collaboration with those in the positions of authority. Lastly, market orientation refers to articulations of the audience, discursified either through the market logic of consumption or the political logic of citizenship. Various combinations across the spectrums crystallize in four variations of the subject position:

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[19] Hanitzsch and Vos use the label "roles" similarly to what I call "subject positions" to talk about identities.

popular disseminator, detached watchdog, critical change agent, and opportunist facilitator (Hanitzsch, 2011). More recent theorizations (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018) reformulated the four variations into six journalistic roles in the political life: informational-instructive, analytical-deliberative, critical-monitorial, advocative-radical, development-educative, and collaborative-facilitative roles.

Adding an important hegemonic dimension to the theoretical discussion, Carpentier's (2005) model located the variety of articulations on a hegemonic/counter-hegemonic axis. This model, too, constructs three continua – from objectivity to subjectivity, from autonomy to dependence and from "professional elite" to "part or representative of the audience." It draws a distinction between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic articulations of the professional identity. The hegemonic discourse is represented by a set of normative models, primarily the liberal model that allocates journalism its watchdog function, as well as the social responsibility model that assumes the public accountability of media organizations. The alternative, counter-hegemonic discourses include participatory-democratic and advocacy forms of journalism, moving towards more deprofessionalized and mobilizing forms of media production.

Approaching journalism as a field of discursivity prevents us from slipping into a deceptive mainstream/alternative dichotomy. In this, I follow Kenix's (2011) approach to mainstream and alternative media as a spectrum, rather than two separate categories. Earlier studies by scholars within alternative media research support this approach; for instance, Atton's (2002a) study of liberal and radical press coverage in the UK has shown that "whilst there are distinctive journalistic techniques… both radical and mainstream adopt elements from each other, whether in writing style or in news values and framing" (p. 491).

The overview of the discursive field of journalism begins with unpacking the hegemonic discourses and their performances. It specifically addresses objectivity, autonomy and formalized connection to media organizations as the pillars of the professional subject position. Furthermore, practices and material artefacts are activated in the enactments of these discourses.

4.1.1. Hegemonic discourses on journalism

Objectivity is often named a defining element of journalistic professionalism (Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1978). Moreover, "questions of journalistic professionalism are themselves tied into questions of what it means to be an objective journalist", Anderson and Schudson (2020, p. 137) maintained. Showing a widespread acceptance in the West as much as in the Global South (Hanitzsch 2007), the striving for objectivity is seen as the demarcating line of journalism as a jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988), ensuring its credibility as the

Fourth Estate (Deuze 2005). Articulations of objectivity in the literature commonly include impartiality, balance and neutrality (Deuze, 2005; Raeijmaekers & Maeseele, 2017; Westerståhl, 1983). Factuality, or fact-based reporting, too, is an important discursive moment of objectivity (Westerståhl, 1983). In particular, fact-checking is one of the primary enactments of this professional standard, albeit not without limitations in relation to one's own partisan political pressures (Graves, 2016). The practice of fact-checking particularly fits the "detached watchdog" model based on minimal interventionism and a critical approach to the elites (Hanitszch, 2011).

Importantly for discourse-theoretical analyses, articulations of journalistic objectivity often remain, simultaneously, part of political and fantasmatic logics. That objectivity remains the golden standard, "the most sacred belief held among journalists" (Nordenstreng, 1995, as cited in Raeijmaekers & Maeseele, 2017, p. 648), is ensured by institutionalized performances within the field of media production, such as self-regulation and ethical codes. In that, objectivity indeed remains the cornerstone of the logic of fantasy driven by "many management and government techniques" (Glynos & Howarth 2007, p. 146) in the professional journalistic work. In this sense, the prior critique against objectivity as unrealistic and unattainable (Schudson, 1981; Tuchman, 1978) overlooked the very fantasmatic logic of objectivity. But, as a value contested by counter-hegemonic discourses on journalism, objectivity is also part of the political logic, insofar as it entails "articulation of equivalence and difference, and… the construction of internal frontiers and the identification of an institutionalized 'other'" (Laclau, 2005, p. 117).

The second nodal point in the hegemonic discourse on journalism is autonomy, most commonly crystallized in the notion of the Fourth Estate within the liberal model. Autonomy implies the independence and editorial freedom of journalists in their work, "be it public criticism, marketing or corporate ownership" (Deuze 2005, p. 448). Independence from both external and internal pressures as an *ideal-typical value* (Deuze 2005) is seen as a key to the successful exercise of the democratic function of journalism. Part of the performance of this autonomy is the relationship between journalists and their sources (Berkowitz, 2009), based on a broad consensus on the importance of protection of the sources' confidentiality (Berkowitz et al., 2004).

The third nodal point of the discourse on professional journalism relates to the embeddedness of individual actors in organizational context of news media. This link to professional media, sustained through formalized membership, is a particularly noteworthy part of performances of the professional identity, which relies on preestablished rules, conventions and procedures (Westlund & Ekström, 2020). Soloski's (1989) study of internal routines within news media showed their successful reproduction within the organizational milieu. The study especially emphasized the importance of a hierarchical order within the media organizations, ensuring their smooth operation through disciplinary mechanisms and internal self-regulation. Newer evidence

(e.g., Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2014) supports the suggestion of the centrality of newsroom socialization for journalists' perception of professional roles. The formalized membership in media organization cultivates the status of professional elite (Carpentier, 2005), supported by a formal employment and material objects such as press cards, enshrining the symbolic power. Daily routines and rituals within media organizations remain one of the key manifestations of professional identity, "selectively internalized" (Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2020, p. 111) by individuals through daily on-site performances.

The final component of the journalist's identity connects to the notion of audience as its constitutive outside. Especially articulations of the audience as passive and subordinate, prominent in media effects research in particular, strengthen the antagonistic relation between producers and consumers. In a classic quote, Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) feared the "narcotizing dysfunction of mass media" that would be "transforming the energies of men from active participation to passive knowledge" (p. 239). Within journalism studies, too, it has been argued that the very discourse of journalistic professionalism establishes unequal power relations between media consumers and producers, which leads the latter to staying "out of touch" (Deuze, 2008, p. 857) with the former. In other, more empowering and positive articulations, the audience is seen as active (Fiske, 1987), critical (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994) and engaging in an active construction and interpretation of meaning (Liebes & Katz, 1993).

To be sure, the relationship between media producers and audience members had been significantly complicated over the course of transformation of the mediascape from the era of broadcasting to digitalization and user-generated content, resulting in the increasing interdependence of media production and consumption. Reflected in notions such as prosumption (Beer & Burrows, 2007) and produsage (Bruns, 2008), media and journalism research envisioned a new position for the "people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006). Yet, the change in material circumstances did not always attend to the discursive conditions, where power is still often unequally distributed. The transformation of material means of consumption into means of production, rather than being a guarantee, requires struggles for new forms of social organization (Allan & Hintz, 2020). The following section addresses some of these struggles.

4.1.2. Counter-hegemonic discourses on journalism

The nodal points supporting the professional identity of a journalist are actively contested. These counter-hegemonic positions have found a home in the notion of alternative media, although a range of other labels has been proposed in the theoretical literature. This section revisits the debates, protecting the idea that the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, the mainstream and

alternative are a spectrum rather than two opposite categories (Kenix, 2011).

4.1.2.1. Discursive struggle over definitions

Alternative media is a notion encompassing a variety of media practices that position themselves, in one way or another, in opposition to mainstream media. Needless to say, the meaning of *mainstream* and *alternative* is relative: "[E]verything, at some point, is alternative to something else" (Downing, 2001, p. ix), but also contextually dependent: "[w]hat is considered as alternative medium in one country can be defined as mainstream in another country" (Hájek & Carpentier, 2015, p. 368). The blurry boundaries between the two notions have underscored the play of social contingency in the struggle within the field of media production. More recently, an additional element to this struggle has emerged from the critique of the "previous… 'progressive' perspective" (Holt et al., 2019, p. 860) as inadequate for the contemporary media environment, characterized by misinformation, polarization and partisanship (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2019; Theorin & Strömbäck, 2019).

Attempts to overcome the limitations of the notion *alternative* included nominations such as *radical* (Downing, 2001), *citizens'* (Rodríguez, 2001), *activist* (Waltz, 2005), and *critical* (Fuchs, 2010). The different definitions shed light on particular aspects of the counter-hegemonic positions. The notion of "activist media" implies their keenness on getting involved in a direct political action (Waltz, 2005). The label of "citizens' media" stresses the enactment of a democratic citizenship through the transformation, fragmentation and reclaiming of the established mediascape (Rodríguez, 2001, 2003). Couldry and Curran (2003, p. 7) argue that the notion "citizens' media" emphasizes the political origin of the otherwise neutral label "alternative media", while doing justice to its original meaning. From the Marxist and Frankfurt School perspective, Fuchs (2010) suggests the term "critical media" to account for the proletariat counter-public sphere that they construct.

I draw upon the earlier theorizations in outlining three dimensions where alternative media perform the counter-hegemonic discourses on journalism. These concern the subject positions of (alternative) media producers and their audience; internal structure leaning towards the democratization of communication and horizontal networks; and radical content that provides space to new voices, often excluded or underrepresented in mainstream reporting practices.

4.1.2.2. Re-articulation of professional journalistic identity and audience members' position

Counter-hegemonic discourses on journalism address the problem of access into journalistic production, which in the hegemonic discourses is reserved for the professional elite. The re-articulation comes in two forms: the emergence of the subject position of alternative media producer and the rethinking of the audience.

First, the producers of grassroots media are redefined in a number of ways that detach them from the professional discourse. The subject position of alternative media producer may be unpacked in terms of partisanship, voluntarism, and informal organizational membership. Partisanship here is understood in terms of an expressed commitment to a social or political cause, rather than merely being a mouthpiece; as Downing (1984, as cited in Atton 2002b, p. 20) maintains, alternative media "may be partisan, [but] should never become a tool" of any political force. Partisanship in this articulation comes closer to the notion of advocacy journalism, which aims to speak on behalf of marginalized and oppressed groups in society (Waisbord, 2009).

Informal organizational membership is another nodal point in the articulation of the alternative media producer. Unlike professional journalists, the alternative media producer is only informally affiliated with the outlet, which does not offer formal employment. The subject position is thus also articulated through voluntarism, where the labor is understood to be donated as part of gift economy (Carpentier, 2017, pp. 138, 331).

The second re-articulation of journalistic professionalism relates to the construction of the audience as the constitutive outside of journalism. Such positioning of the audience by the professional media, the critical argument goes, makes its inclusion impossible as long as the identities of the journalist and the audience are defined in mutually antagonistic terms. Facilitation of access then continues with rethinking the very subject position of the audience member. Counter-hegemonic articulations emphasize the necessity of a two-way process, calling for a more equal relationship between producers and audience members (Carpentier, 2005, p. 203). The resistance of alternative media to commercialization has been considered one way of facilitating access, assuming that a decreased dependency on profits would redefine the audience in terms of users (Downing, 2001) or citizens (e.g. Hanitzsch, 2007; Rodríguez, 2001), rather than activating the position of consumers driven by the market logic.

Especially the inclusion of non-professionals into the media production process and their role has remained a subject of reflexivity and contestations. In minimalist-participatory models characteristic of mainstream media, the audience members – sometimes appearing under the label *ordinary people* – may get access into the process and its premises; yet, their decision-making

power remains limited. Inclusion in this model is performed mainly through interaction with media professionals (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007), but even then the articulation of the audience members may remain antagonistic in relation to the elite participants. Whereas the former are articulated as a mass holding fragmented opinions, the latter represent individuality and expert knowledge (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007, p. 285). By contrast, in more maximalist-participatory models professional journalists do not necessarily disappear from the scene, but remain in the position of non-patronizing assistants to the ordinary people who produce their own work (Traber, 1985, as cited in Atton, 2002b).

The audience-producers dynamic becomes even more complex in the community media model, where participation translates into facilitation of access by members of a community for members of the same community. Community is an elusive and highly unstable concept, which is acknowledged by this model: here, it is rather broadly understood as a product of articulatory practices and symbolic construction (Howley, 2005), performed through various expressions of belonging. Since media production in this model is seen as a service to the community (Bailey et al., 2008), the latter is also understood to be the primary audience. Given the horizontality of the community structure, this also implies that the audience is encouraged to take the position of media producers, co-creating content that is relevant for the specific community.

Carpentier (2017, pp. 126–127) triangulates this dynamic into a model of "articulatory relations" between community members, community media producers and the audience members. Within the community media setting, these subject positions largely overlap, further re-articulating the subject position of the audience and blurring the unstable boundary between production and consumption (see also section 4.1.1). These relations do not remain unproblematic, however. One pitfall – especially relevant for the empirical part of this study – concerns the power relations within the community, where particular individuals may, for various reasons, intervene in the production process (Hadland and Thorne, 2004, as cited in Carpentier, 2017), jeopardizing the community's horizontality. The community media model, therefore, brings a helpful theoretical perspective on the fluid identifications within the multiple layers of media production, limited by the ongoing enactments of power. The empirical chapters of this study will follow up on the idea of the multiple and partially overlapping layers that structure participation.

4.1.2.3. Performance of alternative structures

The discussion on the horizontal structures of community media, reviewed in the previous section, brings us to a broader point raised by alternative media in relation to the organizing process within mainstream media. The critique of professional journalism – and especially its commercial actors – has

concerned the hierarchical, managerial forms of internal organization. In its extreme, this critique takes Chomsky's (1997) characterization of corporations as "basically tyrannies, hierarchic, controlled from above... The major media are just part of that system" (para. 9). By contrast, counter-hegemonic discourses suggest a more horizontal internal structure. Participation here is understood as inclusion in the decision-making process, in terms of decisions on both content and the process itself (Carpentier, 2011).

The rejection of hierarchical order partly stems from the historic embeddedness of alternative media in grassroots movements, sensitive to issues of subordination and eager for a more democratic communication. Downing (2001) and Atton (2002b) emphasize this performative component of alternative media production that foster

> participation and communication through self-awareness, through reflexivity amongst the members of the collective, who must remain sensitive to the cultural and political conditions that affect their organizational choices. (Atton, 2002b, p. 99)

Considering the embeddedness of alternative media in civil society organizations and communities, participation often has to be negotiated within an already complex structure, characterized by interconnectedness of its various elements. Bailey et al. (2008) employ Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) metaphor of rhizome to account for the elusiveness of the structure of alternative media. In essence, the metaphor symbolizes fluidity, which is juxtaposed to *arborescent* thinking that privileges order and unity. Applied to alternative media, the concept of rhizome may be unpacked in three categories – connection and heterogeneity, multiplicity, and asignifying rupture. Connection and heterogeneity point at the non-hierarchical, strictly horizontal form of a rhizome, with any of its points connected to anything other: it "has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25). Multiplicity implies that a rhizome does not have a clear origin or central point: "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7).

Connection, heterogeneity and multiplicity are characteristic of alternative media. Positioned at arm's length from both the state and the market, in the midst of multiple networks and movements, and often operating within a loose internal structure, alternative media embody the key qualities of a rhizome. These qualities open up opportunities for experimentation, which remain limited within more established editorial routines of professional media driven by the arborescent logic. The logic of the rhizome may often result in sporadicity of the production process (as will be vividly shown in the empirical part of this dissertation), which further adds to its instability. However, the notion asignifying rupture indicates that, if broken at any spot, a rhizome will start

up again: "A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). While particular alternative media outlets may be short-lived, new projects sporadically emerge.

The networked, rhizomatic structure does not only concern internal organization, but also forms of distribution. Historically, alternative media relied on alternative sites of distribution, such as clandestine and underground networks (Atton 2002b). In Russia, the Soviet *samizdat* was a particularly important example, where one gained access to the media in exchange of a promise to retype the *samizdat* with multiple carbon copies for future readers (Downing, 2001, p. 356). The rise of the internet solved many of the puzzles with distribution and, in some ways, intensified the rhizomatic nature of alternative media – considering the web's initially chaotic, decentralized and uncontrolled nature (Dahlgren, 1996; Platon & Deuze, 2003). The Independent Media Center (Indymedia) was perhaps the most prominent example, where sporadic communication between the many branches of the network was taking place through email lists or chat channels (Platon & Deuze, 2003).

The distribution of alternative media reminds us that the performance of alternative structures invariably involves space, activating its political dimension (see section 3.3). In the aforementioned community media model, the link is sustained through the geographical relationship between the media outlet and the local community it serves, emphasizing the grassroots character of the production and thus the complex structures of interaction and self-organization. Returning to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), one may also invoke their logic of deterritorialization, which disrupts the arborescent by blurring boundaries and decentralizing structures. The internet is one obvious example of this logic. One may recall the optimistic outlook of the early work within digital media studies: the emergence of Web 2.0 was associated with the creation of a more inclusive and accommodating space for social and political struggles than the established political systems – and spaces – allowed (e.g., Fenton, 2007; Sassen, 2005). As the empirical part of this dissertation will argue, a similar dynamic may be observed in participatory media, where the performance of alternative structures fosters autonomous spaces for political processes on a micro-level.

4.1.2.4. Enactment of alternative voices and their representations

The third level of contestation of the professional journalistic ideology addresses voices and their representations. Hegemonic discourses on journalism articulate objectivity and neutrality as core professional values. The critique of the mainstream media's *view from nowhere* is closely linked to the ways of news construction in professional media. Harcup's (1998, as cited in Atton, 2002b) question "Whose news is it anyway?" aims at the news values that

provide a disproportionately extensive coverage of power elites and celebrities (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, 2017). By privileging the already privileged voices while marginalizing the rest, mainstream news function ideologically (O'Neill & Harcup, 2020; Schudson, 2003), supported by the material inequalities in the field of media production (McChesney, 2003).

In contrast to the hegemonic norm of neutrality, counter-hegemonic discourses lean towards the more interventionist, advocative, socially committed and motivated forms of journalism (Hanitzsch 2007). Alternative media "privilege a journalism that is closely wedded to notions of social responsibility, replacing an ideology of 'objectivity' with overt advocacy and oppositional practices" (Atton, 2003, p. 267). Alternative construction of news focuses on the perspective of people with low status in relation to those in the position of authority and individuals from more privileged social groups (Atton, 2002b, p. 11).

In the community media model, social responsibility is performed through serving a community (Bailey et al., 2008). In particular, these advocacy practices are crystallized in the notion of native reporting. Atton (2002b) defines native reporting as

> the activities of alternative journalists working within communities of interest to present news that is relevant to those communities' interests, in a manner that is meaningful to them and with their collaboration and support. (p. 112)

In the news constructed from the perspective of native reporting, individuals from marginalized communities may not only be made visible as significant actors, but also become participants of the process itself, "creating news to their situation" (Atton 2002b, p. 116). Thus, community members are empowered to take responsibility for their own representations (Bailey et al. 2008, p. 14).

4.2. Alternative media and the state

Alternative media's embeddedness in the civil society and their continuous enactments of counter-hegemony place them in an ambivalent position in relation to the state.[20] We know from Gramsci about the tensions between political and civil society, and the need for counter-hegemonic actors to engage with the civil society if they aim to subvert the status quo (see section 2.4.5). In this section, I deploy the concept of the war of position to argue that alternative media, through their enactments of counter-hegemony, expose the contingency of the state as a discursive formation. I begin by reviewing

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[20] Alternative media are also particularly positioned in relation to the market, but this is not my main focus here.

hegemonic discourses on the state, which prepares the ground for considering the ways in which non-mainstream media actors disrupt the order in which the state remains the single privileged actor of the political process.

4.2.1. Hegemonic discourses on the state

The state is a multilayered concept that includes a range of ideological, material, and judiciary relations. Fuchs (2018, p. 72) lists six dimensions of the state: 1) relationship of the state to the economy and 2) its citizens; 3) intra-state and 4) inter-state relations, as well as 5) semiotic representations *by* the state (discourses by the state) and 6) semiotic representations *of* the state (discourses on the state). The two latter dimensions serve as a helpful point of departure, allowing an approach to the state as a discursive formation (supported, as I will argue, by a series of material arrangements). As a discourse, the state has been extensively discussed in political theory through two nodal points: the state as a heterogeneous system and the state as a central actor of the political process.

The nodal point on the state as a system emphasizes its separation from other social actors. In this way, Easton (1957) defines the state as "a self-contained entity surrounded by, but clearly distinguishable from, the environment or setting in which it operates" (p. 384). In a similar vein, statist approaches in political studies (for instance, the works of Nordlinger, Krasner and Skocpol) articulate the state as an autonomous entity whose agency is independent from other forces within society (Mitchell, 1991, p. 82). Furthermore, the state is understood to have sufficiently clear boundaries, demarcated by "all those actions more or less directly related to the making of binding decisions for society" (Easton, 1957, p. 385). The state functions as an overarching system for its various elements that acquire meaning by means of interrelation: "The role of a particular institution… can be understood only if the institution is placed in the context of the total political system of which it is a part" (Almond et al., 1955, pp. 1046–1047). On the micro-level, the state materializes through what Mitchell (1991) called "mundane social processes we recognize and name as the state" (p. 95), examples of which may include border patrols or police checks. Through these practices, the state appears as a sedimented assemblage of meanings, practices and institutions that "live a relatively quiet life, interrupted only by political attempts to reform or even 'overthrow' the state" (Torfing, 1999, p. 71). Thus, despite the internal contradictions and dependency on the exterior in its construction, the state creates an impression of operating "as a cohesive and unitary whole" (Gupta, 1995, p. 392).

The second nodal point of the discourse articulates the state as a privileged actor in the political process. One source of these articulations is Marxist theory which, despite its focus on the economy, delegated the state the key function of organizing the ruling class. Poulantzas (1968) defined the state as "the

instance that maintains the cohesion of a social formation" (p. 44). In Althusser's (1970/2014) theorizations of ideological state apparatuses, the state emerges not only as a privileged but essentially as an omnipresent actor: in his model, all social and cultural institutions that serve to support the dominant class are attributed to the domain of the state. Another location of the nodal point of the state as a central actor can be found in the pluralist school of democratic theory (Dahl, 1956; Parsons, 1959; Truman, 1951). Here, the state is understood to take the central role in guaranteeing the stability of the democratic system by mediating and adjudicating between the demands of various interest groups seeking influence (Held, 2006). The state itself, in this model, remains neutral and serves as a mere system of checks and balances.

4.2.2. Counter-hegemonic discourses on the state

Counter-hegemonic discourses on the state have critiqued its privileged position within political theory, and attempted to decentralize it: as Foucault (1978) noted, "[i]n political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king" (pp. 88–89). The state, he argued, was too often presented as the "cold monster we see confronting us" (Foucault, 1978/2002, p. 220). Exaggerating the importance of the state "as a target needing to be attacked and a privileged position needing to be occupied" (Foucault, 1978/2002, p. 220) is unhelpful for a nuanced analysis of power dynamics in society: "Maybe," Foucault mused, "after all, the state is no more than a composite reality and a mythicized abstraction, whose importance is a lot more limited than many of us think" (p. 220).

Foucault undertook one of the key poststructuralist efforts to move beyond the state with his notion of governmentality. The concept referred to the ensemble of institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections that enable the form of power which "has as its primary target the population and as its essential mechanism the apparatuses of security" (Foucault, 1978/2002, p. 219). As he later explained:

> I was concerned not with some omnipresent power, almighty and above all clairvoyant, diffusing itself throughout the social body in order to control it down to the tiniest detail, but… techniques for 'governing' individuals – that is, for 'guiding their conduct.' (Foucault & Rabinow, 1986, pp. 337–338)

Governance is thus seen as a set of techniques and practices produced by particular rationalities, connecting the political with the ethical: "One governs one's own conduct, while government guides the conduct of others. Government is the conduct of conduct" (Simons, 1995, p. 36).

This perspective was further developed, especially within anthropology of the state, which looked into ways to disaggregate and decenter the state:

"Rather than take the notion of 'the state' as a point of departure, we should leave open the analytical question as to the conditions under which the state does operate as a cohesive and unitary whole" (Gupta, 1995, p. 392). Cultural approaches thus view the state as an assemblage of fragmented practices and sedimented meanings, seeking to

> bring together the ideological and material aspects of state construction, and understand how "the state" comes into being, how "it" is differentiated from other institutional forms, and what effects this construction has on the operation and diffusion of power throughout society. (Sharma & Gupta, 2006, p. 8)

We are then faced with the question of practices that enable the performance of the state as a pre-discursive entity, but also articulations and enactments that may subvert this hegemonic representation. Gramsci's notion of the war of position is helpful for this purpose, especially in its interpretation by Mouffe as a practice of re-articulation and disarticulation (see section 2.4.5). I argue that alternative media is one domain where an alternative to the hegemonic discourse on the state is enacted.

Participation acts as one of the key pillars of this alternativeness, with the very organization of alternative media enabling them to perform resistance to the state. Operating in a flat media environment (Ahva et al., 2015), they strive to create spaces for participation beyond institutional politics and the hegemonic state discourse. These practices often serve as a compensation of the shortcomings of political representation on the level of state institutions, but they also recall the need to expand the framework for analyzing the distribution of power to account for the political. We are remined, once again, of the rhizomatic model of alternative media (see section 4.1.2.3), which emphasizes their elusiveness, interconnections among each other and with civil society, as well as the linkages with market and state. The root metaphor may also remind us of Foucault's (1978) notion of mobile and transitory points of resistance (see section 2.7). It has been argued that through the very contingent process of operation, by balancing verticality and horizontality, alternative media perform resistance to the following quote. The point is made in relation to media organizations, but it may equally be applied to the state:

> Alternative media do establish different types of relationships with the market and/or the state, often for reasons of survival, and in this fashion they can still be seen as potentially destabilizing… the rigidities and certainties of public and commercial media organizations. (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 28)

Gramsci (1971) has famously written about the "primordial and gelatinous" state of the civil society "in the East, [where] the state was everything" (p. 238). However, the very wideness of the gap between the civil society and the state in Russia (Chebankova, 2012) has, arguably, contributed to development of a large variety of practices that kept the civil society away from the state.

Other examples from Eastern and Central Europe include Downing's (2001) case study of Czech and Polish underground media, which provides an illustration of how collective, decentralized self-organization succeeded in challenging the logic of the state. This may be further exempified with the Soviet practices of circulation of semi-legal literature among intellectual milieus of Moscow and Leningrad that would use particular public spaces – normally cafes and bars – as meetings points. Yurchak (2006) argued that these interactions essentially replaced the monopoly the Soviet state had on providing free education: "[I]n the 1970s you could receive a better literary and philosophical education in the Saigon [café] than in the departments of philology or history of Leningrad University" (p. 145). Translating this into discourse-theoretical vocabulary, Yurchak is effectively talking about a hegemonic struggle against the state in the cultural domain. The process of state transformation, in this sense, invokes the logic of its gradual replacement by redrawing discursive boundaries between the legitimate and the illegitimate.

I will return to Yurchak's observations in the analytical chapters, which are especially valuable insofar as they bring up the material and affective dimensions of resistance against the hegemonic discourse of the state. The analysis, which stretches from chapters 6 to 8, is preceded by methodological chapter where the research design of the study is outlined.

Chapter 5. Methodology, method and research design

This chapter clarifies the methodological approach employed in this doctoral project. The chapter is organized in two parts. The first part, section 5.1, outlines the theory on method, which revolves around a series of epistemological positions connected to social constructionism and, more specifically, discourse theory. It also presents the research design, defending particular choices made in this study. Section 5.2 presents a set of specific research procedures undertaken to tack the empirical aspects of the study and provides essential information on the corpus of data. Furthermore, it discusses ethical considerations in data collection and efforts to ensure quality of research, its validity and reliability.

5.1. Research methodology

5.1.1. Situating the study in the qualitative research paradigm

The study is embedded in a qualitative research methodology. Despite the increasingly blurred divide between quantitative and qualitative paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), the latter retains a number of distinct features and merits. One is its preference for real-world settings, as opposed to a controlled and experimental research environment (Yin, 2015). The social world here is seen as "an open system that is not susceptible to 'closed' experimental observation and analysis" (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, pp. 31–32). The context of observed social phenomena, therefore, acquires a particular significance, leading to the tendency to apply methods such as case studies and participant observations (which will be discussed later in this chapter).

Another key feature of qualitative research is its focus on meaning, as opposed to a mere physical behavior or frequency. The purpose of qualitative research inquiry consists in uncovering the meanings invested in social phenomena, which entails approaching research participants' perspectives as a starting point, rather than relying on researchers' values and preconceptions (Yin, 2015, p. 9). There is, however, a delicate balance between representation

and critique. Certain qualitative approaches, such as phenomenology, may base interpretation on participants' own viewpoints. In its extreme forms, it strives for a symmetrical and dialogical relationship between the researcher and the researched, where the researchers effectively act as spokespeople for the informants (see Jørgensen & Phillips, 2010, p. 199). Other approaches, especially those originating in the critical tradition, argue that social science explanations are not reducible to self-interpretations of research subjects but need to provide an elucidation that goes beyond their self-understandings (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 13).

Initiating the discussion on discourse analysis as a theory in chapter 2, I have already listed the ontological and epistemological premises of positivism. Naturally, the rejection of "pure" objectivity and neutrality as a basis for scientific claims carries implications for one's methodological approach, calling for reflexivity on the part of the researcher. This entails an awareness that there is more than one way to understand social phenomena, resulting in systematic efforts to view subject matter from different angles (Alvesson, 2002, pp. 171–172). Furthermore, notions such as data constructionism and situated knowledge emphasize the role of discourse and individual researchers' standpoints in the production of knowledge (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Haraway, 1988). Contingency is thus embedded in the very process of scientific reasoning, and research itself is seen a contingent representation of reality rather than its accurate depiction with a claim to a privileged access to the truth (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2010, pp. 200–201). Discourse theory, with its strong focus on the instability of meaning, is firmly grounded in this qualitative research tradition. As the following section will demonstrate, it also provides a methodological toolbox and vocabulary to address some of the issues raised by social constructionism.

5.1.2. Discourse theory as a qualitative methodology

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is not only a reservoir of ontological and epistemological premises regarding the role of language in the social construction of the world (see chapter 2), but also serves as methodological guidelines (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2010, p. 4). At the same time, taken into social and political analysis, discourse theory is, in Glynos and Howarth's (2007) words, "problem-driven, rather than method- or purely theory-driven research" (p. 167). Contrary to methodological approaches that assume the prior existence of certain social structures, agents or objects, the focus in discourse theory shifts to the construction of the object of the study, bringing together distinct empirical phenomena and emphasizing the logics of contingency (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 167; Phelan & Dahlberg, 2011, p. 13).

Much ink has been spilled since Howarth's (1998) critique of Laclau and Mouffe's approach as epistemologically and methodologically unclear.

Discourse theory has been developed and applied in a variety of fields, particularly prominent in media studies (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007; Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011) and the burgeoning field of populism studies (e.g., De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014). One significant methodological development of discourse theory was the logics approach (Glynos & Howarth, 2007), where the logic of a practice "comprises the rules and grammar of the practice, as well as the conditions which make the practice both possible and vulnerable" (p. 136). The logics approach is concerned with identifying social, political and fantasmatic logics. Social logics, constructed and named by the analyst themselves, characterize a particular practice or regime (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, pp. 137–139). Political logics capture the construction, defense and naturalization of the new ideological frontiers, and fantasmatic logics explain why particular practices and regimes "grip" the subject (pp. 141, 145). The task of a social scientific inquiry here is articulated as threefold: *descriptive* (what the subject's self-interpretation are), *explanatory* (how new discursive frontiers are constructed and contested) and *critical* (how particular discourses are concealed through the workings of ideology). I will return to this critical-explanatory task of research later in this chapter.

Among the various interpretations of Laclau and Mouffe's work, discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA) has gained a particular significance within media and communication studies in recent years, first laid out in Carpentier and De Cleen's (2007) work and adopted by a number of subsequent studies (Carpentier & Van Brussel, 2012; Chen, 2020; Filimonov & Svensson, 2016; Mylonas, 2014; Uldam, 2010; Van Brussel, 2018). As already outlined in chapter 2, DTA is a macro-textual and macro-contextual approach that situates discourse at the level of representations, rather than mere language use.

The key bridge between high theory and empirical analysis in DTA is sensitizing concepts (Van Brussel et al., 2019, pp. 12–13). In qualitative research, the researcher's sensitivity is understood as "having insight as well as being tuned in to and being able to pick up on relevant issues, events, and happenings during collection and analysis of the data" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 78). Sensitizing concepts in turn help the researcher in "what to look for and where to look" (Ritzer, 1992, as cited in Carpentier, 2017, p. 77). They invite the researcher to engage in a problem-driven construction of the objects of the study rather than imposing predefined categories on the data, but still provide necessary theoretical support.

Epistemologically, DTA thus leans towards an *abductive* mode of reasoning, as opposed to deduction and induction. Unlike in deduction, which focuses on finding a connection between two observable phenomena, abduction leaves space for surprise and aims at the discovery of a social order that fits the surprising facts (Reichertz, 2019, p. 9). Abduction is also different from induction, which generates theory based on empirical data. The abductive mode of explanation "construes a concept, an idea, a theory which makes the action the data represent comprehensible and explains it" (Reichertz, 2019, p.

10). Therefore, abduction allows the researcher to keep an open mind, while at the same time providing a firm theoretical ground for the research inquiry.

Iteration is the technique supporting abduction in DTA. It is a reflexive process that encourages the researcher to visit and revisit the data, juxtapose them with the theoretical framework, engage in additional rounds of literature review if necessary, and thereby progressively move towards the refinement of focus and understandings (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77). Iteration may be imagined as a spiral that repeatedly makes the rounds of theory development, data collection, and data analysis (Van Brussel, 2015, p. 52). Iteration was used in this study to continuously move between theory and new emerging concepts in the analysis.

DTA is a qualitative research methodology for analyzing meanings and representations that still needs to be supported by a robust research design. The following three sections present four research strategies – case studies, ethnographic participant observations, interviews, and qualitative content analysis – as supporting pillars for a discourse-theoretical inquiry.

5.1.3. Case study

Case study is the overall research strategy used to support the discourse-theoretical analysis in this study. Case study can be defined as a broad method that covers research design, data collection and approach to data; it focuses on a contemporary social phenomenon; it deliberately covers its contextual conditions; and it studies phenomena that cannot be clearly separated from the context (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003).

Flyvbjerg (2006) argues for a number of important advantages of the case study as a method. The first one is its ability to provide a nuanced view of local practices due to the closeness of the researcher to real-life situations. Case studies, therefore, are well-suited for the concrete, context-dependent knowledge encouraged by qualitative research. Secondly, the case study goes in line with the iteration strategy, allowing the researcher to revisit or reject theoretical propositions if they do not hold up against the data. Building on previously available experience of the case-study method, Flyvbjerg (2006) observes that researchers' "preconceived views, assumptions, concepts and hypotheses were wrong and that the case material has compelled them to revise their hypotheses on essential points" (p. 235). Lastly, a case-study method, rather than offering mere summarizing, provides an opportunity for a nuanced narrative that tells the story "in its diversity, allowing the story to unfold from the many-sided, complex and sometimes conflicting stories that the actors in the case have told" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 238; see also Stake, 1995, p. 12). While it may be argued that the case-study method is problematic in terms of its generalizability, this problem may be partially solved by applying a multiple-case design (see Yin, 2018). A multiple-case design produces

comparisons that clarify whether an emerging pattern is idiosyncratic to a single case or consistently emerges in several cases (Eisenhardt, 1991; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Furthermore, it enhances the robustness of the output – and subsequent theory building – as it relies on cross-case comparison, rather than dealing with a series of disconnected cases. This methodological strategy, as will be pointed out in section 5.2, has been implemented in this study.

The case-study method offers a number of strategies for data collection. This research is based on an instrumental case study that addresses particular cases capable of providing a more general explanation of a theoretical puzzle (Stake, 1995, p. 3). To achieve this purpose, I conducted theoretical sampling, that is, selection of groups to study on the basis of their relevance to the research question and one's theoretical position (Mason, 1996, p. 93). In this study, theoretical sampling entailed a careful selection of case studies based upon theoretically predefined criteria for what constitutes alternative media. The following section will unpack the ethnographic methodology which has informed the work that followed.

5.1.4. Ethnographic participant observations

In order to get a deeper insight into the everyday participatory practices in the selected case studies, I employed an ethnographic methodology. Stemming from anthropology, ethnography has historically been used to study a different (non-Western) way of life, providing a descriptive account of a community or culture and a native point of view (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007; Spradley, 1980). There are overlaps between ethnography and case-study methodology (especially since it has migrated into sociology), so in this dissertation, I refer to ethnography in the more restricted sense of field research. Approached in this way, it means studying people in naturally occurring settings, which involves the researcher's immersion in the field in order to systematically collect data without imposing meanings from the outside (Brewer, 2000, p. 10). This does not preclude having a set of theoretical propositions from the outset of the study such as sensitizing concepts; however, the ethnographer needs to make sure that the field is sufficiently explored before any conclusions are drawn (Yin, 2015, pp. 131–132).

Within ethnography, participant observation has received particular attention, encouraging the researcher to directly take part in the common daily activities of a studied group of people (McCall & Simmons, 1969; Musante & DeWalt, 2010; Spradley, 1980). The degree of the ethnographer's role and involvement may vary, ranging from internal to external: a complete observer, an observer-as-participant, a participant-as-observer, and a complete participant (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007; Yin, 2015, p. 129). In most participant observations, the ethnographer is located somewhere in between; while striving to become a native, they remain a *marginal native* (Freilich, 1970) to

ensure a distance sufficient for a critical explanation.[21] The complex dynamic of participant observation consists in this ongoing co-construction of observer and the participant, the researcher and the researched, demanding a greater reflexivity on the part of the ethnographer, who becomes a temporary component of the field they observe (Jordan, 2016). In this sense, as Denzin & Lincoln (2018) note, "[t]here are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of – and between – the observer and the observed" (p. 53).

The choice for participant observation as a method in this study intersects with the object of the study – participation in alternative media. Understanding the logic of the process invited a more engaged role of an observer who also takes part in the process of daily interactions and media creation. At the same time, given the explanatory-critical focus of the study, the role of a complete participant was deemed inappropriate.[22]

5.1.5. Interviews

In-depth interviews complemented ethnographic observations in this study and provided a more nuanced, in-depth and participant-centered view of the process, mainly seeking to answer the secondary research question: "How do the participants understand their engagement, contribution, and the collective identity of the communities, and how do they materially enact this?"

Interviews as a qualitative method are practiced in a variety of formats but generally consist in a conversation between the researcher and study participant(s). Interview formats are normally classified into structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. There is no strict border between the three approaches; rather, they need to be understood in terms of "a continuum with the extremes being only possible in theory" (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 1000). However, the choice between the different positions stems from the study's epistemological points of departure. Structured interviews are primarily interested in facts, behaviors, attitudes, and values (Alvesson, 2011). Here, the interviewer retains a formal approach to their informants and follows a predefined script, bringing the method closer to a questionnaire or a poll (Yin, 2015, p. 141). Such an approach, which largely overlaps with the positivist agenda, was not deemed fully appropriate for this study that places a heavy emphasis on the researcher's engagement with the setting and remains open to surprises in the field. By contrast, unstructured interviews aim at revealing the subjective authentic experiences of the informant, where they are invited to become a co-constructor of the research (Alvesson, 2011, p. 15). I opted for semi-

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[21] This approach comes closest to the one employed in this study, which will be detailed in section 5.2.1.1.

[22] Ethical considerations will be addressed in section 5.2.4 and explain the observatory-participatory balance in more detail.

structured interviews, which attempt to reach the middle ground. While following a common set of topics or questions for each interview, the researcher may introduce the topics or questions in different ways as appropriate for each interview (Matthews & Ross, 2014, p. 221). The informant, in turn, is free to discuss the topic in their own way, using their own words.

In addition, participant observations provide opportunities for informal conversational interviews, which refer to a "spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction" (Patton, 1990, p. 642). The strength of informal conversational interviews lies in its relevance and appropriateness: it may be carried out in the immediate setting of an ongoing observation. The value of talking freely and naturally to research participants, without booking a specific time and place, cannot be underestimated. Its weakness consists in a less systematic and comprehensive approach to data compared to more formal interviews. Keeping in mind the implications of these pitfalls for the research validity, informal conversational interviews in this study were carried out only occasionally and were always supported by other collected data.

5.1.6. Qualitative content analysis

While discourse theory offers a conceptual toolbox to analyze the relationship between hegemony and representation, it provides limited resources for a hands-on analysis of textual content. To support the discourse-theoretical analysis, this study draws on content analysis – a set of techniques for exploring categories that the data comprise, and condensing them into fewer categories to make sense of the material (Matthews & Ross, 2014, p. 395). Content analysis may be performed quantitatively or qualitatively. Given that the purpose of this inquiry is to study the discourse that structures social practices, it deploys qualitative content analysis (QCA). Generally, the analysis is performed on textual or visual data that may consist of field notes, interview transcripts, analytical memos, media articles, etc.

QCA relies on coding, understood as raising raw data to a conceptual level through an interpretative practice (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 66). A single code in QCA is "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of… data" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 3). The process of coding enables the researcher to organize and group similarly coded data into categories, which allows the researcher to begin to see patterns (Saldaña, 2015, p. 8).

Coding is a cyclical process that requires the researcher's continuous interaction with the data. In the first cycle, sometimes referred to as open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) or initial coding (Saldaña, 2015), the data are broken apart to consider various possible meanings, always keeping in mind the previously established sensitizing concepts. The second cycle (and, if necessary, a third, a fourth, and so on) consists in the organization and reorganization of

the codes and categories obtained in the first cycle. Parts of the data may be recoded; some similar codes merged, others re-labeled or deemed redundant and dropped. The overall purpose of the subsequent cycles of coding is refinement of the analytical output by "classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, [and] conceptualizing" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 45).

5.2. Research design and ethics

5.2.1. Data collection

Collection of data for this study began in March 2017 and ended in October 2019. The data consist of field notes and diary notes taken during participant observations, analytical memos, interview transcripts, and texts published on the web platforms, additional samples of articles relevant for the inquiry, and logs of chats on messaging apps (see table 2 in section 5.2.1.2).

Initial access to *Discours* and *DOXA* was obtained through their respective coordinators, both of whom I had known before commencing the research. They introduced me as a researcher to the rest of their collectives, most of whom I had never previously met. I was also added to *DOXA's* and *Discours's* group chats on the Telegram messaging app. However, only *DOXA* used their group chat for active coordination of work; hence, it was only the content of *DOXA's*, and not *Discours's* chat, that was included in the collected data. In *Avtonom*, access to each participant was negotiated separately, through mutual contacts among professional journalists or during public events where I could approach the participants, introduce myself, and request an interview. It was crucial to ensure that the informants were aware of my identity and the purpose of my research (ethical aspects of my stay in the field will be addressed separately in section 5.2.4). Once the access was negotiated, I could start my fieldwork, which consisted of participant observations and in-depth interviews. Details of the fieldwork are presented in the following sections.

5.2.1.1. Participant observations

Participant observations took place in the settings where alternative media producers were working. I spent 5 days in Helsinki (Finland) and 5 days in Izhevsk (Russia) in May 2017, meeting informants who lived there. With *Discours* and *DOXA*, whose editorial teams were more established in one specific city – Moscow – the participant observations could be more focused. I spent a total of 8 weeks in Moscow in October-November 2018 with *Discours*. The period comprised seven weekly group meetings in a bar (15 hours in total) and

an estimated 150 hours of the daily work of the core team in a public library and at the participants' homes, as well as informal hangouts in the city. The work with *DOXA* covered 6 weeks spent in Moscow between April and June 2019 (two separate periods of four and two weeks respectively). The work comprised about 16 hours of formal meetings and informal hangouts at the premises of one of Moscow's higher education establishments, as well as a number of cafés. Observations also included *DOXA's* private chat logs on the Telegram messaging app where coordination of their work was taking place, accessed with the permission of the community. The participant observations resulted in field notes that detailed my observations, notes about conversational interviews with some participants, and memos in my research diary that sought to process the obtained information and arrive at preliminary conclusions.

My immersion in the field required a continuous reflection about my position, oscillating between a participant and an observer. My involvement largely depended on the needs of the community. While in the case of *Avtonom*, there was a limited immersion with a number of participants rather than the community as a whole, *Discours* and *DOXA* provided greater opportunities to be observed or interacted with. Yet, while I mostly remained seated and silent during my participant observations with *DOXA* (unless I was specifically asked to share my opinion), I was encouraged to join *Discours's* discussions more frequently, which is partly explained by my familiarity with two of its core group members from before the research.

Some strands of ethnography, especially within participatory action research, have argued for collaboration between the researcher and their informants and stressed the need for the researcher to be helpful in return for the favor of access to the field. We find this understanding, for instance, in the American Anthropological Association (2002, as cited in Jack & Westwood, 2009, p. 261), where research collaboration is defined as "a full give and take, where at every step of the research knowledge and expertise is shared." From the outset, I made clear that I was willing to contribute with whatever work the three alternative media find suitable for me to do, while still retaining my primary position as a researcher. As a result, I contributed with a few texts of my own for *Avtonom* and *Discours* (none for *DOXA*). I authored two translations and one article for the website *Avtonom.org* and three articles for *Discours*. Most of this work was done at the request of the communities; in two cases, I took the initiative myself – partly to contribute with relevant content, partly to get a first-hand experience of participatory dynamics in the field. However, to protect my position of a scholar who provides explanation and critique, I suspended any creative collaboration with the media communities once my field work was completed in the summer of 2019, until the completion of this research project in February 2021. I did, however, keep contact with certain participants, and later approached two coordinators to discuss findings.

5.2.1.2. Interviews

In addition to participant observations, and once I got more familiar with the setting, I carried out a set of formal semi-structured interviews with 15 participants (see table 1). The participants were selected based on their involvement in the media production process; all of them were part of the core group of producers who interacted with other producers on a regular basis at the time of data collection. The selection followed snowball sampling, where already known participants were asked for recommendations about other active contributors. All interviews were conducted in person and lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. The spoken language was Russian. The audio recordings were manually transcribed by myself. I also translated selected quotes in the dissertation into English.

The interview guide was constructed around the sensitizing concepts derived from the relevant theoretical literature and revolved around four key areas of my inquiry: content, organizational structure, subject positions, and material aspects of production. Those were mainly starting points for a conversation, and I asked many follow-up questions. Although the three alternative media share numerous important characteristics, they still differ in terms of their organization, so the interview guide had slight variations across the case studies. In addition, the questions varied slightly depending on whether I was speaking with one of the coordinators or individuals only temporarily affiliated with the core group, such as interns. Initially experimental, the interview guide was stabilized after the first three interviews.[23] The structure revolved around the secondary sensitizing concepts and consisted of the following.

I started the interview with a question about the background of the selected participant, and his or her reasons for joining the production process. The first group of questions related to identifications and subject positions. What is the purpose of the alternative medium? What is the primary position in which the participant sees themselves (journalist, activist, etc.)? Who is the audience of the media and how could those people be defined?

In relation to the structure of the alternative media, my questions focused on decision-making. How are producers recruited? How do they cease being part of the production process? Has anyone been purposefully excluded? What decisions are taken by the core group of producers and what is decided by the community as a whole?

As to the content, I was interested in the following: what criteria are used to select texts for publications? Are there topics that the media would not cover? What principles do the editors follow when they work with the texts? Can an author whose text was not accepted by an editor still get it published? I also asked the informants what type of content they would have liked their

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[23] There was no need for subsequent major revisions or adjustments.

respective media to focus on, what content they personally contribute with, and for what reason.

Finally, a number of questions related to the material process of media production. Thus, I asked about the financial budget and sources, and encouraged the informants to share ideas of the importance of profitability and for motivation of their contributors to work for free. In terms of spatiality, I was interested in the venues where the media had worked, how the different venues affected the process and how their ideal venue could have looked. In the end, I also inquired about the normal workday of the participants.

As an interviewer, I took an active and engaged role, with an eye to encouraging informants to talk more freely and in more detail. Following Alvesson (2011), I used techniques such as explicitly asking for examples and clarifications, reformulating the informant's words to make sure I understood them correctly, and pointing at possible contradictions in their words, while avoiding leading questions and imposing particular viewpoints. Table 1 presents an overview of the interviews that I carried out for this study.

Table 1. *Overview of interviews.*

Number	Pseudonym/ name	Interview date	Length	Alternative media
1	Antti	03.05.2017	84 min	*Avtonom*
		11.05.2017	60 min	
2	Alexey	14.05.2017	31 min	*Avtonom*
3	Valery	04.07.2018	74 min	*Avtonom*
4	Artur	23.10.2018	72 min	*Discours*
5	Viktor	24.10.2018	74 min	*Discours*
6	Veronica	01.11.2018	71 min	*Discours*
7	Valentina	09.11.2018	60 min	*Discours*
8	Tatyana	09.11.2018	43 min	*Avtonom*
9	Grigory	13.11.2018	94 min	*Avtonom*
10	Olya	15.06.2019	86 min	*DOXA*
11	Vera	19.06.2019	51 min	*DOXA*
12	Agatha	19.06.2019	67 min	*DOXA*
13	Nadya	20.06.2019	60 min	*DOXA*
14	Levan	20.06.2019	86 min	*DOXA*
15	Alexander	21.06.2019	86 min	*DOXA*

5.2.1.3. Textual sampling

Access to some of the communities was broader than to others: for instance, *Discours's* meetings were more frequent than *DOXA's*, and *Avtonom* was more protective of access than the two other media. I addressed this problem by sampling larger textual corpora from the two cases, where participant

observation data were scarcer. In the case of *Avtonom*, I carefully examined the website to sample texts where the collective identity of the movement was discussed and/or calls for participation were made. As a result, I sampled 12 articles published between February 2017 and August 2018,[24] as well as their manifesto where the discourse on participation was articulated. The participant observations of *DOXA* were supplemented by logs of their private chat on the Telegram messaging app used by the participants to coordinate their work, accessed with their consent. I analyzed the logs during the period between April 2019, when *DOXA* added me to the chat, and June 2019, when my work with the community was completed. In addition, I sampled logs from two weekends in July and August 2019 when large demonstrations and mass detentions took place in Moscow and were covered by *DOXA* (27-29 July and 3-5 August 2019), which, as I will argue in the analysis, had a decisive impact on their internal processes. The final cycle of data collection on Telegram was carried out in October 2019, following a heated discussion between *DOXA's* core group members regarding their internal norms. I also sampled *Discours's* manifesto, where they explain the participatory politics of the community. The overview of textual data, excluding interview transcripts, is presented in table 2. The data were processed over the course of its collection. Subsequently, they were subjected to qualitative content analysis, carried out during the fall of 2019.

Table 2. *Collected textual data (excluding interviews).*

Alternative media	Data	Pages (n)
Discours	Participant observation notes	27
	Research diary notes	7
	Discours manifesto	2
DOXA	Participant observation notes	11
	Research diary notes	7
	Chat logs	148
Avtonom	Articles	45
	Research diary notes	4

5.2.2. Application of DTA

Once the data were collected and processed in a textual form, a discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA) could begin. As outlined previously in this chapter, DTA relies on both sensitizing concepts and qualitative content analysis, which together give the researcher a focused coding of data around the

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[24] Published on the website www.avtonom.org.

previously established theoretical notions that are deemed most relevant for the research question. At the same time, the list of sensitizing concepts is flexible and may alter depending on what the data show.

Primary sensitizing concepts, derived from poststructuralism and discourse theory (see chapter 2), were *articulation, performance, subject position,* and *antagonism.* The concept of articulation allowed me to code the various characteristics of the participatory process that made themselves present in the discursive practices of my informants. The concept of performance captured the contingent (re)production of the discourse on participation through material, corporeal and affective means. The concept of the subject position helped me code the standpoints from which the individual participants approached the process and its various actors. Lastly, antagonism was the sensitizing concept that enabled me to reconstruct the discursive boundaries of participation and explain its external conditions.

Secondary sensitizing concepts were extracted from the neighboring fields of journalism studies and participation studies (see chapters 3 and 4), re-read through the lens of discourse theory. In relation to alternative media, four focal points have been taken into consideration during the coding procedure: content, organizational structure, subject positions (producers' identifications), and material aspects of production.

5.2.3. The coding process

First-cycle coding interpretation of data in the form of analytic memos was done already at the stage of data procession. Throughout my immersion in the field, I kept a private research diary in the form of a paper notebook where I put down initial summaries of the observed events and processes, as well as my interpretation of what the informants were sharing at our interviews.

Second-cycle coding could begin once the analytic memos and participant observation notes were gathered and the interviews transcribed. All text corpora, except hand-written analytic memos, were uploaded to the software MAXQDA, which allows for convenient storage of data and production of codes. At this second stage of coding, the data were carefully reviewed for emerging patterns. After the main categories (such as, for instance, "sociality", "horizontality" or "collectivity") were established, a few rounds of selective coding (and recoding) were carried out, in order to create logical connections among the various elements of the coding tree. Three major emerging themes – subject positions of the participants, characteristics of the participatory process and the state as its constitutive outside – organized the three analytical chapters of this dissertation.

After the coding procedure, the iterative strategy was deployed (see section 5.1.2). Some particularly prominent or newly emerging patterns (for instance, the power dynamic between alternative media and the state) were additionally

theorized, creating a dialogue between the sensitizing concepts and the findings of the study.

5.2.4. Ethical considerations

As the data encompass information that may be potentially damaging for the informants, the work on this research project included careful ethical considerations and decisions. Even if the data were not sensitive at the time of the collection, the changing political circumstances in Russia proved that they may become sensitive over the course of time. Thus, although only one informant wished to stay anonymous and no one else objected to their real names to be used, every single informant was anonymized. All names used in this dissertation are fictional, chosen by the participants themselves (except for one, Antti, who insisted on keeping his real name). Whenever the identity of the informant could still be traceable, I abstained from using any name or gender at all. In such cases, the gender-neutral pronoun *they* was used instead. Similarly, the names of venues that hosted the participants were omitted. In order to protect confidentiality of participants, the audio recordings and field-notes will not be disclosed.

At every stage of data collection, I made sure to fully disclose the purpose of my presence and my institutional affiliation, as well as to ask for consent to take audio and written records. Whenever a new participant entered the venue during the audio recording, I repeated my self-presentation and asked for permission to keep recording. In the private group chat of *DOXA*, all of its participants could see my name (Kirill) on the list of the chat members, and were repeatedly informed by one of *DOXA* editors about the reason for my presence.

The decisions throughout the research were guided by respect for research participants. This understanding was performed through a series of actions from my side. I expressed willingness to contribute to the work of this communities in exchange for their time and welcoming attitude. At the end of the research project in mid-2020, I approached the coordinators of *Discours* and *DOXA*[25] who had enabled my immersion into their communities in order to disclose and discuss my findings; their overall feedback was positive and thoughtful. Around the same time in 2020, all interview subjects[26] were approached through social media channels with a request to choose their own pseudonyms, and thus reminded about the upcoming publication of the dissertation.

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[25] As mentioned in section 5.2.1.1, *Avtonom* did not have a single coordinator who would enable my access.
[26] Except for one participant who I have not managed to reach; I changed his name myself.

5.2.5. Positionality

The research ethics also required an ongoing reflection on the researcher's positionality that could inadvertently affect the collection of data and their interpretation. The most appropriate way to tackle potential tensions is being as transparent about one's positionality as possible. My position in the field was characterized by a complex insider/outsider dynamic. As a Russian by birth and nationality who spent over 20 years in Moscow before moving abroad, I have a generally sound understanding of the historical, social, political, cultural and urban context in which the study is embedded. I also had prior experience of working for Russian media outlets belonging to the liberal side of the political spectrum. This background fine-tuned my contextual understanding of the media landscape, but also brought in particular politics to my position, even though my views may have partially evolved over the years. At the same, as someone who had lived in Sweden for several years by the time of data collection, my familiarity with the local and national context had perhaps begun to show certain limitations. In addition, gender is discussed in the analytical chapters of this dissertation as one of the structural conditions of the participatory process. I am aware that my position as a male researcher from a well-established European university might have brought certain power dynamics in the research process.

The insider/outsider dynamic also relates to my personal familiarity with three of the informants, two of whom were the (informal) coordinators of the alternative media. The prior familiarity with members of two core groups was positive for the study in terms of establishing rapport between the researcher and the research subjects. However, rightful warnings have been raised about developing "loyalty or potential bias" (Mathias, 2010, p. 114) in the field. The issue was partly resolved by phasing out from the field. My physical remoteness from the territory where fieldwork was conducted naturally led to a decrease in the intensity of our interactions. At the same time, my exit was not abrupt, I kept occasional interactions with some of the informants, and, as mentioned in the previous section, I approached them again towards the end of the research project.

5.2.6. Research quality, validity and reliability

Qualitative research suggests a number of strategies to ensure validity of a study, which were undertaken over the course of this research. Validity may be articulated through credibility, which implies persuasiveness and plausibility of interpretations (Silverman, 2015) – "so that the conclusions accurately reflect and represent the real world that was studied" (Yin, 2015, p. 88). Given that social constructionism is a relativist ontology and a subjectivist

epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 57), it contests the positivist understandings of the values of objectivity and truth: "[T]here is no possibility of achieving absolute or universal knowledge since there is no context-free, neutral base for truth-claims" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2010, p. 175). Rejecting the idea of a "view from nowhere", social constructionism rearticulates the notion of research quality in terms of credibility, transferability, reliability, and confirmability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Silverman, 2015).

Transferability means that the results of a given study should be generalizable and held "true for or relevant to the wider population or a different context" (Matthews & Ross, 2014, p. 12). To be sure, there are limits to generalizability of a qualitative study, given the specificity of context where the research takes place. One way to enhance transferability is to refer to relevant theory or other research (Matthews & Ross, 2014, p. 13). The research began with a literature review that relied on research of alternative media in a variety of contexts across the globe (e.g. Europe, Latin America, North America), by different social and political groups. The literature review resulted in a set of sensitizing concepts that were applied for the study of Russian alternative media, ensuring transferability of the research output.

Reliability, another parameter of research quality, is often articulated as replicability, referring to "the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions" (Hammersley, 1992, p. 67). Considering the embeddedness of qualitative inquiries in real-life situations, they rarely offer ways to repeat a given study in the exact same way. Here, reliability may be achieved through transparency (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Transparency in this study was achieved through clarifying theoretical standpoints, detailed descriptions of the research strategy and data analysis.

Lastly, *confirmability* requires that a qualitative study represent participants' perspectives, not the researcher's own viewpoints. Confirmability can be demonstrated by describing how conclusions and interpretations were reached, based on an explicit body of evidence such as quotes or descriptions (Cope, 2014; Yin, 2015). The empirical chapters of this dissertation include an abundance of direct quotes from participants to illustrate the points being made. The argumentation is supported by ethnographic descriptions, especially relevant for the material aspects of participation, such as the descriptions of spaces. In qualitative research, confirmability is connected to authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which is understood as a faithful expression of participants' lived experiences (Polit & Beck, 2012, as cited in Cope, 2014). It is a commendable research practice to provide original quotes together with their translation (Yin, 2015, p. 254). The fact that all of the interviews were recorded in Russian, the native tongue for myself and virtually all informants (except for one), enhanced the quality of data interpretation. Yet, to further improve the authenticity of the study, I made sure to provide original quotes

in those cases of a more specified language use, such as metaphors or slang. Such tropes are very common in Russian; yet, as much as they make it a rich and vivid language, they often present difficulties for a translator. Whenever possible, those original excerpts were Latinized and presented in brackets inside the passages translated into English, allowing the readers familiar with both languages to get a deeper insight into the informant's perspective. I also occasionally used square brackets to clarify the contextual meaning of what is being said in the quote.[27]

In understanding qualitative research as an interpretative practice, we are reminded that "each practice makes the world visible in a different way" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 43). In order to further enhance the quality of the study, data triangulation has been implemented. Data triangulation refers to the combination of various data sources that are researched at different times, places and persons (Flick, 2018, p. 444). An example of data triangulation is seeing an event with researcher's own eyes, having it reported by someone else who was present there, and reading its description by someone in a written report later – so that there are multiple ways of "verifying or corroborating a procedure, piece of data, or finding" (Yin, 2015, p. 87). Triangulation in this study consisted in the combined deployment of participant observations, in-depth interviews, and qualitative content analysis, and supported by feedback of research participants in the end of the project (see section 5.2.4).

Finally, saturation was deployed as a technique enhancing the validity and reliability of the study. Ensuring data saturation means that the researcher should look for more data until no deviant cases are found or no new significant patterns related to the research questions emerge (Seale, 1999; Silverman, 2015). It is important to keep in mind that data analysis begins simultaneously with data collection (Saldaña, 2015). Encountering a new pattern, I doubled down on it in my ethnographic observations (if the study was ongoing) or retrospectively examined the available textual data in an iterative fashion in order to find evidence to support it or otherwise refute it. Once the key categories were established with sufficient supportive evidence, the data collection was ceased.

5.2.7. Limitations of the method

Although, as the previous section demonstrated, some necessary precautions have been taken to ensure the quality of the study, a number of limitations should be borne in mind. First, there are limitations in terms of access to spaces where interactions between participants were taking place, and

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[27] Consider one example from chapter 7: "The vast majority of the editorial team of that time, myself included, believed this [exclusion] to be essential." Here, "exclusion" is my addition to the informant's quote to clarify the intended meaning, which may not be obvious outside of the immediate interview setting.

variations of access to data across the three case studies. While *DOXA* provided generous access to both their online and offline spaces, I faced restrictions in access to *Avtonom* — partly because of the dispersal of its participants across Russia, and partly due to security concerns that will be addressed in chapter 8. *Discours* did not limit my access to physical venues, but its online interactions were organized on an interpersonal basis, in which separate participants mainly spoke to each other one-on-one or in small, temporary chats that were quickly created and then abandoned – unlike *DOXA* which used a larger group chat over an extended period of time. My inclusion into those private chats was not deemed possible. These variations explain the limited access to *Avtonom's* and *Discours's* online interactions compared to *DOXA*, and may have limited my understanding of internal processes in some of the case studies. However, since certain deficiencies in private data were compensated by additional, publicly available material – as well as having three case studies – these limitations were at least partially overcome.

Secondly, time constraints have affected data collection and, by extension, the conclusions of the research. Alternative media are dynamic milieus whose circumstances may quickly change under external pressure, but doctoral research can only realistically cover a specific time frame. The context looked somewhat different for the anarchist activism in Russia after a terror attack was carried out by a teenage anarchist in late 2018 (see chapter 1); yet, by that point, I had already collected large parts of the data related to *Avtonom*. Similar contextual changes occurred to *DOXA*, who saw their popularity skyrocket as they covered mass arrests of students amid Moscow protests in the summer of 2019. Also here, I had collected most of my data on *DOXA* prior to this period, when they still remained a relatively unknown media outlet that struggled to keep the production process going (nevertheless, I managed to include data from the summer period as well). In addition, as alternative media are characterized by flexibility and sporadicity, their participants, internal structures, technical affordances and affiliations could have changed since the data were collected, which may have well affected the participatory dynamics. While this in no way invalidates the findings, limitations in terms of time for data collection entail that the conclusions can only be attributed to the specific context under study and cannot be simply generalized. Further research may provide valuable insights into the participatory dynamics under new circumstances.

Having clarified the methodological approach and research design, as well as their limitations, we may now move on to the analysis. Following the logic of data coding, the analysis is split in three larger clusters: conditions of the process (chapter 6), its internal characteristics (chapter 7), and its constitutive outside (chapter 8).

Chapter 6. Configuring participation: Subject positions in alternative media production

> The paradox of subjectivation… is precisely that
> the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled,
> if not produced, by such norms.
> (Butler, 1993, p. xxiii)

The analysis begins with a set of subject positions that structure power relations within the production process. We know from discourse theory (see chapter 2) that the subject takes a variety of positions from which it speaks and acts. Those positions are offered to the subject by particular discourses activated through the articulatory practice. In chapter 4, I showed how the discourse on journalism configures the subject position of a media professional, and the struggles for defining it in particular ways. Building on that theoretical framework and exploring adjacent discursive practices, this chapter analyzes discourses and subject positions activated in the process of alternative media production, setting conditions for inclusion and, at times, exclusion.

Contrary to the more rigid positioning of individuals within the hegemonic discourses on journalism, I argue that alternative media practices make for multiple, overlapping and occasionally contradictory points of identification. Section 6.2 focuses on articulations and performances imported from professional media practices. It demonstrates the prevalence of hegemonic discourses on journalism that continue to structure meaning in the alternative media production. In particular, the subject position of the audience member – typically understood as an outsider – enables the reproduction of the hegemonic model (section 6.4). Here, we see mutually contradicting articulations of the audience, where it appears as simultaneously knowledgeable and unskilled, critical and passive. I show how the more disempowering articulations of the audience tend to come from individuals professionally employed by media organizations, whereas the more optimistic outlooks were expressed by non-professionals. Nonetheless, the reproduction of the hegemonic professional discourses, too, has its limits. Performances of participation are also configured by resistance to professional media practices, many of which stem from articulations of alternative media producers as part of marginalized groups (see section 6.3). The sense of being part of a broader community – defined on very specific political terms – becomes a key condition for a

meaningful participation in the production. Section 6.5 shows the political logics behind community building, performed through various acts of belonging and solidarity.

6.1. Multiplicity of subject positions

The subject position of a professional journalist, as was argued in chapter 4, is characterized by a relative fixity, articulated through the notions of objectivity and autonomy and further stabilized by a link to a professional media organization. The analysis of community media practices suggests a much greater degree of fluidity in the identification practices of its actors. Indeed, they were unconstrained by a formal membership in their communities (see also section 7.4.3), which themselves were often situated at the crossroads of civil society. As one participant pointed out: "The people who publish [with us] do a lot of things and are members of a lot of [groups], sometimes together, sometimes separately" (Grigory).[28] One example was Tatyana, a regular *Avtonom* contributor who volunteered for a variety of causes, such as countering abuse of workers' rights and protection for the homeless. When asked whether she involves in these causes within the framework of *Avtonomnoye Deystviye* (AD), she replied:

> There is no such thing as 'the framework of Avtonomnoye Deystviye' <…>
> It's very important to think beyond *(abstragirovat'sya ot ponyatiya)* Avtonomnoye Deystviye. These are anarchist and feminist events.

Unrestrained by organizational formalities, the participants created multiple links across social networks and discourses and seamlessly navigated across the spectrum of the different subject positions offered by these discourses.

The multiplicity of subject positions was supported by the informal membership of the participants in the communities. Formally employed outside of the community, they contributed to the collective work in their free time, bringing in articulations from adjacent fields. "He is like us because he is partly a political activist, partly a journalist, partly a scientist", said an anonymous *Avtonom* editor in a public interview about his imprisoned colleague (*Avtonom* texts, 3/2/17). The word "partly" is important for my point here, as it simultaneously underlines the discursive framework for these identifications and a certain (yet limited) freedom of the actors to switch between them. Professional journalism, for instance, is performative insofar as it consists of activities and practices by which one qualifies to be a journalist (Zelizer, 2017). To this one could add, using Butler's language, that these activities are

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[28] As explained in chapter 5, all names are fictional and all quotes are translated from Russian by myself.

performed through a repetitive and iterative practice. Importantly, some participants expressed sensitivity and awareness of the contingency of their identifications: "I see myself, above all, as a social activist who is trying to change something. I am a journalist in the third or fourth place" (Alexey). Another informant, a professional journalist in her main job, as well as an activist and community media producer in her free time, emphasized this performativity:

> **Tatyana**: To give you an example, if I attend a demonstration, I make it clear [to myself] from the beginning: am I there as an activist or a journalist? If [I am there] as a journalist, I don't get involved and do my job.

The affiliation with the discourse on alternative media production enables actors to simultaneously act from multiple positions, although the position of an alternative media producer itself may not always enter the equation. Some participants drew on other subject positions: "I don't strictly distinguish between research and activism" (Grigory); or this quote, describing involvement in alternative media production: "One cannot say that this is [pure] activism, because this is activism through journalism" (Olya).

Performance of multiple subject positions facilitated the process in a number of ways. First, the more structurally privileged position of professional journalist – legally recognized, regulated and protected – shielded individuals if they acted from more precarious positions. The following quote illustrates how a formalized employment as a professional journalist may help avoid attacks from state institutions, thanks to the relative strength of the journalistic community's voice:

> **Valery**: [L]ook, they would be jailing a person who works for *** *[human rights organization's name omitted]*, works for *** *[professional media outlet's name omitted]*. Sure, you can do it, but there are plenty of mechanisms, especially in Moscow. All the journalists know me, they would be asking questions about this. A lot of noise.

Secondly, acting from different subject positions in different instances of alternative media production enabled the participants to multiply their connections within the broader field which we may label as civil society. Chapter 7 will argue for the key role of vibrant interactions in sustaining the production process, where participation is performed through sociality and supported by the fantasy of a full community. The multiplicity of subject positions affirmed this logic by presenting the participants with opportunities to engage with various communities, which contrasts, for instance, with the constraints that professional journalistic ethics and editorial policies impose on journalists in relation to their outside affiliations.

The resulting interdiscursivity, where elements of one discourse moved into the discourse of adjacent professional field, reshaped power relations. In

one manifestation of this dynamic, elements of alternativity were imported back into the professional media practice. Consider the example of one *Avtonom* participant, who talked of his attempts to bring the anti-authoritarian component of the anarchist discourse into his professional media coverage:

> **Valery**: If I'm writing for *** [*professional media outlet's name omitted*], I would emphasize that, in a certain conflict, the grassroots organization plays a larger role, not the thoughts of some leader.

Considering that the personalization of politics has increasingly been seen as a pattern of media coverage (Hjarvard, 2013), Valery's choices in his capacity as a professional journalist may be understood as a counter-hegemonic position imported from his engagement with anarchist activism. However, this interdiscursivity also entailed the reverse adoption of elements of professional discourse by the counter-hegemonic practice. As the following section argues, this had some profound implications for shaping the power dynamics in the alternative media production.

6.2. Articulations and performances of professional journalism in alternative media practice

Although alternative media show resistance to many of the regulatory norms sustaining mainstream media practice, their agency was invariably shaped in relation to those very norms. In a Foucauldian fashion, the resistance to power was exercised not from a position external to power, but from one immanent to it. Some elements of those practices were defied, others remained intact. This section explores the articulatory practices and performances of participation in alternative media production informed by the professional journalistic discourse. Performances of journalistic professionalism, addressed in section 6.2.2, present a particular interest in terms of shaping power relations between professionals and non-professionals, and, consequently, in shaping access and participatory intensities.

6.2.1. Articulations of professional journalistic discourse

As I argued in chapter 4, professional journalistic practice is guided by a set of ideal-professional values, which were operationalized in discourse-theoretical terms as moments of the discourse on professional journalism. In this section, I show how some of them move into articulatory practices of alternative media producers, creating particular discursive conditions for the process.

Adversarial articulations of journalism were particularly salient in the data. Especially in *Avtonom* and *DOXA*, journalistic practice was understood in terms of being a "critical agent" (Hanitzsch, 2011), whose mission is to push for social change by exposing the existing problems – whether in particular areas or in society at large. *Avtonom's* confrontational stance was linked to its broader ideological critique from the anarchist perspective. *DOXA* offered a critique of power in academia and on campus:

> **Agatha**: Our mission is not [simply] to report – our very mission is based on critique <…>
> **Interviewer**: Let's sum up, a critique of what?
> **Agatha**: Critique not in the negative sense. Not in the sense that we are looking for shortcomings. But in the sense that we want to report honestly – and if there are shortcomings, to report on them as well. [Shortcomings] in everything, in the whole system, because the system has a lot of shortcomings, and unless we start covering these shortcomings and improving them, they are not going to disappear.

Alongside the critical function of media production, objectivity, too, was emphasized as the core value of reporting:

> **Nadya**: [J]ournalism is the coverage of events, news, materials, op-eds. If we talk about [media] projects that express a [particular] point of view, I think this is not quite journalism.

> **Valery**: My view is that journalism is a job. You research some phenomenon happening in society, some stories, events, you try to understand what really happened there, talk to as many people as possible, to connect… Ideally, this shouldn't be done in anyone's interests.

A paradox that will become evident later in this chapter is that the hegemonic value of objectivity co-existed with its rejection, with the privileging of a committed and engaged reporting style. When pointed at the contradictions between the critical perspective and objectivist stance, some participants acknowledged the tension but did not provide any solution, leaving the contradiction unresolved. As one informant said of *Avtonom*, "This is <…> a journalism specific to a particular field" (Valery).

Independence was the third moment of the professional journalistic discourse identified in the data. It was particularly salient in *Discours*, whose origin was inspired by the very demand for the political and financial autonomy of the media. As *Discours's* founder explained, the idea to launch the community was triggered by his encounter with censorship in a professional editorial team: "My whole world, my idea of the social mission of journalism, all I was taught at the university, was in tatters *(treshchit po shvam)*." This quote is important, as it reveals that some alternative media producers, rather than challenging the professional discourse as such, were instead inclined to

remedy for what was seen as a corrupt enactment of the otherwise valid principles. In *Discours* and *DOXA*, autonomy was also understood as refraining from any direct political advertising or propaganda, although an overall political positioning was considered acceptable (a number of participants in *DOXA* suggested that it was leaning to the political left, and *Discours* editors avoided dealing with texts coming from the extreme right, according to two interns).

A fourth element of professional journalistic discourse was ethics, albeit mainly present in the data from *Discours*. Discussing possible headlines for an article, one editor said he went by the so-called TACT test – the abbreviation for Taste, Attractiveness, Clarity, and Truthfulness (Field notes, October 2018) – a professional guideline recommended by a number of gatekeepers of the professional discourse, including Columbia University's Department of Journalism and Mass Communication.[29] On another occasion at *Discours's* weekly meeting, the core team and a prospective author (I will call her Svetlana) engaged in a discussion on the ethics of data collection for an article on online dating (Field notes, October 2018). I quote an excerpt from that discussion at length in order to give an insight into the arguments of the participants, but also the vibrant, polemical and at the same time friendly atmosphere of the editorial meetings:

> **Svetlana:** I'm OK with everything, except the fake photos… I don't have the right to take someone's photos for any purpose.
> **Artur:** You could use photos of sex models.
> **Alexander**: It's an ethical question, mate. Svetlana says that this sex model has not given us permission to use her photo to chat on Mamba (online dating app – *KF*). And it's not cool to use her photos. There's a point in that. Let's use yours – you're more sexually attractive.
> **Artur**: *[protests]*
> **Alexander**: Ah, you see! *[laughs]*
> **Artur:** We could use photos of some American model that are available online anyway.
> **Alexander** I don't know, I have a controversial suggestion… It depends on what kind of ethical model you adhere to. But I think the ideal option is taking photos of a dead person.
> **Valentina:** For god's sake… This is not cool.
> **Svetlana:** No…
> *[participants laugh]*
> **Alexander:** This person is already dead. He can't get offended.
> **Valentina:** But he has relatives!
> **Svetlana**: How are you going to search for them? Specifically for pics of a dead person.
> **Artur:** No, listen… Are you nuts? There is a sex model, some American woman who lives in another country, ethical relations have nothing to do with her, she displays her body for millions of masturbating people all around the world with public access.

[29] Mann, M. (n.d.). Headlines. *Columbia University*. http://www.columbia.edu/itc/journalism/isaacs/client_edit/Headlines.html (retrieved 25 August 2020).

Svetlana: And she had better be dead, I understand.
[participants laugh]
Alexander: Alright, alright, OK.

The entire debate, but especially Alexander's comment on ethical models, reveals the emphasis placed on performing this element of professional journalistic practice.

Lastly, immediacy, as a moment of professional journalistic discourse, could be observed in the articulatory practices of the alternative media. The need for quick responses and a focus on hot topics, though not deemed ideal, was nonetheless accepted as an inevitable part of the media production:

> **Alexander**: We look for hot topics. Perhaps it sounds somewhat cynical, but I think, in journalistic work you inevitably sell stories to people – even if you don't get money for that – still, you try to attract attention in this way.

As a preliminary conclusion, it needs to be pointed out that different moments of the professional journalistic discourse were characterized with varying degrees of acceptance. Some, such as the position of the critical agent, were more broadly recognized by different participants. Others, such as immediacy, remained more heavily contested, especially by non-professional participants who openly expressed preferences for slower and more reflective forms of production. Before addressing these disagreements in more detail, the material enactments of professional discourse need to be explained.

6.2.2. Enactments of journalistic professionalism

Professional media discourse manifested itself not only through articulatory practices of alternative media producers, but also through a series of their enactments. As I will argue in this section, not everyone in the communities had the knowledge and experience to replicate professional media practices, and others resisted some of these replications (see also section 6.3). Nonetheless, media professionalism still found its way into everyday practices of the alternative media. This resulted in a disproportionate influence of individuals with professional skills over the decision-making process and the reproduction of hegemonic definitions of the audience.

Professional journalistic practices retained a symbolic privilege in the production process. Any previous or existing links to professional media organizations, as well as vocational training, were deemed important assets. The few available professional journalists, especially in *Avtonom*, helped to not only produce content but also administrate the process. The symbolic privilege of professional journalism was also clear in the identifications of the participants:

a number of them confessed to having dreamed of becoming journalists in the past, or aspiring to work in professional journalism in the future.

Among the variety of professional competences, writing skills emerged as a salient signifier determining the degree of access into the production process. Writing skills helped segregate between those deemed capable to meaningfully participate in the process from the others who retained the position of the audience (see section 6.3). The definition of "good writing skills" remained elusive, with some emerging ad-hoc definitions of a "good text." On one occasion, an intern in *Discours* suggested she and another editor have a careful look at incoming content to develop criteria for what counts as a good text (Field notes, October 2018). However, these criteria generally remained undefined, implemented by editors on a case-by-case basis. The strong focus on the quality of texts concentrated a significant power in the hands of editors who checked argumentation, style and internal structure.

Closely connected to professional writing skills was the use of professional journalistic vocabulary, in a way that allowed alternative media to perform journalistic professionalism by mere language use. Each community had an *editorial team* with *editors* and *correspondents;* they would have regular planning meetings, the Russian equivalent of which – *planyorki* and *letuchki* – originate in journalistic jargon*.* A more conventional style of news reporting was often preferred, with phrases and sentences such as "according to our correspondent" or "our correspondent is currently located at Chistyie Prudy where detentions have begun" (*DOXA* chat logs, 3/8/19). The process was especially interesting to follow in *DOXA*: the community was new to news reporting, consisted mainly of non-professionals, and did not have pre-established reporting routines. In the midst of ad-hoc reporting from mass demonstrations in central Moscow in the summer of 2019, members of the community had to make quick decisions on how to report news while protecting the community's credibility: "I think we can write 'according to our correspondent' <…> so that it doesn't look baseless" (*DOXA* chat logs, 3/8/19). The quote illustrates how the professional journalistic vocabulary remained the crucial reservoir of signifiers – on the one hand, immediately accessible to the speaker and, on the other hand, desirable in terms of delivering a more mature professional appearance.

The reliance on professional media practices in taking decisions on content was further illustrated by a discussion that happened between myself and two editors in one of the media. The argument concerned the most elegant way to quote an interviewee in a material I wrote at the community's request: I argued for the need to keep the original inversion in the sentence to protect the person's authentic voice, whereas the editors insisted that the word order needed to be changed so as to abide by literary standards and the norms of journalistic professionalism. Proving their point, one of the editors referred to the existing practices of two professional news media that allowed editing of original quotes – notably, one of them being Forbes magazine. Eventually, as I felt that

I was not in the position to insist, the editors took the final decision. Despite the discussion concerning a purely stylistic issue (none of the disputed options would affect the meaning or grammatical correctness of the quote), the entire situation encapsulated the readiness of the core groups to perform professional media practices.

Even when no specific references to mainstream media were made, the notion of *professional journalistic* practices – whether written, spoken or behavioral – continued to guide the decision-making of the communities: "Even if the author is weaker, the editors <…> can still save this text, it will become OK, and it will be a good professional journalistic text" (Valentina). The participants, especially the younger ones, were willing to learn from the mainstream media practices. Below is an excerpt from a discussion in *DOXA's* group chat on Telegram (5/8/19), which followed their public backing by a well-known journalist. As I could not identify some of the individuals by their nicknames during a later reading, I refer to them simply as participants.

> **Participant 1:** I think it would be cool if he helped us <…> with content production: interviews/opinion pieces/interactives
> **Participant 2**: I wonder what kind of help we can ask him for
> **Participant 3:** Teach us journalism
> **Participant 4:** Damn, he's cool. And probably knows a lot about technical aspects, how to expand, etc. <…>
> **Participant 5:** Yes it would be cool to organize a one-week school for editors <…>
> **Participant 1:** Maybe we can ask him to hold a workshop for us

An expressed solidarity was another was of identifying with media professionals, which also brings in the embodied and material components of the enactment. In a dramatic series of events that unfolded during my observations in Moscow in June 2019, the investigative journalist Ivan Golunov was detained on the suspicion of drugs possession (Lokshina, 2019). In the four days between the arrest and eventual dropping of charges, a solidarity campaign was launched by professional media and grassroots activists who supported the journalist on the covers of newspapers, protests on the streets, and stickers displayed in cafés, bars and on car windows (Bennetts, 2019). *DOXA*, whose members I observed at the time, enthusiastically took part in the campaign, publicly supporting the journalist on the community's social media and taking part in the street protests. For a medium directed at the student community, an expressed support for a professional journalist was not an immediately obvious act. What was important, however, is that it enabled *DOXA* to symbolically identify with the journalistic community:

> **Agatha**: This is pure journalistic solidarity. Initially, I also didn't understand why we stood up for Golunov. Then I understood: we stood up for him because we also considered ourselves as journalists, we also considered ourselves a

full-fledged medium. And as <...> all decent Russian media, we stood up for him.

Enactments of media professionalism also took a spatial form. For a short period of time prior to my participant observation, *Discours* was hosted by a bar called *Redaktsiya* (Editorial Team), owned by a prominent journalist as a space for hangouts among fellow professionals. The simple act of working side by side with journalists helped close the gap, symbolically if temporarily, between professional practitioners and alternative media producers.

Lastly, material objects served as important artefacts for performing professional journalism. In particular, press cards, used by both *Discours* and *DOXA*, represented the media's symbolic power. The *Discours* core group had the legal right to issue press cards, and actively encouraged anyone who had published at least two articles on the community platform to apply for one. The card, valid for one full year, would give the authors a number of privileges legally reserved for journalists, such the right to submit official requests to authorities (Interview with Artur). Besides, *Discours*' founder was a member of Russia's Journalists' and Media Workers' Union, creating an additional point of identification.

The enactment of media professionalism carried implications for the participatory intensities in the alternative media. Individuals in the already structurally privileged positions – those with the cultural resources to express their voice in an articulate, media-savvy manner – retained influence throughout the process and had greater power in shaping the final output. Enactments of media professionalism were also conditioned by the ongoing construction of the subject position of the audience, which in itself created a set of problematic exclusions (see section 6.4). However, the reproduction and enactments of the discourse of media professionalism had clear limits. In the next section, I outline the subject position of alternative media producer, which challenges professional media practice on a number of accounts and thus protects the distinct discursive positioning of alternative media.

6.3. Alternative media as arena for counter-hegemony and social commitment

In the previous section, I have analyzed the reproduction of nodal points of the professional journalistic discourse, while arguing that it had certain limits. To explore this further, I now turn to the construction of the subject position of the alternative media producer. Two larger categories will help unpack the counter-hegemonic discourse articulated by the alternative media. One relates to social engagement and commitment, which activates the affective component of the subject position. Affect in particular emerges as a point of

difference from the celebrated dispassionate neutrality of professional journalism. The second category represents media as the arena for new voices and demands, which brings the antagonism with mainstream media back into the picture.

6.3.1. Resistance to professional media practices

As much as the articulations and performances of alternative media producers replicated those of professional journalism, there has been an ongoing critical reflection on the mainstream media practice. In particular, censorship, internal hierarchies, elitism and social disconnect emerged as elements of professional media practice that triggered resistance. This resistance, however, was enacted along the very discursive boundaries that produced it in the first place, with professional journalists tending to replicate the hegemonic discourse and non-professionals seeking to challenge it. Moreover, as I will argue, the latter often performed resistance by appealing to the very same nodal points that constitute the discourse of professional journalism.

Previous experiences of censorship in the professional practice appeared defining for some participants' understanding of the mainstream media. For instance, in our interview, the founder of *Discours* spoke at length of how an editorial team of one of Russia's largest newspapers gave him the cold shoulder when he – a young intern at the time – came up with fresh suggestions for topics to cover. "[W]e won't write about this, this is too sensitive *(slishkom ostro)*, the reader is not interested", he recalls hearing from his boss. This experience prompted him to launch *Discours*, where "the risk of individual preferences of one person, the risk of political pressure on him [sic]" would be eliminated.

Related to censorship was the critique of internal hierarchies in professional media – "traditional vertical media", as Artur put it. Especially worrying for some participants was the strong influence of individual actors on the production process: "I wouldn't want to work for a medium that follows a certain editorial policy <…> [if] there is an investor or a boss who says what can and what cannot be published" (Nadya). Equally, some informants talked of their repulsion for internal hierarchies in mainstream media, where some authors were treated as more senior than others.

The inequalities existing in professional editorial teams were associated with social disconnect, in contrast to the community-centered media production that puts an emphasis on friendly sociality. Here is how Valentina recalled her time as an intern at a professional editorial team: "There, once you've discussed the agenda and the editorial meeting is over, everyone leaves. Here, it's heartwarming and nice *(dushevnen'ko i zdorovo)."* Furthermore, social (dis)connect is linked to the sense of unity and support:

Valentina: Elsewhere, if you don't succeed in something, [they'll tell you to] go to hell. They will either cut your salary or do something else, plus you'll let a lot of people down and, most likely, go to hell anyway.

Furthermore, the perceived tendency of mainstream media to provide coverage to the already-privileged social actors was highlighted: "[P]eople with no access to the media", Artur said critically, "are not famous enough, not rich enough to be written about, from the perspective of the business and tabloid press". This point of critique did not only concern the actors covered by the mainstream media, but also extended to the privileged actors within them. Interestingly, the presence of media professionals within the alternative media, and the performances of the hegemonic discourse on journalism they brought in with them, caused struggles between them and the non-professional participants. One informant, who wished to stay completely anonymous in the following quote, recalled one such experience. Their colleagues suggested inviting a well-known journalist to write an op-ed for their medium. The informant resisted the proposal, pointing at the problematic tendency to reproduce professional elitism:

> [S]ome of my comrades <…> are infected with journalism *(zarazheny takim zhurnalizmom):* 'Here's a very important person, <…> he will write an article for us, and everyone will read us' <…> I absolutely do not like this.

The example illustrates the competing constructions of the subject position of alternative media producer, which simultaneously challenge professional media practices and remain under their influence, brought in by professional actors.

Building on their critique of professional media practices, the participants sought to perform an alternative in their production process. In the following two sections, I present two ways in which this alternative was enacted: through encouraging counter-hegemonic voices and demands, and through an open display of social commitment.

6.3.2. Arena for counter-hegemonic voices and demands

In the theoretical literature on alternative media, counter-hegemony is discussed as one of their major distinct features (Bailey et al., 2008). The analysis of data supports this observation and indicates two models in which counter-hegemony was enacted. One relates to the notion of voice, understood here in the more restricted sense of *individual* expressions of thoughts and experiences (Pietikainen & Dufva, 2006). The other one is Laclau's notion of demand, viewed as an expression of *collective* requests and claims establishing

the relations of equivalence and difference in the political field (Laclau 2005, p. 73).

The media in the study presented somewhat different meanings of arena, which help to further unpack the notion of counter-hegemony in two, more nuanced, ways. Their shared understanding is that alternative media are platforms where the voice of less powerful social actors can be expressed, such as people of lower social class, marginalized political groups or victims of assault. Providing an arena to these unprivileged voices, the media aimed at fostering new and alternative narratives, as exemplified in the two following quotes:

> **Alexander**: [I]t is an opportunity to give voice to people who are excluded from the official agenda or are ignored by it.
>
> **Vera**: For me it's obvious that in cases of harassment we always side with the victim, even if someone finds our arguments insufficiently convincing <…> [We] side with the person in a conflict who needs help. In any situation where someone's rights are violated.

Importantly for my point here, the two quotes were uttered by informants from *DOXA*, an alternative medium expressing the voice of the student community often at odds with university administrations (hence the "official agenda"), which in certain cases included cases of harassment of female students. Exclusion here is understood as the failure to address particular claims engendered by the political reading of the student community (see also section 6.5). In a similar vein, *Avtonom* saw itself as a loudspeaker for the anarchist project, for a demand encompassing a set of equivalentially articulated political struggles, such as antifascist, feminist and environmentalist (*Avtonom* Manifesto, accessed in April 2020); as the informant Alexey regretfully said, "[w]e don't have large newspapers <…> covering the anarchist or antifascist perspective."

The dissatisfaction with mainstream media representations is still present, but it concerns representations of the respective communities and their demands. Amidst Moscow protests against electoral fraud in 2019, in which young people were particularly visible, *DOXA* countered claims laid out by professional media outlets. In one instance, when a popular TV anchor claimed that many protesters came from outside of Moscow and lacked voting rights at the local elections, *DOXA* discussed the need for publication of counter-evidence (*DOXA* group chat 29/7/19).

By contrast, *Discours's* editorial team was organized around shared principles of horizontality (see chapter 7) and vaguely shared personal interests, rather than collective political demands. Its manifesto (accessed in April 2020) proclaims the need to "explain the fragmented picture of modernity from different points of view." Here, the notion of individual *voices* appears more

relevant; it accounts for the construction of an arena that remedies the failure of mainstream media to reflect the diversity of the political spectrum:

> **Artur**: [I]n the context of the lack of a public discussion, almost all ideologies are muted and not heard. We are giving a voice to many. Here, feminists, libertarians, the left and people speaking out against feminism can all have a say. We give voice to a lot of different people, and these voices are usually not heard [elsewhere].

In this sense, alternative media still act as arenas, but in two slightly different ways. *Avtonom* and *DOXA* broadcasted the demands of their respective communities who seek to represent their collective identities through the construction of an equivalential relationship. In turn, *Discours* can be more helpfully approached as a micro-model of the public sphere, with its multiplicity of voices not necessarily articulated into an equivalential chain; as one informant put it, "a platform that would create a broad discourse." With this second model, *Discours* effectively attempted to make up for the perceived failures of mainstream media to construct a vibrant platform for a variety of voices within politics and culture. Conversely, *DOXA* and *Avtonom* attempted to radicalize the political field by setting the stage for marginalized political demands.

6.3.3. Social commitment and engagement

The second way in which counter-hegemony was enacted in the study relates to the expressed social commitment and engagement, contrary to the dominance of objectivism in hegemonic discourses on journalism (see chapter 4 for theoretical discussion). "I don't think that objectivity is very important for the format of *Discours*", Valentina confessed, "objectivity is for the news." This position was echoed by Olya of *DOXA*: "The idea is that this is partisan journalism *(angazhirovannaya zhurnalistika).* That is, we don't roll our eyes and [claim that we] try to be objective." Agatha, who said she did not believe in objective journalism, called for transparency: "One just needs to be reflexive about one's stance, that's it."

The committed stance was partly connected to the purpose of serving the community (see section 6.5), but first and foremost to the particular understanding of journalism and its purpose. In these articulations, media producers are not neutral observers but committed social actors providing explanation and critique. In an illustrative quote about the coverage of police searches in student dormitories, one informant said, "The purpose is precisely to show that, guys, this is not 'just happening' – you [should] see what it means, look at it from a different angle" (Alexander). Here, media producers are articulated as "citizens who care about what is happening to us" (Agatha).

In this articulation, the discursive boundary between media producers and political activists is particularly unstable. This evokes, once again, the multiplicity of subject positions, where the position of alternative media producer peacefully coexists with that of the activist:

> **Alexey**: I see myself above all as a social activist who <…> is trying to change things.

> **Olya**: It is not necessary to go on the picket line to take action. One can cover the pickets, interview the picketers – this would give a sense of purpose (*pridavat' smysl*) to the very picket.

Juxtaposed against the rational and dispassionate attitude fostered by the hegemonic discourse on journalism, the socially committed media production invests the participatory process with emotion and affect. In a striking moment at one of my interviews, after speaking for half an hour in a quiet voice and appearing self-conscious, Vera suddenly let her feelings show and stated firmly: "I came to *DOXA* because I hate my university. I simply wanted to find the place where I can mingle with people who also hate my university."[30] An informant from *Avtonom*, too, spoke of his very personal commitment to the subject: "I've grown up in a family where we discussed justice. Justice as the most important human value. That it's important to think not only about oneself, but also of other people. I was raised like that" (Alexey).

The affective dimension of a socially committed journalism was linked to the sense of liberty and full self-expression. Unlike in professional media that invariably impose limitations on their authors, alternative media are spaces where "you can express your full self" (Alexey). Another participant ardently spoke of their involvement in the community media production as a "personal project of liberation, when one liberates themselves through an introduction to [anarchist] philosophy, and liberates other people" (*Avtonom* text samples, 3/2/17).

To sum up, the subject position of the alternative media producer is articulated in more radical terms than that of a professional journalist, enabling to enact counter-hegemony in terms of individual voices and collective demands. The politics of production does, however, rely on the third key subject position – that of the audience member – which contributes to structuring power relations. The next section analyzes the construction of the audience and its implications for the participatory dynamics of the process.

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[30] Quote tweaked to omit the name of the university.

6.4. Articulations of the audience

As I have established in sections 6.2 and 6.3, alternative media production combines elements of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses on journalism. This fusion of discourses extends into the construction of the subject position of the audience. Here, we find diverse and often mutually contradictory articulations of audience members, providing rather different conditions for access and power-sharing. In sections 6.4.1 and 6.4.2, we find more traditional articulations of the audience which prevents their inclusion in the participatory process. Furthermore, I show that these positions were often expressed by individuals who are themselves employed at professional news organizations. By contrast, section 6.4.3 addresses the more empowering notions of the audience members that create conditions for their meaningful participation, which tended to be shared by non-professionals. Whatever the articulations, the position of the audience remained constitutive for the alternative media; as Agatha of *DOXA* said, "as long as these people perceive us as a serious medium that is worth reading on a permanent basis <…> we [count as] a medium."

6.4.1. The audience as a mass

The articulation of the audience as a mass, characteristic of professional journalism (see chapter 4), was one model replicated by the communities. In that position, the audience members were understood to be a target to be reached based on formal demographic parameters and outreach strategies. In our interviews, the core group members were able to list formal characteristics, such as age, gender or countries of residence of their readers, where the audience remained a broadly defined group of people consuming the media product. Interestingly, this was sometimes the first answer that the alternative media producers gave when asked about how they imagined their readers. This is exemplified in one excerpt below:

> **Interviewer**: Perhaps you have an idea of who this person is, who these people are. Let's maybe start with how you imagine these people.
> **Viktor**: You know, I actually don't imagine them very well. I can simply give you demographic data from the metrics. That these are predominantly people aged 18 to 35, that they live in large cities and spend a lot of time online.

This target audience needed to not only be defined, but was also one to struggle for and win over. "It is clear that we will never get a million [followers]. But even if we have 30,000 followers and an outreach of a few hundred thousand, it would be good and successful" (Alexey); "We need to struggle for the audience outside of our university" (*DOXA* group chats, 7/5/19). Here too, the

audience was conceived as a group of people whose attention needs to be actively sought and whose default choice as media users was passive consumption. They are also a rather voiceless group of people, as their involvement is made visible and is counted only through views, subscriptions, likes and other types of anonymized metrics: "We've had a small stagnation of subscriptions rate, but now we got 1,500 people in about 8-9 months. If we keep it up like this, we can continue to grow" (Alexey).

6.4.2. Defining the audience through access to skills and knowledge

Secondly, the audience was approached through (lack of) access to relevant skills and knowledge. As the literature overview sought to establish in chapter 4, the audience is typically constructed in opposition to the expert knowledge with its many loci – often media professionalism, but also science, politics or finance. The data obtained provide evidence that the audience retained this unprivileged position of the *ordinary people*, understood in terms inferior to the media producers:

> **Valentina**: There are simply people who have nothing to write about. If they are unable to write short comments on a small topic, where would they find a topic to write an entire text about?

> **Artur**: Everyone has a computer, but not everyone can start mining cryptocurrency <…> It's strange to believe that everyone who reads texts would write texts.

The articulation of the audience as ordinary people encouraged the producers to present the content in a more accessible way. As one *Discours* editor told his colleague prior to an interview, "You need to ask questions not as someone who understands the topic, but as an ordinary person *(prostoi obyvatel')* – for this to be interesting for the reader" (Field notes, October 2018). A similar approach informed *Avtonom's* decision to promote their magazine in Moscow's bookstores by purposefully simplifying content, based on a set of assumptions about the audience's understanding:

> **Grigory**: It was decided that, because most readers would probably <…> see the magazine for the first time and thereby find out about the existence of anarchists, we need to narrow down the content to colorful tabs with many pictures, as little information as possible, and simply tell about recent dramatic events from the life of the Russian anarchists.

The construction of the audience as people without sufficient skills and knowledge operated on essentialist ground and, in presenting this subject position as fixed rather than performed, camouflaged the political character of this very articulation. Taking the perspective of the audience could thus require a certain effort from the media producer, as pointed out by one participant:

> **Veronica**: I admire people who have a high level of education and erudition but can nonetheless make accessible, simple, understandable materials for a very diverse audience <…> The skill to switch and imagine whether this is useful for a [reader] or not, this still requires a big effort from me. But this is what creates this existential connection between me and the people with whom I almost never interact, with people outside of my social circle *(nye moyego kruga).*

This effort on the part of the media producer, described by Veronica in the quote above, was important: if one was not careful enough to make texts sufficiently accessible, the audience members could be turned off.

> **Veronica**: [W]hen a person – well, one of those who want to understand a complex subject, for whom these accessible articles are needed – comes to *Discours's* front page and sees an article titled "The Collapse of Metanarrative", he [sic] simply gets taken aback *(prosto osedayet).*

In this subordinated position, the audience members' capacity to participate in the production was substantially limited. Expectations of the audience were often low; one informant, a professional journalist themselves, shared their prior experience of trying to launch an online editorial team through an open call, with the vast majority of applicants considered as rather bad writers. Even if they are members of the same movement, such as *Avtonomnoye Deystviye* (AD), their access to the media production cannot be guaranteed: "[I] know people who met through *Avtonom* magazine <…> I absolutely do not believe that the majority of them can be included in *Avtonom*" (Valery). Some people, as another informant put it, will simply "never become writers" (Valentina).

The platforms of the alternative media remained open for contributions, but some gatekeeping mechanisms were in place to ensure the compliance of published content with professional standards. This prevented some of the incoming content from getting published. Informants in *Avtonom*, where the open web platform and magazine were two different entities,[31] referred to some of the readers' content as "very funny" and "just crap":

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[31] The website offered tools for easy publishing, while the texts in the magazine were carefully selected; see more on the process in chapter 7.

Valery: Our readers send us quite a lot. Unfortunately, 70% of this is just crap. The readers can email us texts, most often it's me who looks through them. Very often, in most cases, I don't even forward this to my comrades, because it is obvious… Some highbrowed theoretical essays, terribly written.

Tatyana: [The readers] are trying to submit some reflections to our website, usually along the lines of Tolstoyism, which is very funny <…> some Tolstoy's philosophy, using the same vocabulary, it's just obvious that the person has properly read the classics. Without any informational component. Just reflections about ideals.

Even where gatekeeping was not expressed in an overtly patronizing form, it remained part of the participatory dynamic that could be activated whenever deemed necessary. On one occasion, a *Discours* editor asked me to have a look at an incoming text to see if it required editing. When asked if it was better to let the community decide on their own, he responded, "As an editor, I don't want this text, as it stands, to be published next to other texts which are actually good" (Field notes, November 2018).

It is important to point out that the articulation of the audience as lacking the necessary skills and knowledge rejects the option of a cooperation of professionals and non-professionals, and the learning component of media production. The knowledge and skills attributed to media professionalism are expected by default, thus keeping power in the hands of the already-privileged actors with an access to the discourse on media professionalism.

Although these rather elitist articulations of the audience limited conditions for its participation, it needs to be repeated that they coexisted with some more positive and empowering notions of the readership. The final part of the analysis of the subject position of the audience member turns to these articulations and argues for their potential to increase participatory intensities in the production process.

6.4.3. The educated and critical audience

The more empowering articulation of the audience members, expressed by some informants, emphasized the audience's education and natural curiosity in the outside world, coupled with a critical approach. Metaphorically referring to the mainstream media content as chewing gum, one participant praised *Discours's* audience as sophisticated enough for in-depth content. Below is his quote at length.

Viktor: [T]hese are the people who are interested in self-education, because *Discours* is a magazine with a lot of <…> texts that are <…> complicated; sometimes overly, sometimes just about right, but they can be complicated. If someone reads [us], it means that he [sic] is interested not only in chewing the news gum *(zhevat' informatsionnuyu zhvachku)*, but in making a certain effort

to enrich their cultural baggage, develop their own thinking *(svoyu golovu razvivat')*, learn unobvious things about the outside world.

Education emerged as a keyword in data on multiple occasions; the readership was attributed with positive characteristics such as keenness on life-long learning, open-mindedness, and preparedness for long, deep and diverse texts; "to learn about USSR's war in Angola today and modern forms of poetry tomorrow" (Artur). Hand in hand with education goes a critical perspective on society. The participants characterized their audience as "more critically oriented" than ordinary news consumers (*DOXA* group chat, 10/6/19) and "rather opposition-minded guys" (Valentina).

One needs to point out the apparent contradiction between the articulation of the audience as lacking in skills and knowledge on the one hand, and as educated and critical on the other hand. These different positions were not expressed by the same speakers, although they were often expressed by different participants working at the same alternative medium. One important empirical explanation for the purpose of this chapter is the correlation between the signification of the audience and the professional occupation of the speaker. While the articulation of the audience as a mass could be observed across all of the three communities, some of the more elitist articulations regarding the position of the writer versus the audience member came from informants who were employed at news organizations. As a result, some elements of the professional discourse on the audience were exported into alternative media practice. Although non-professionals replicated parts of this professional discourse, they appeared to give a greater credit to audience members, especially those audience members who were willing to join the production process.

So far, I have presented the articulatory and performative practices in the communities where a number of key elements from the discourse on professional journalism were retained. The next section focuses on the critique of the hegemonic models of journalism and attempts to articulate their more counter-hegemonic versions.

6.5. Community membership through solidarity and belonging

The final subject positions conditioning participatory process focuses on the communities around media production. The position of the community member is key for understanding the power dynamics in the alternative media, as it opens access into the participatory process for individuals who (can) perform it. I define *media community* as a group of individuals with access to the

process of media production that perform belonging to the collective and interact with other producers on a regular basis. *Media* community here is different from the *targeted* community, the broader environment where the community members socialize, which I label with the Russian word *tusovka* as the best way to capture data (see section 7.1). Performing the position of community member does not guarantee partaking in its decision-making, but participation remains an invitation for those who do, unlike the individuals in the position of the audience members. It needs to be pointed out here that the three alternative media may have slightly different understandings of, and even labels for, a community. In *Discours*, they are formalized as the "editorial team" (*redaktsiya*) and are registered as users on the community website, *Discours.io,* even though many of them do not engage in the work of the community. In *Avtonom* and *DOXA*, the community boundaries and labels are even less stable. In this section, I am going to argue that this subject position is performed through identifications with the political logics that determine inclusion and exclusion.

When referring to the political logics of community member position, I mean specific articulations of the community that determined who could meaningfully count as its part. Not every student and not every anarchist could enter the respective community, but, rather, only those who accepted particular discursive positions. The subject position of student community member in *DOXA* was structured around an explicit emphasis on the student struggle, where a mere affiliation with a higher educational establishment did not suffice. The student was articulated as a political subject, which set discursive frontiers between the community and its outsiders. As Alexander of *DOXA* explained, "in Russia <…> because an enormous number of people get enrolled to universities after school <…> the notion of student and a young person often overlap." In its capacity as a "critical agent" (see section 6.2.1), *DOXA* focused on the more political reading of the position of the student, thereby imposing particular requirements for performance of the community membership. The performance – through identification with this more restricted reading – always remained a possibility, but one needed to embrace the political demands of the community to be recognized as its constituent. Consider how this position was expressed by an informant from *DOXA*:

> **Agatha**: [B]y students I mean students who are not indifferent to where they… where they study <…> These are students who don't just come to the university to get a degree, but those who actually care about what is being done to education and how they can use it for their good and for society.

Similarly, power struggles around the definition of the anarchist characterized *Avtonom* and its broader political movement *Avtonomnoye Deystviye* (AD). These struggles prompted the movement to formally define their political project through a special amendment to manifesto, in which *AD's*

commitment to a variety of progressivist causes was emphasized. With this hegemonic intervention, the position of the anarchist was articulated in a way that included a variety of struggles on the political left. It was made clear that those who rejected the new broad definition were not welcome in the movement (see more on protection of diversity in the communities in section 7.3.2). Since the passing of the amendments, *AD* as a movement has largely declined;[32] yet, these principles continue to be implemented in the informal community around *Avtonom* as an alternative medium.

Solidarity, and its expressed forms, was a nodal point in the articulations of the community member, especially the student in *DOXA* and the anarchist in *Avtonom*. One informant explained the rationale for creating *DOXA* precisely by the lack of solidarity among the students, which *DOXA* tried to remedy: "There [used to be] no university solidarity, the community would fail to come to the defense of its members <…> When we created *DOXA*, I was thinking about it" (Levan). One way of enacting solidarity for *DOXA* was expanding their coverage from one specific university to other Russian and Belarusian universities: "A lot of people <…> get the impression that there is our university where people play their own games, and then there is the outside world with problems of its own" (Alexander).

DOXA saw the perfect storm in summer of 2019, when the coverage of students' detentions helped the community establish itself at the heart of the grassroots movement for solidarity among students. In their group chat on Telegram, participants shared instructions on how to join the picket line in solidarity with detained students without getting detained themselves (*DOXA* group chat, 5/8/19) and urged other students to come to courts to "support our colleagues so they support you next time" (*DOXA* group chat, 28/7/19). The importance of solidarity for identification with the student community also comes through in the example below:

> **Participant 1**: Meanwhile I fell out with the initiative group in support of Zhukov[33]
> **Participant 1**: Because these bastards think that you can support one student and give up on the other one
> **Participant 2**: F****** great logic. (*DOXA* group chat, 5/8/19).

In a similar fashion, a text published on the *Avtonom* website discussed solidarity as a discursive element that fosters the community:

> It is precisely through solidarity practices that one develops the sense of unity, community, understanding that you are not an atomized individual but a part

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[32] The decision to pass the amendments was not the only reason for the gradual decline, but did contribute to the weakening of the movement, according to three informants from *Avtonom*.
[33] The student and vlogger Yegor Zhukov was one of the more outspoken detainees in the Moscow protests in the summer of 2019.

of a collective that will not only help you in difficult times, but also guide you and critique you if you happen to be wrong (*Avtonom* text samples, 15/5/17).

Although the idea of a community – especially in the cases of *Avtonom* and *DOXA* – exceeded the media production, the latter was seen as an important element of service to the community. This was done through native reporting, the notion that refers the practice of coverage by disadvantaged communities of stories that matter to them (see the theoretical discussion in chapter 4):

> **Vera**: We are partisan in the sense that we don't cover the news neutrally. We present it from the student perspective.
>
> **Valery**: Perhaps the goal of *Avtonom* is to cover events through the lens of the anarchist project.

To sum up, solidarity acted as a nodal point of the discourse on community, which created the position of community member. Seeing as there is no formal membership in the community, and a forced exclusion of individuals has virtually never been practiced,[34] the subject position remained largely performative. It was anchored in continuous material practices based on solidarity: studying together, protesting injustice or enacting and embodying anarchist ethics, which *Avtonom* described in an article calling for the "anarchism of lifestyle" (*Avtonom* text samples, 15/5/17).

As has already been mentioned above, performance of the community member position does not promise a direct inclusion in the participatory process. The subject position is characterized with a more minimalist intensity, where the inclusion into the core group of decision-makers is a possibility dependent upon a number of conditions, such as staying active and keeping a friendly spirit. In the following chapter, I am going to focus on how these participatory intensities are structured, presenting an analytical model that takes into account the subject positions explained above, from the non-participatory audience to the directly engaged roles of alternative media producers.

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[34] Except for cases of plagiarism, but also instances of collaboration with police, which will be discussed in chapter 7.

Chapter 7. Doing participation: The process and its limits

7.1. Delineating the process

Before characterizing the participatory process, I will begin by outlining its boundaries. This chapter draws on participatory theory (see chapter 3) that emphasizes the political dimension of participation that separates it from related concepts such as access, interaction or consultation (Arnstein, 1969; Carpentier, 2012). My argument builds on political theory's understanding of participation as power-sharing which, in its normative ideal, is articulated in terms of equal power positions of the actors in the process. From this more critical perspective, a mere interaction between individuals and groups is not sufficient to characterize a process as participatory. Neither is access, which ensures the presence of participants but not their inclusion in the (re)distribution of power. There is a need, the theoretical argument goes, to distinguish between access, interaction and participation in a more nuanced approach to democratic practices.

Taking this distinction as a helpful starting point, this chapter has a double purpose. On the one hand, it protects the focus on decision-making as the normative ground for analysis. On the other hand, it brings the attention back to interaction as the level where power relations are shaped and access to decision-making is negotiated. I argue that decision-making often concerns agendas where a general prior consensus has already been reached. It is, therefore, necessary to take a step back and analyze how the complex and dynamic interactions act as a condition of possibility of particular forms of participation.

Locating the interaction in specific milieus, we are once again reminded of Yurchak's (2006) point on sociality within informal hangouts and the tight circles of *svoi* ("the homies"), which I reviewed in section 3.4. Yurchak's observations on togetherness, with its particular historical roots and significance in the Russian culture, are helpful for understanding why the notion of interaction, rather than serving as an object of criticism and dismissal as analytically insufficient, is crucial for understanding the conditions of participatory process. In the previous chapter, I identified a set of discursive conditions – subject positions – that enable particular (greater or lesser) participatory dynamics: the journalist, the alternative media producer, the audience member,

and the community member. Drawing on these subject positions, I propose an analytical model that consists of four layers of participation and is largely structured by the quality of interaction[35]. Below, I outline the four layers of the model, which will be unpacked and problematized further in this chapter.
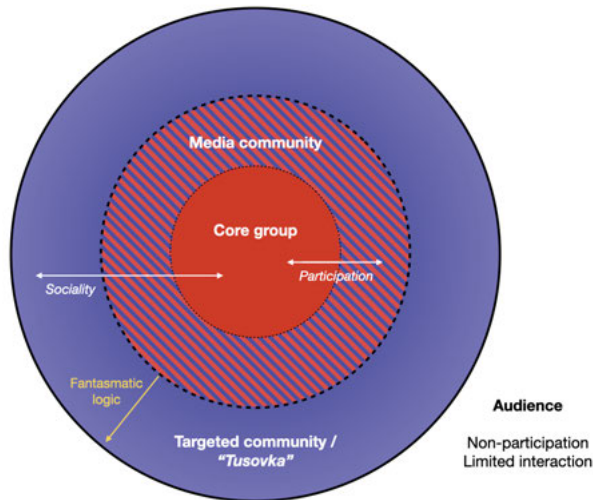
Figure 2. Model of participation in the alternative media.

The first and core layer, which I will henceforth call the core group, included a handful of people that took key operational decisions related to legal, financial and technical matters. Here, one finds the most maximalist participatory intensities, where decisions were taken in a collective and generally non-hierarchical fashion. Consequently, the access into the core group was the key condition of a meaningful participation. The core groups may have had different labels and degrees of fixity, but were clearly present in all of the case studies. In *Discours*, we find the more established core group with the label *izdatel'stvo* (the publishers), whereas *DOXA* and *Avtonom* had no fixed labels and a greater fluidity among the members of the core group.

The second layer of the analytical model is the media community, whose discursive boundaries were analyzed in section 6.5. To recap, this group brings together individuals who perform the subject position of a community member, articulated through a particular political logic where solidarity is the nodal point. In practice, media community members are seen as potential contributors to these media or have occasionally contributed in the past, but have not fully committed, which is part of the reason they are kept outside the core (these dynamics will be further explored in this chapter). Still, in *Discours*,

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[35] For reasons that were partially explained in section 3.1 and will be further clarified in section 7.2, I will refer to interaction as sociality.

which has developed more rigid labels and functions of its community, it enjoyed some decision-making rights. Labeled as *redaktsiya* (editorial team) and, at the time of the participant observation in 2018, encompassing about 400 people, the *Discours* community was delegated the right to vote in favor or against incoming content (see more on the procedure in section 7.3). In *Avtonom* and *DOXA*, these people were not directly included in decision-making, but were nonetheless seen as potential contributors (and even potential members of the core group), remaining close to the rest of the community and creating a milieu similar to what Yurchak called *svoi* (see the quote on p. 62)*.*

Beyond the narrower circle of media communities was a larger social environment in which they were embedded. To label this broader social milieu, I borrow the Russian word used by some of my informants, *tusovka,* meaning a social circuit, a scene of people brought together by similar background, interests, values, and occupations.[36] The majority of participants belonged to roughly the same generation (born between the late 80s and early 00s), studying or having studied in the more prestigious Russian universities; many participants of the three alternative media knew each other, some had established friendships across the communities and often spent their time in the same places popular with people of their social circuit. On at least one occasion, *Discours* and *DOXA* community members accidentally ended up having parallel meetings at the same bar, and *Avtonom* members were present at some *DOXA's* events (Field notes, November 2018 & April 2019). I argue that the *tusovka*, as a space where vibrant sociality was taking place, is key for understanding the performance of participation in alternative media, because it structures the key fantasmatic logic of community building that drives their participatory process. While people hanging out in the *tusovka* had a lot of shared structural dispositions with the community members, they were not yet articulated as part of the political logic of the community (see section 6.5). For instance, they could be students in the sense of formally being enrolled to a university, but they were not (yet) performing the kind of political subjectivity that *DOXA* ascribed to the subject position of the student; the same goes for *Avtonom* and anarchists and, to some extent, for *Discours* and its insistence on dialogue and respect for diversity. My point is that media production was largely driven by the fantasy of interpellating those in the larger social circuit as *their* community members in the predefined subject positions (a *particular* articulation of the student, anarchist, etc.), thus imagining the community as potentially limitless. A limitless community entailed limitless opportunities of enjoyment of the sociality and camaraderie that characterized the production process (I will develop this point in section 7.2.1).

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[36] I am aware the label has a different, negative connotation in Russian when applied to the relatively narrow pool of professional journalists to emphasize their elitism. It needs to be made clear that the word *tusovka* here is used in a neutral way and does not directly relate to professional journalists, although it may partly include them as they collaborate with the alternative media under study.

Finally, outside the broader social circuit we find the layer of the audience, structured by a particular reading of this subject position. Although the doors were not closed on the audience entirely, and particular audience members could still negotiate access into the activist and intellectual milieu of *tusovka* (and, consequently, the participatory process), the audience were predominantly articulated in terms of an anonymous mass, with limited knowledge and skills (see section 6.4). In this final, outer layer of the analytical model, we find no power-sharing and limited opportunities for interaction.

In this chapter, I will unpack the key points brought up in this introductory section. I begin by analyzing the role that interaction plays in organizing the participation in media production. Due to the analytical emphasis on the affective and embodied dimensions of interaction, I will call it sociality. Later in this chapter, I show how sociality informs the fantasmatic logic of the process. Much of the chapter focuses the attempts to overcome instability and contingency as the defining characteristics of alternative media production, which partially opens ways for a broader inclusion, but also sets limits. The final part, section 7.4, looks into ways those limitations affect the practice.

7.2. Conditions of participation

7.2.1. Sociality

As I pointed out in the previous section, interaction – or sociality, as I prefer to call it – structures some of the key dynamics of the participatory process. The argument of this section is that sociality performs the key fantasmatic logic (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) of the participatory process: the promise of a full (and thus ever-expanding) community around political struggles represented by the alternative media production. For *Avtonom*, the struggle is focused on the promise of a (new) society on the principles of anarchism; for *DOXA*, a united, galvanized and solidarized student community. *Discours's* ideological project is slightly different, as it is based on the fantasy of an accomplished unity in difference; yet, a steady expansion of the community's network remains central to its imaginary.

Additionally, sociality activates affect, the key dynamic of the participatory process that manifests not only in its presence (ensuring the continued involvement of participants), but also in its absence, disappearance and forced removal, which further intensifies the existing antagonisms. Sociality, and the variety of affects it produces, manifests in four key areas: networked sociality (desire for a larger community), intimate and conflictual sociality (personal friendships, where disputes and arguments are one of the components), and embodied sociality (physical proximity that sustains enjoyment). I argue that

approaching participation through sociality helps in understanding its performance, insofar as it brings the attention to the assemblage of articulatory and material practices, bodies, and objects.

7.2.1.1. Networked sociality

Community building through expansion of existing social networks is one way in which sociality structures the process. Indeed, participation in media production consists not only in the (sometimes) tiresome and frustrating interactions with editors, contributors and technicians. It also involves communication with community members, brought together by shared outlooks, interests and cultural background (see section 6.5). People join the process to become and feel part of this togetherness, with its fantasy of never-ending expansion. Media production is a starting point, but not necessarily the ultimate purpose: for some, the process of interactions, and the fantasmatic logic of community building, has a priority over participation in media production as such. A few key quotes from *Discours* and *Avtonom* contributors help illustrate the point:

> **Valentina**: In my view, the creation of space, of community is more important for *Discours* than the production of content… That production of content creates such a cool group is amazing and very valuable, and I think that this is perhaps partly the very goal of *Discours*.

> **Veronica**: Community is needed in its own right. You need a community because communication creates the sense of time, the sense of other people, the sense of your own interest.

> **Grigory**: I think that, much like in other countries, [in Russia] it is relevant to use the term 'anarchist scene' <…> This is very important, it has a subcultural component, informal connections, this is precisely a scene and *Avtonom* is one of the points of crystallization.

The metaphor of *scene*, used by Grigory in the last quote, is not dissimilar to *tusovka* and is equally relevant for understanding sociality in alternative media. Interaction connects the communities producing alternative media with the broader *tusovka*, people only vaguely related to each other, often (yet) unfamiliar with each other, and yet united, as Veronica put it in the abovementioned quote, by shared interests and the sense of the historical moment. These ties are activated not only at the regular community meetings, but also in more informal settings, such as birthday parties, cafés, bars or at the homes of some participants. Especially in the end of the week, the more formal meetings evolved into informal hangouts in the city, joined by friends, and friends of friends. These interactions with a broader and diverse social environment helped enact the fantasy of a continuous community growth. For example,

here is how Levan shared his excitement of expanding the network with other participants in *DOXA's* group chat, in a series of messages from a student party:

> **Levan:** Damn guys I [just] met f****** cool psychology students
> **Levan:** They attended *[DOXA's]* anniversary party
> **Levan:** Really cool [guys], from different universities, they have a community of a couple of thousand [subscribers] on VK
> **Levan:** And are interested in the same things as us
> **Nadya**: Whoa who are they
> **Levan:** [sending link]
> **Levan:** And they want to write articles with us (*DOXA* group chat, 19/4/19).

These kinds of encounters, with both familiar and unfamiliar people within the *tusovka,* become an integral part of the community building – not necessarily for particular benefits, but for enjoyment of a good time and distraction from everyday life. Often, people encountered at these informal meetings would indeed become part of the media communities and contribute to the production process with their knowledge and skills (see section 7.2.2.3 on mobilization of participants). One informant recalled coming to *Discours's* weekly meetings after a long and tiring day at his previous workplace to enjoy a few drinks. Later, when he joined *Discours* as a full-time editor, he realized that "there are weekly meetings that you need to make fun. You don't need to, they just turn out fun." Levan remembered the joyful times when *DOXA* was granted a room in Moscow's children's library: "We hung out there and had so much fun. They had a cardboard Kremlin that we used as a background for our pictures, some funny children's books, plush toys." In the days preceding the unexpected protests in July 2019, many of the messages in *DOXA* group chat on Telegram consisted in invitations to go out and grab beers.

This enjoyment of sociality was something the communities held dear and were eager to protect by restricting access to the participatory process to those who spoiled the pleasure:

> **Tatyana**: We have a list of [authors] who we don't want to interact with because they are terribly toxic people.

> **Agatha**: We have a guy *[name omitted]* who joined our editorial team, rushed in with huge ambitions <…> But he had constant conflicts with *** *[editor's name omitted]*, because he is a smart guy but, how to put it politely <…> his stance is "I know everything and I'm not going to make compromises" <…> He's constantly absent, then suddenly turns up again – so what's the point of inviting him into senior management.

It needs to be pointed out that the communities are organic and sporadic entities where formal inclusion and exclusion is rare (see section 7.4.3). However, informal decisions on inclusion and exclusion were still possible within

the core groups. Sociality set a number of important conditions for entering or staying part of the core: one needed to be responsive, pleasant and to simply show up; informal practices of blacklisting or ostracism – those that do not require any formal procedure – always remained an option for the core group. As Levan wrote to his fellow participant in *DOXA's* group chat, "We reserve the right to not want to deal with you *(ne hotet' s toboy imet' delo)*, if you don't accept our common conditions" (*DOXA's* group chat, 2/10/19). The troublemaker from Agatha's quote above was eventually positioned outside of the core group, as part of the mobilization efforts (see more in section 7.2.2.3).

Part of the driving force behind this network-building is the fantasmatic logic of a yet-to-be-achieved community fullness. Grown from about 30 contributors in 2015 to over 400 by late 2018, *Discours* kept relying on the promise of community expansion, cutting across ideological positions in the creation of a common product and, by extension, a community united in its differences.

> **Artur**: [O]ur society is extremely polarized. There are many social ghettos that do not intersect. People who read communist or libertarian, pro-Putin or anti-Putin newspapers, they live in parallel realities, in different information bubbles. We are the medium that bursts these bubbles.

This desire for fullness – achievable only through continuously expanding sociality – was echoed in *DOXA*. In the first half of 2019, its core group's discussions often revolved around the need to expand their focus from one particular university to all Russian students and foster the political reading of studentship. This fullness would be impossible without further community building: "We need to integrate more people outside of our university into our editorial community. For this, we need to meet other people" (Field notes, April 2019).

7.2.1.2. Intimate and conflictual sociality

A successful community building activated a more intimate component of sociality. For Olya of *DOXA*, it was especially important that at some meetings, she "managed to find not only allies, comrades in struggle, but even friends." This was echoed by Valentina who said her internship at *Discours*, mandatory for her university studies, was nonetheless "[a]s if I went to work at an editorial office but eventually found cool friends", with communication being "easy, informal *(laitovo, bez ofitsioza),* everybody acts like they are homies *(kak drugany)*." For many of the informants, this intimate sociality contrasted with their prior experiences in professional media. For some, like Valentina, this was the reason to stay involved in the process: "[F]or me human ties are

always more important that just business connections or simply content production." This comforting experience of togetherness kept people engaged in the interaction, with participation in media production being one of its important effects, but, for some, not the decisive one.

Discours's case is particularly important for a better understanding of participation in terms of both intimate and conflictual kinds of sociality. At the time of the participant observation in 2018, the core of the team consisted of two editors, both men in their mid-20s who had been friends since school. Much of the social dynamic in the community reflected their interpersonal relationship, characterized, on the one hand, by a visible enjoyment of each other's company, and on the other hand, by what one intern described as "a vital importance of arguing" with each other (Field notes, November 2018). The arguments concerned a wide variety of issues, from those directly related to content production and distribution, to a long polemic on whether the Moscow government allows the sale of alcohol in the city's squares. Much of the contrast consisted not only in positions but also style. In the words of another intern, one editor is "softer", the other one "is more radical, more straightforward. And they have different views on a lot of things." The differences in style, in her view, helped the core of the community make a broader appeal: "Because of that, they are forming a sound symbiosis that can represent the interests of different sides of the spectrum: both the more radical and the more moderate." Another intern, Valentina, recalled her role as "the third party" in the arguments between the two editors, sharing her occasional frustration.

> **Valentina**: I was sitting [there] and thinking: Gosh, give me a break, you've discussed this a thousand times. I think such conflicts are rather irrelevant, they are just wasting time. These arguments are pointless.

These arguments, however, were probably not entirely pointless. This very conflict – respectful and nonconsequential as it was – acted as a driving force of the participatory process that invested it with affect, not a far cry from what Mouffe's (2005) argument for passion in democratic politics (see chapter 3). Furthermore, this sociality played a significant role in keeping the process going despite the many limitations emerging on the way.

7.2.1.3. Embodied and spatial sociality

The affective dimension of sociality was partially conditioned by the material settings in which it was experienced. Strictly speaking, physical encounters were not necessary for the participatory process; moreover, in case of *Avtonom*, they were logistically and organizationally difficult, with participants spread all over Russia and even abroad. Yet, there was an expressed

need to have face-to-face meetings of the core groups, where sociality was often central:

> **Grigory**: We are trying to call for meetings once a month. These meetings are dear to me <…> Of course, something can be decided on the phone and through computer, but nonetheless <…> To me this is dear because you can learn something new, hang out with the others *(s kem-to poobshchat'sya).*

> **Levan:** We started looking for a venue not a long time ago. In the first year, we existed in the form of a [group] chat on VK, gathered very rarely and thought it was OK. Then we decided that we need to gather [somewhere].

> **Artur**: [W]hen we had our own place without strangers, [our] colleagues could come over on weekdays much more often and, of course, it was much livelier. When we were based in *** *[name 1 omitted]* and *** *[name 2 omitted]*, we also had our own room, so every day a few colleagues would come over. People would constantly come over to make our acquaintance, we could invite them.

Spaces functioned not only as a background for sociality, but often determined its very quality. In our informal interview, a *Discours* intern astutely pointed at the embodied aspect of the interactions between the two editors: "Even their positioning in the room: they always sit either in front of each other or diagonally opposite, so that they don't have to yell back and forth" (Field notes, November 2018).

Tellingly, when asked to imagine the perfect place for their communal work, the editors would describe a space where hangouts and fun go hand in hand with media production, integrated into the participatory assemblage; in some accounts, hangouts even precede the work itself.

> **Artur**: It is a place somewhere in central Moscow <…> which has two or, better, three rooms, one of which is a big hall with a bar counter, equipment for small concerts, film viewings, lectures, and discussions. And it has two, ideally three rooms for a quieter work, not for hangouts *(obshcheniye),* not for events.

> **Alexander**: [I]t should be sizeable enough for something like 20 people to have fun and, even more so, work.

Ongoing in the summer of 2019 was a conversation about renting an apartment for a few *DOXA* members who would be willing to join and spend more time together. In those articulatory practices, "togetherness" (*splochyonnost'*) remained the nodal point of participation, but was supplemented by its embodied dimension, "gregariousness" (*skuchennost'*), the word used by Levan: "We would have an adequate density – six people for three rooms – but you'd still get the feeling of gregariousness, togetherness." This need for physical proximity and closeness was echoed by another informant from *Discours*:

>**Valentina**: The publishers are all working closely together, we're all based in one place, despite the fact that we could work from home. Still we come together, which is much easier than sitting at home alone.

The regular meetings of the communities remained one of the key performances of the process. It was interaction, not decision-making, that remained crucial for some participants, reminding of Butler's (2015) notion of an embodied character of a collective identity (see section 2.5).

>**Veronica**: When you find a community, you feel better. It's as if you stand on your own two feet *(kak by stoish' na nogakh)* when you meet people of similar views and you know you can regularly meet them – for instance, once a week.

The priority of sociality also manifested itself in physical objects that materialized belonging and expressed the community's collective identity. One informant described this kind of atmosphere as "magic": "When we had our own spaces without strangers, it created some magic and [special] atmosphere, because it had our books, our pictures, and handicrafts of our colleagues" (Artur). This affective relation with the material world explains why the perpetual deprivation of space, which will be detailed later in this chapter, was experienced as stealing of a pleasure, as the frustration of not being able to overcome the lack of a vibrant, growing and well-established community. Various attempts to fulfil that desire were still made. The next section analyzes the attempts to mobilize efforts and resources in the face of the inherent instability of the process.

7.2.2. Mobilization of resources and people

The operations of alternative media across various historical and cultural contexts follow a familiar pattern: they are organized amidst significantly strained resources. Later in this chapter, this underlying condition of vulnerability will be discussed in more detail in relation to the limits of participation. However scarce the resources and unstable the situation, the communities manage to pull off the production process. In this section, I explore mobilization of resources as a perpetuate characteristic of the process aiming to overcome the inherent vulnerability.

7.2.2.1. Raising money

Financial difficulties have haunted alternative media throughout their entire existence (Atton, 2002b; Comedia, 1984). This is, at least in part, explained

by alternative media's avoidance of – and often disdain for – the market and its logic (Bailey et al., 2008). Scarce financial resources often mean that raising funds for a basic survival becomes one of the key conditions for any production (let alone participatory) process.

From the outset, it needs to be pointed out that the three communities do not have a singular approach to monetization. Their articulatory practices around profit-making differ, often depending on ideological positions. In *Avtonom*, selling ads has caused disputes: while Antti expressed his support for ads, appealing to the experience of the 1960s zines, his fellow media producers objected to the idea on the basis of anti-commercialization (Interview with Antti). As another activist put it: "We have a strict rule: no one here gets paid anything for any kind of work" (*Avtonom* 3/2/17). Needless to say, the outright rejection of commercialization imposes further limitations on the process.

By contrast, *Discours's* founder did not rule out selling ads to non-subscribers (our interview, October 2018). In general, *Discours* has opted for a hybrid model: while community contributors did not get paid, the editors got a salary, although one of them emphasized the modest amount of payment:

> **Alexander**: Yes, I do get a salary, it's a very small one for the market standards, but it's enough to… It suffices for Doshirak[37] (*doshik*), even for kebab (*shaurma*). Today, for example, I ate a kebab.

Since alternative media production had either failed to transform into a profitable business (in *Discours*) or was never intended to be one (in *Avtonom*), the alternative media relied heavily on crowdfunding and subscriptions. Such methods solved at least part of the problems:

> **Artur**: We get donations from [our] readers, but so far this has only been enough to cover technical expenses, [such as] the server that we use, but [it was] not enough for the development that we need.

Usually, the donations are modest in size[38] and come from one-time contributors rather than regular subscribers, which creates difficulties in planning future expenses. *DOXA*, for instance, aimed for at least 100-200 regular subscribers to make financial planning possible, but was yet to achieve this goal at the time of my participant observations.

Albeit an unreliable way to generate income, crowdfunding enabled alternative media to perform its very purpose of fostering a community around the

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[37] A brand of instant noodles.
[38] *Discours's* largest donation as of fall 2018 amounted to 1,500 rubles (€20 according to the conversion rate in October 2018). By spring of 2019, *DOXA* had only gotten a handful of contributions of 1,000 rubles (€14 as of April 2019).

process of production. Financial contributions became a way of bringing the community together, providing them with the means to engage in the process:

> **Levan:** I've realized that asking people to finance one's own medium is OK, moreover such culture is needed <…> if every subscriber chipped in with 50 rubles, we would have a million-ruble budget. We thought that it wasn't difficult for every student to make a monthly subscription for 100 rubles, whereas for us this would be solid.

The protests in summer of 2019 drastically changed the dynamic of *DOXA* crowdfunding, harvesting tens of thousands of rubles in just a few days after the first demonstration. That enabled a temporary remedy for the financial instability, and the introduction of modest payments for volunteers. The instability of financial planning, however, remained unchanged: the massive protests were as unexpected as the financial inflow and the workload that followed them.

Although an efficient way to foster a community around alternative media production, financial contributions per se did not affect the structure or content of the media and, thus, expand participation. In one characteristic example, *Avtonom's* website addressed readers with the call "Help us print it out" (15/10/2016), suggesting that the readers either preorder the future issue, lend money until the issue is printed and sold, or simply send a donation. However, the prospective contributors were presented with topics coming up in the issue. This demonstrated, on the one hand, the seriousness of the publishers' intentions and preparedness, but, on the other hand, the protection of decision-making related to content for the core group.

The quest for overcoming the financial vulnerability became one of the central preoccupations for the communities. External grants were sought after. Some of these grants were awarded by third-party foundations for organization of events; providing media coverage for these events helped raise money. For instance, *DOXA* was awarded a grant for organizing an academic summer school, which brought substantial financial support for the community (Interview with Levan). Additionally, *DOXA* has successfully collaborated with external foundations in producing paid translations of academic texts that were published on *DOXA's* website.

Community events were another strategy for raising funds. At *DOXA's* anniversary party in 2019, their volunteers were selling cakes, beers and merchandise, part of which later went to a jailed doctoral student that *DOXA* considered a political prisoner. The event raised some 50,000 rubles (€690 as of April 2019). Yet, considering the costs of the venue, ingredients and support of the imprisoned student, *DOXA* estimated that virtually no profits were made that night (Field notes, April 2019).

7.2.2.2. Searching for venues

As I argued earlier in this chapter, face-to-face meetings were an important driving force of the production process. Physical meetings require physical places, resulting in ceaseless searches for available venues that could host the communities. A successful mobilization of resources to overcome the scarcity of spaces was one of the key conditions of participation, but temporality was their defining characteristic.

Due to the strained financial situation, the alternative media mostly made use of publicly available spaces. At the time of the observations, *Discours* participants were working in a public library in central Moscow. *DOXA* had previously used a public library, too, but held their weekly meetings at one of the Moscow educational establishments as of summer of 2019. At the same time, numerous small commercial venues – cafés, bars and fast-food restaurants – were used as meeting points, where participants could sit freely, often with their laptops. Some communities attempted to establish a temporary fixity of venues – for instance, *Avtonom* participants normally gathered in a fast-food restaurant close to the city center (Interview with Grigory), whereas *Discours* chose a centrally located bar. There was no such fixity with *DOXA*, where lot of time and effort was often invested in choosing the venue that seemed right for as many participants as possible. Below follows an example of a conversation from the *DOXA* chat on Telegram in June 2019, where the place for upcoming community meeting later that day is discussed. Here, participants show awareness that they can only use one venue for a limited period of time:

> **Participant 1:** Shall we go to *** *[name 1 hidden]*? <…>
> **Participant 2:** On a Friday night?
> **Participant 1**: well… fair enough
> **Participant 2**: Need to think of places that are empty even on Friday nights…
> **Participant 3:** Cafes where coworkers are hanging out should be OK. Everyone is leaving to get hammered at this time of the day <…>
> **Participant 4**: *[name 2 hidden]*?
> **Participant 3**: In *[name 2 hidden]* there'll be no free seats. Can try *[name 3 hidden]* on Kurskaya, but I think they don't have tables for a lot of people…

Private places, mainly the apartments of the community members, could also be mobilized when necessary. This was an especially useful solution for *Avtonom*, whose printed magazines needed somewhere to be stored. The amount of these kept increasing over the years, including old editions and newly printed ones. The community found the solution in reconfiguring participants' homes into storages (Interview with Antti). Similarly, *Discours* held one of their editorial meetings at Alexander's apartment, while his family members were away on a trip (Field notes, October 2018). Considering the

relatively young age of participants, many of whom shared their apartments with family members or other people, such a solution could only be temporary. New mobilizations were required to keep the process going.

7.2.2.3. Mobilizing contributors

Given the lack of a formal organization, formalized responsibilities, financial rewards and legal accountability within the structure, the entire operation was dependent on personal commitments. Although this model was obviously unsustainable and often left the alternative media with an irregularly followed schedule of publications, they have developed a number of ways to overcome this fragility.

The (rather rich) intellectual and technical competences available within the community and the broader *tusovka* were crucial for this mobilization. On a number of occasions, the core group of *Discours* approached the community of authors with a request to compose a text on a particular topic understood to be within the community member's competence (for instance, I was asked to write an introduction to Judith Butler's book recently translated into Russian). Similar ad-hoc mobilizations were practiced by *Avtonom's* core group:

> **Grigory**: The engagement of various people through various channels and acquittances is welcome. Someone [may] come and say: "I want to write about this." Sure, [they can] do that. Or we know someone who had been somewhere, knows something, has some thoughts about it, and so we can ask him [sic] to write a text [for us].

While the *tusovka* provided the media communities with valuable resources, a set of practices was developed, and decisions taken, to fixate the instability within the core groups. This was the case for *DOXA*, whose core group during my observations experienced a period of inactivity, with poorly attended weekly meetings and missed deadlines. At a meeting in June 2019, the core group decided to focus on mobilizing the available resources and reducing its own size. Thus, they formally discriminated between the decision-making core (participants who had been most engaged in the process), the non-decision-making community members who only occasionally interacted with the core, and the pool of students vaguely affiliated with the community but not directly involved in its activities. This structure, essentially, stabilized the model I presented in section 7.1. Notably, while the access into participatory process was restricted with this decision, there was an expressed undesirability of reducing the sociality:

> **Levan:** There are many people who are interested in *DOXA* who are saying, 'OK cool, let me do something for you', then never do anything, but for whom

it's important to stay part of the *tusovka* <…> [W]e don't want to exclude and kick them out, to say: 'Well you ain't doing anything, go to hell.' On the other hand, you can't go on like that <….> So we've decided that we need a group of people <…> who will permanently work for *DOXA*. 6-10 hours a week – that is, some responsibility.

The main purpose of the ad-hoc restructurings was to mobilize the scarce human resources by keeping the less active participants out. However, they also presented a chance to keep out those who were considered problematic for the atmosphere of friendly sociality, discussed in section 7.2.1. At the aforementioned *DOXA* meeting, one of the participants placed outside of the core group was a person who, according to the informant called Agatha, "had stormed in with huge ambitions, he really wanted to do something, but had constant conflicts" with another editor. Considering that the troublemaker was also "constantly absent", Agatha asked the question about "the point of having him in senior management" (the term she preferred for the core group). Despite the absence of the participant at the meeting, he was placed into the second, non-decision-making group: "[H]e is still with us, he is still doing something, he still wants to be a manager, so he remained in the second pool" (Agatha).

The reliance on personal commitments, often supported by solidarities and friendships, provided an unstable ground, with people forgetting about their promises and simply sleeping through. Yet, even here the communities managed to mobilize resources. The supportive social network came to aid when it was necessary:

Alexander: Most of my responsibilities <…> in the past year were reminding people that they must do something, checking if they did, how they did it, whether this should be redone.

Mobilization of available human and material resources, alongside vibrant sociality, made the performance of participation possible, even as contingency remained its defining characteristic. These conditions of the process do not, however, explain how power was structured inside the decision-making core of the communities. Let us now turn to the internal qualities and dynamics of that process.

7.3. Characteristics of participation

The previous section sought to analyze the conditions necessary for participatory process to be performed within the broader social milieu. Here, I zoom in on the inner characteristics of those performances within the core groups, where (decision-making) power was concentrated. I will show how the

discourse of participation is performed by a series of enactments of the principles of horizontality and respect for diversity, bringing a variety of democratic articulations into the everyday practice.

7.3.1. Horizontality

Democratization of communication has, historically, lain at the heart of the project of alternative media (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2006). Horizontality is one of the defining elements of that aspiration, enabling alternative and community media to claim their difference from their mainstream counterparts and shatter the established power structure within the media. This section outlines elements supporting the discourse on participation in the three community media. I argue that participation is performed through horizontality, which further unpacked in terms of collegiality, equality, and autonomy. As they further intensify the contingency that characterizes alternative media operation, a series of interventions were designed to temporarily stabilize the participatory process. The section specifically addresses leadership in the communities, conditioned by particular articulations of horizontality.

7.3.1.1. Collegiality

The first element enacting horizontality is collegiality, which signifies collective decision-making of equal participants. Already the nomination used by some participants in group chats and interviews to refer to other participants – "colleagues" – emphasized this collaborative working style: "[Dear] colleagues, this is very important" (*DOXA* chat logs, 28/07/19), "[our] colleagues did not vote in favor of the text" (*Discours* informant); "Unlike my colleagues, I'm not a professional journalist" (*Avtonom* informant). In line with this nomination, there was a tendency to approach media production as a group work where decision-making power was spread across a collective, rather than concentrated in the hands of a handful of individuals. *DOXA's* group chat, for instance, presents ample examples of small decisions taken together – formulations of public and private responses on behalf of the community; the format of a future material; questions to ask at an upcoming interview and so forth. This format emphasized the decentralized organization of the community, but also the collegial, by default, mode of work.

Not all decisions were taken in a collegial fashion, but the opportunity to contest and overturn decisions taken by particular individuals on the basis of autonomy (see section 7.3.1.3) remained open.

> **Alexey**: The discussion begins among editors if an [incoming] article is provocative or unfit for the website, if it causes conflicts. If the free news[39] don't bother anyone, the editorial team has no discussion.

These contestations may have taken the form of group discussions leading to new decisions. If the discussion failed in reaching a new decision, a group vote would have taken place. Participants differed in their views on the desirability of a formal procedure such as polls: for some, this was an unnecessary point of a potentially overt conflict; others seemed to enjoy the procedure, especially when it could be easily organized, and anonymized, in online group chats.

Avtonom and *Discours* in particular had formalized the voting procedure. In *Avtonom*, where any audience member could publish their own text directly on the website, any member of the core team had the right to request taking the text to down. Here is how Antti explained the complex process in May 2017:

> **Antti**: [A]nyone [in the editorial team] can remove an article. Once the article is removed, a vote begins. There are two options: either the article shouldn't reappear at all, or it may reappear, but not on the front page. Then the vote starts, which runs for 125 hours (5 days). If the majority wants the text back, it comes back. But if within the first six hours there is a majority, the article reappears on the website and stays there until the end of the vote.

In other words, the procedure in *Avtonom* attempted to calibrate the balance in decision-making power between the individual and collective agency. Notably, the participants were expected to not only cast their vote, but also elaborate on reasons for their decision: "You are, anyway, not simply voting – you explain why you are against or in favor [of the text]" (Tatyana). The dialogue with Tatyana, recorded in November 2018, indicated that the voting procedure has been reduced from 125 hours to 24 hours over the course of the 1.5 years that passed since our interview with Antti. The switch from mailing lists, which *Avtonom* used in early 2010s, to social media chats towards the end of the decade, appeared to accelerate the speed of participation, and it remained up to the participants to catch up: "If you didn't have time to take part in the discussion, then you are [considered] a deadhead *(myortvaya golova)*, it happens" (Tatyana).

Similarly, in *Discours*, polls remained a crucial part of the participatory process, although not entirely doing away with the power of the core group. Also here, any audience member could upload their text to the website. Getting it published necessitated voting: once uploaded on the website, a text needed to be approved by at least five community members to appear on the

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[39] The name for incoming content that all internet users are free to submit to the *Avtonom* website.

front page. If the text received over 20% disapprovals, it was returned to the author for revisions. To vote, website users – all formally considered part of the editorial community – needed to click either the button '+' or '-'. Yet, in practice, the core group paid close attention to all incoming content and often intervened in the process before a text got the minimally required number of votes, in order to suggest edits. The next step consisted in editing. Here, either one of the core group's members would perform the function of an editor, or a community member with a supposedly good knowledge of the subject would be approached to share comments on the draft (for instance, I have been asked to be an editor for texts about Michel Foucault and political participation, based on the core group's understanding of my expertise). The allocated editor was effectively left with three options: accept the text (possibly with minor revisions), send substantial critical comments for improvement, or suggest an outright rejection (which also entailed enclosing a list of comments for the text's author). It was up to the text's author to accept the suggestions or upload the text without revisions; however, considering that the number of votes per article mostly remained in single digits, there was always an option for the core group to collectively vote against a certain text, thus raising the number of disapprovals over the critical 20%. With the practice of the allocation of editors, the core group delegated decision-making power to specific community members, and the rotation prevented a narrow group of editors from taking over control. At the same time, the core group protected its decision-making power and used various ways to discourage submission of certain texts – for instance, by returning poorly and unclearly written texts back to the authors for major revisions.

Apart from the more formalized voting procedures, other polls in the communities were sporadic and appeared an easy way to find a solution to an issue that raised too many different concerns. Some polls addressed more pertinent questions, such as the topic of a new magazine issue (Interview with Grigory). Other polls often concerned some less substantial issues. On one occasion, *Discours's* core team argued about a better title for their private Telegram group chat. As no decision was reached, the participants launched a poll in the very same chat (Field notes, October 2018). Arguments like these, irrelevant as they may seem, nonetheless activated the sense of belonging to the community through participatory models. The very act of choosing one of a few options, but also including as many people as possible in the poll, helped validate the democratic process, filling the mundane decisions with the sense of collegiality and togetherness. In a similar example, as I was quietly sitting at a *DOXA* meeting taking notes, the participants encouraged me to join their online poll on the design of the community's merchandize – more specifically, whether the word *DOXA* needed to be written in Latin or Cyrillic letters (Field notes, April 2019). Although I was not part of the discussion and the issue was hardly critical, what appeared to matter for community members was the

enactment of the procedure, not the rationale for including particular individuals into the poll or having the poll in the first place.

To be sure, most decisions – and even most polls – still required only a discussion, not a formalized procedure. However, the explicit striving for either a majority rule or, in the words of Alexander, a quorum ("so that this is not one person [deciding], but at least 2-3 [people]") was present:

> Discussion about the color of a frame for an online poll. Viktor[40] wants a black one. Mikhail asks Marina which one she likes better. Marina says white and explains why; Mikhail supports her, saying: "Two against one, go with the white one (Field notes, October 2018).

> **Participant 1**: Hi! Here's an idea: issue a limited number of enameled badges with the logo of the Party from '1984' <…> What do you think?
> **Participant 2:** Cool
> **Participant 3**: Let's try [this]
> **Participant 1:** Anyone against?
> **Participant 4**: I'm not against
> **Participant 5**: Superb!!!! (*DOXA* chat logs, 4/5/19).

Questions such as this, addressed to the whole group in the chat – "what do you think?" – were a common way to activate the collegial component. Although everyone's participation was not expected for a decision to be made, the very opportunity to share opinions emphasized the willingness for a broader inclusion.

7.3.1.2. Equality

The second element supporting horizontality as part of the discourse on participation is equality, which relates to the explicit intention of flattening out hierarchies within the communities. Especially in *Avtonom*, this aspect of participation enabled community members perform the anarchist discourse: "Since the anarchist society is a society without hierarchies, it cannot be constructed by a hierarchical organization" (*Avtonom* texts, 15/5/17). *Avtonom's* manifesto proclaims the need for "minimum vertical and maximum horizontal links in society" and "decentralization of management", or governance *(detsentralizatsiya upravleniya)* (*Avtonom* manifesto, 15/3/2009). Also in *DOXA*, internal organization within the community was seen as the projection and extension of power struggles in society. The critique of those power imbalances informed decisions regarding the internal structure in *DOXA*: "The corporate hierarchy is naturally oppressive <…> one governs, the other one obeys" (Levan).

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[40] Fictional name, here and henceforth in the excerpt.

> **Levan:** At some point, at the purely political level, perhaps my orientation has changed <…> I realized that the only thing I can do here is something more horizontal, more egalitarian, more inclusive, more inviting the community to collaborative work, rather than something external, hierarchical, and so on.

As equality was articulated into the discourse on participation, a set of practices were developed to ensure its protection. One was an explicit disempowerment of leaders. Even though, as we will see, leadership did not disappear entirely, individual community members had a relatively weak power to make executive decisions on the content. This was especially visible in the example of *Discours*, where the entire community is invited to decide on publication of texts and is dubbed as a "horizontal editorial team" *(gorizontalnaya redaktsiya)*. In his interview, *Discours's* founder, who kept referring to himself as an "one of the members of the editorial team", recalled an example of his interventions in the community chat. His comments concerned certain incoming materials that he suggested be taken down: "[I said] guys, I don't like this text because of this and that and I think we shouldn't publish it. On one occasion, I was heard; the next time I wasn't." Him again, elsewhere: "If we see that the text is bad and can't be saved, we vote against it just as regular authors." When asked about the ability to exclude certain participants, Viktor from *Discours* responded: "We don't have instruments for that. We are a horizontal editorial team." This was echoed by Valentina: "Here [in *Discours*], everyone has the right to speak out and all voices are equal. For me, this is very important."

Equality was also performed through rotation. In *Avtonom*, the rotation of editor's responsibilities was a practice used when the community was more active, but essentially ceased by 2017 when the interview with the website editor was conducted. In *DOXA*, rotation was often sporadic, and interchangeability was part of the participatory process; if one grew tired of dealing with the same topic, the community ensured realignment to meet the editor's needs: "I see that he has himself grown tired of this format and would be interested to try something different" (Vera). Also in their public appearances in 2019, as *DOXA* received multiple invitations to interviews and events as a result of their prominent role in the summer protests, the core group made sure to rotate its representatives so as to avoid having a handful of voices speaking on behalf of the whole community (*DOXA* chat logs, August 2019). Furthermore, *DOXA's* rotation was organized with respect to equal gender representation.

7.3.1.3. Internal autonomy

The third element supporting performance of participation is internal autonomy. This refers to the self-sustaining character of activities within the

alternative media, united by broadly shared values and goals but not by any kind of formal management. Internal autonomy was performed by separate individuals or designated units within the core groups, with respect to the horizontal structure.

Avtonom's website functioned independently from the namesake magazine: in our interviews, the website editor had difficulties responding to some questions related to organizing processes in the magazine, and vice versa. Website editors, too, enjoyed autonomy in decisions regarding the incoming content (Interview with Alexey). Also in *DOXA*, several groups producing different types of content could work autonomously and have different coordinators, even if physically present at the same meetings.

As became evident from our interviews, all three communities relied on multiple group chats across various social media platforms, such as Facebook and Telegram, where various issues could be discussed with various degrees of privacy. It was not possible to obtain access to all of these chats – partly due to privacy concerns of its members, partly because of the spontaneity of their creation and abandonment. Still, these practices, too, performed horizontality by activating a network of mobile relations, a digital rhizome that, in line with Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 19), was capable of connecting any point to any other point. The rhizome metaphor was described by one of the informants from *DOXA*, who showed a striking reflexivity on the horizontality of the structure (their name is omitted due to traceability considerations):

> **Participant**: We have an open editorial team – we don't have an immune system, anything can connect to us and it turns out we've become something else, there's a constant mutation. It's not just a rigid [structure] of 10 people with equal rights.
> **Interviewer**: You are almost visually describing the metaphor of Deleuze and Guattari.
> **Participant**: I know, I wrote my Master's thesis on Deleuze and Guattari *[laughs]*.

Despite the democratic promise of horizontality, the relative weakness of formal coordination in the communities often meant that decision-making simultaneously took place in a number of spaces by different people, often causing confusion. In my participant observations, I received first-hand experience of such disruptions, when a text that one *Avtonom* editor had requested me to translate was vetoed by another editor. The polemic concerned a 3-page interview with the lawyer of an anarchist activist whose defense strategy appeared to aim at shifting the blame for the crime in question – attacking a police officer at a demonstration – onto another protester.[41] Arguing that *Avtonom* should not help imprison one activist instead of the other, the second editor

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[41] The appearance of the protester, whose identity remained unknown to the lawyer, was similar to that of his defendant on the video footage examined in the court

requested the removal of the text and initiated a group poll which backed his position. I was informed of the discussion in a newly created Facebook group chat that involved both editors and another editorial team member.

Autonomous and decentralized decision-making created contingencies in *DOXA* as well. This was especially the case during the coverage of unexpectedly large-scale arrests at the summer protests in 2019 which strained the community's limited resources and caused a visible stress. Below follows one example, where a trivial decision of one of the editors to take a break immediately thwarted not only the process, but also created complications for other mentally and physically exhausted participants (chat from 29/7/19):

> **Participant 1:** I'll take a break for half an hour
> **Participant 2**: sure, one can take a half-hour break while doing a live broadcast
> **Participant 2:** without handing it over to anyone
> **Participant 2**: very responsible
> **Participant 2:** ok, I'll be doing this broadcast 24/7
> **Participant 2:** thanks for helping
> **Participant 2:** working for 48 hours is not a limit
> **Participant 3**: let me take it over
> **Participant 2:** if you can – do it
> **Participant 3:** yes

The above example relates to an unusual situation under intense pressure. Although celebrated as the performance of democratic self-organizing, horizontality has a potential of thwarting the process. Some participants showed awareness of the problem:

> **Alexander**: We had a horizontal system <…> and it did not work well. Because people were saying: 'I can't do this, sorry, I won't do this'. If something worked, that was because someone in particular was very interested in it or was too conscientious to give up on their responsibilities.

The above quote illustrates the oft-expressed dissatisfaction with the extreme contingency of the participatory structure, and a set of arrangements have been deployed in an attempt to stabilize – or, in Glynos and Howarth's (2007) words, conceal – this contingency. One of the key arrangements was leadership, to which the following section turns.

7.3.1.4. Emergence of leadership

The final component sustaining horizontality in the communities addresses the issue of leadership. Here, I show that exercise of power in the communities retained a largely consensual character and was seen as necessary and legitimate, as long as it was supported by a democratic articulation of leadership

and a set of procedures supporting the principles of collegiality, equality and internal autonomy.

Even though the position of the leader was not formalized in either of the communities (and, in case of *Avtonom*, actively resisted as contradictory to the anarchist project), there were individuals with a clear symbolic authority in the process. Considering that they had no formal title, I will refer to them as coordinators or leaders. In *Discours*, this person was its founder whose symbolic status as the creator of the community was further supported by the financial investments he had made into the project (see also section 7.4.1.1). In *Avtonom*, the de-facto editor-in-chief was also one of the oldest community members. *DOXA's* coordinator used to be the editor-in-chief, who later rejected the formal status (in his own words, "the editor-in-chief has decided that there should be no editor-in-chief"). The participants were aware of the informal power structure and generally accepted it:

> **Nadya**: We all know he is sort of a managing editor. I think we all subconsciously know that, but he doesn't call himself this way.

> **Vera**: *** *[name omitted]* doesn't want to acknowledge that he is *DOXA's* editor-in-chief, in fact, I like that we don't have a personalistic hierarchy. Still, you can't avoid discussing a lot of questions a lot with him, and, in fact, it's good.

The articulation of leadership carried a strong democratic component (see chapter 3 for theoretical discussion). The position of the leader was primarily articulated as that of a facilitator and moderator who sets out a direction for the discussion and protects order. One coordinator himself brought up the politics of labeling at our interview:

> It's clear that I'd rather act as a facilitator than a chief. In fact, this is exactly how it works, I never act as a chief. This is another organizational puzzle, meaning that I can't control anyone and nobody has to obey me, and I don't want to control anyone.

In the context of horizontality, and affected by the democratic articulations, leadership was conditional and open for contestations. The core group members protected their right to initiate polls, where the ultimate decision would be reached in a collegial fashion. As one participant concisely pointed out,

> We have a horizontal editorial team insofar as any serious conflict will be solved by voting <…> We have a delineated leader-creator with higher legitimacy than other [core group members], but this does not radically change the disposition (*DOXA* group chat, 2/10/19).

In the lack of a formal structure, performed leadership became an integral part of performance of participation. Undefined by any internal documents or agreements, leadership was an iterative practice. One part of this practice consisted in various sorts of mobilization – encouragements, reminders and organizational suggestions addressed to other participants. *Discours's* founder, for instance, used the community's Telegram chat to urge the members to cast their votes regarding an incoming text. In *DOXA*, leadership was enacted by structuring the editorial team's work. One characteristic example follows:

> Just for the future: when you don't reply anything in the working chats, the work is delayed enormously. Because if there's no answer, you [feel like you] don't have to do anything until it comes. As a result, this really slows down the work. Please don't ignore anything in the group chats, especially since most thematic chats have their own coordinators. (*DOXA* group chat, 23/4/19)

Leadership was performed by protecting internal order and well-being; to repeat the already-quoted passage: "Stop critiquing other people's ideas so rudely. This leads to burnouts" (*DOXA* group chat, 4/8/19). Especially in the critical moment in July-August 2019, when *DOXA* invested all of its resources in covering arrests of students during the aforementioned protests in Moscow, the leadership transformed into direct structuration of the core group's work. Here is a quote from *DOXA's* coordinator:

> Warning: tomorrow you'll need to be available the whole day.
> -in the morning, check information on the location of the courts
> - regarding trials – some will need to be visited <…>
> -post the info from trials, [it's] especially important to collect all info on verdicts
> Let's decide who can do what and when. But so that it's clear and without any 'sorry…' (*DOXA* chat logs, 28/7/19)

However, once the situation stabilized, *DOXA's* leadership returned to its more facilitative enactment.

The performance of leadership also had a more spatial and embodied dimension. The meetings of *DOXA's* editorial team were typically held in a university classroom, where the coordinator took the teacher's desk, facing the rest of the participants in a setting that recalled a classical university lecture. It is relevant to highlight the gendered dynamics of leadership, all coordinators in the three communities were male. Although many in the communities displayed awareness of gendered power dynamics in society, not a single female participant took on the role of a coordinator throughout my observations. When *DOXA's* main coordinator was absent, he was replaced by another male participant who took the teacher's position in the room, although the rest of the group he was facing consisted entirely of female participants (Field notes,

April 2019). It needs to be mentioned, however, that the described gender dis-position relates solely to the period of my participant observations.

Leadership played a significant role in mobilization efforts. The absence of *DOXA's* coordinator in April-May 2019, for instance, proved damaging for the editorial team, as the weekly meetings became less frequent and less at-tended, which he acknowledged himself: "We stop gathering once I go away on a trip. Or [they] continue gathering, but with lesser intensity." However, the coordinators showed a restrained attitude to a deeper involvement, encour-aging delegation. The following self-reflective account of a *DOXA* participant helps to illustrate the point.

> **Vera**: He really does a lot to encourage more autonomous decision-making, for it not to depend on him, and for him not to be a hindrance for some deci-sions. I think this is a really smart and adequate act from his side. But I think that a lot of people find comfort in knowing that there is one person who you can always approach.
> **Interviewer**: What steps have been taken to delegate responsibilities to other people in the editorial team?
> **Vera**: [There have been] situations when he said: 'Write it yourself. Do it your-self. I think you'll manage without me'. Sometimes this can frustrate you, sometimes you realize that, indeed, I can [handle it on my own].

To give another example, the following exchange happened in the *DOXA's* group chat when the coordinator suggested the community register as individ-ual commercial enterprise.

> **Coordinator**: Based on this, here is the question: who is ready to sacrifice their good name for the sake of the registration?
> **Participant**: You are not?
> **Coordinator**: Well, I'm again adhering to the principle that I don't want my name to be everywhere. (*DOXA* chat logs, 2/5/19)

In *Discours*, despite a similar effort to empower community members, the leadership of the core team appeared to have a disempowering effect on some of the community members, diminishing participatory intensities. Veronica of *Discours* observed that

> people are too lazy to read a text if they are unsure about its quality. They need someone to read this text [first], give it a primary evaluation, and only then are they ready to spend their time voting for it.

According to Veronica, the willingness of the core group to act as the primary filter for the incoming content discouraged the rest of the community from taking the collective lead. She explained it in terms of the core group acting as the 'council of managers' that "will be the first to decide in favor or against" incoming content. Veronica juxtaposed this to the regular community

members who saw themselves as an "expert council" that "share their opinions, the consequences of which they don't quite see." Veronica astutely concluded that in that type of editorial constellation, "there is no special feeling of responsibility for the [future] direction of the magazine." The reliance of the community on its leaders was also clear in the quote of a participant from *Avtonom*.

> **Grigory**: Obviously, the anarchists don't have leaders *(niet glavnykh)*, but he is performing the role of an "editor-in-chief" in the sense that he is the ultimate responsible *(krainiy)*. Any enterprise needs someone ultimately responsible – the person whose inaction will lead to the failure to achieve a result.

The consensual application of authority, therefore, relied on the explicit will of community members to have leadership in the process of media production. However, the consensus was also supported by the ability to openly question and challenge this authority, either by resorting to formal and semi-formal procedures such as voting (see section 7.3.1.1), enacting the principle of collegiality, or by an informal and friendly system of checks and balances, enacting the principle of equality.

7.3.2. Respect for diversity

The horizontality of alternative media, informality of access, and their positioning between the state and the market, make diversity their inherent quality. The communities embraced their heterogeneity; to repeat the quote of an informant who described *DOXA* in strikingly Deleuzian terms, "we don't have an immune system; everything connects and it turns out we've [already] become something else." This is not only diversity of subject positions and articulatory practices, but the kind of social heterogeneity that Laclau (1990, p. 82) understood as the ultimate failure of representation. In what ways, then, do the communities articulate a coherent collective identity and enable the participatory process to continue, while respecting the heterogeneity? How, in discourse-theoretical terms, are particularities integrated into an equivalential chain, and how does the emerging universality deal with the particularity of demands that constitute it? We are reminded here of the theoretical puzzle, again, put forward by Laclau (1990) who writes that

> the essential asymmetry between the particularity of the demands and the universality of the values never gives rise to a reconciliation in which any particularity would be finally reabsorbed into a universal and transparent order. (p. 80)

Alternative media serve as an important empirical testimony to social heterogeneity, where it is made especially salient due to their very insistence on dissent. In this section, I show the different models used by the alternative media in navigating diversity as a key element of their collective identities. Different from each other as they are, the three media communities share similar challenges and offer a set of responses.

First, we need to recap the starting positions of the media outlets in regard to diversity. *Discours* has taken an openly celebratory approach: "We are convinced that the more voices will be present in *Discours*, the louder the truth will sound in the polyphony of opinions" (*Discours's* manifesto). The positioning of *Avtonom* and *DOXA* was more focused, speaking to and on behalf of the anarchist and student communities, and yet inevitably faced a polyphony of voices akin to the one that *Discours* sought to celebrate. *Avtonom* encompassed a variety of political struggles in relation to class, race, gender, environmentalism, and others. *DOXA* attempted to maintain a balance between political representation of students, an arena for academic debates, and a space for production, distribution and critique of knowledge.

The first model had ongoing and formalized decision-making on content as its cornerstone. It was most present in *Discours* (see the procedure for voting in 7.3.1.1). The whole community – enlisting, as of fall 2018, over 400 members – was empowered to take decisions through joint voting. In so doing, *Discours* enabled the presence of a plurality of voices, rather than confining them to the privileged few.

The second model was based on what could be labeled as strategic non-decision-making. It emerged in *Avtonom*, as its editorial team struggled to make strategic decisions in relation to the magazine. Below, an informant describes the discursive struggles as they were taking place in *Avtonom*.

> **Grigory**: We have repeatedly tried, in the better years when *Avtonomnoye Deystviye* still existed [as an organization], when *Avtonom* was published more often and had a larger circulation, come to agreement on what we do, for what, and for whom. And every time we had huge fights, because some said that we need to do something as popular as possible, <…> some wanted <…> more theory and fundamentality. Others wanted the magazine to be directly linked to activism, social problems, demonstrations, and so on.

In the words of Grigory, these discussions were long, heated, and ultimately pointless, as no solution ensued – at least one which would bring the magazine to a more uniformed conception. Instead, the solution consisted in rejecting any final decision in favor of one option over the other, and cancelling the arguments altogether.

> **Grigory**: [A]t some point, [we] simply tabooed these conversations. We came to the point that we are doing something eclectic, diverse, where everyone brings something of their own, something that does not please everyone

entirely… The principle is not that we are printing what everyone likes, but that we are printing what doesn't cause strong protests [from community members].

The strategy illustrates how diversity was achieved through a respectful acknowledgment of the fundamentally opposite views on the means of media production, without privileging one perspective over the other. Rather than spending time seeking consensus once and for all, the media producers appreciated any temporary agreements they could achieve.

The respect for diversity was protected through the formalization of norms. One consequence of the split within *Avtonomnoye Deystviye* (see also section 7.4.4) was passing of an amendment to the *AD* manifesto that protected the diversity of groups covered by the anarchist project. The amendment ensured that "all the parts of the manifesto are equally important, and if someone disagrees with this, they have to leave" (Antti). This regulation supported the presence of a variety of voices: in the words of Alexey, "[a]ll of these principles of the manifesto are put into practice. The news about LGBT [people], antifascists, feminists, we have all of that." In so doing, *Avtonom* attempted to both protect its existing diversity and prevent future threats to the discursive alliance.

7.4. Limits of participation

Horizontality and respect for diversity enabled performance of the discourse on democratic participation, but those enactments had its own discursive and material limitations. In particular, the application of the core principles was restricted by the shortages related to the body and the space, financial resources, the workings of the social antagonism, as well as unequal power relations beyond the communities imported into the process.

7.4.1. Material constraints

7.4.1.1. Limits of money and space

Although the mobilization of financial resources was overall sufficient for the ongoing operation of the media outlets, it also imposed constraints on the media production in general and the participatory process in particular. That was especially the case in *Discours*, who owed its initial financial investment to its founder's parents on the promise that the money would be returned to them once the project becomes profitable. This initial private investment, however necessary, created an unstable situation in two respects. First, financial

decisions have essentially become the prerogative of the founder. At our interview, another core group member refused to comment on finances, pointing to the private source of the *Discours* budget:

> *Discours* is largely – even though I am a partner and I own, metaphorically, a share of its stock, roughly speaking, – at the same time, I understand that *Discours* was created and largely exists thanks to the money owned by *** *[the founder's name omitted].* So, I don't feel the moral right to make some decisions, and since I'm not making some decisions, I'd probably better keep clear of these [financial] matters.

Furthermore, the future of *Discours* was uncertain as the loan still needed to be paid back, despite the fact that the business remained unprofitable: "I need to return the money, the personal economic aspect is worrying me, too", the founder confessed. The lack of financial stability meant that the core team were left wondering if they would be able to focus on media production on a full-time basis: "If we aren't able to monetize for some more time, I'll have to look for a second job to return the loans."

For the participants of *Avtonom*, where commercialization had been rejected, a paid full-time job has always been a necessity. As was discussed in chapter 6, some of them combined media activism with jobs professional in media organizations. Largely due to this, the position of alternative media producer, unpaid and voluntary, is rendered unprivileged and secondary. The production process receives less time and attention, as pointed out by one informant:

> **Valery**: With *Avtonom*, this is a question of time which we don't have, we do less than we want <…> I don't know who would sponsor us. That's why for now, *Avtonom* is produced in the nighttime and to a lesser extent than we'd want.

The need to prioritize full-time jobs elsewhere did not only discursively privilege media professionalism, but also caused problems for the very material daily operation. When *Discours's* website crashed, the core team failed to reach the IT specialist who was based abroad doing his main job. As Artur explained, "he's probably at a meeting right now"; it was clear the meeting had no relation to *Discours*. As a result, the website remained inaccessible for over an hour (Field notes, October 2018).

Financial uncertainty triggered spatial constraints. Venues in Moscow were continuously searched for but were too expensive for the tight budget of the media. On one occasion, *Discours* lost the bid for a new venue to a contender that offered four times what the community could afford (Field notes, October 2018). In this context, the media most frequently had to rely on spots they did not need to pay for, which in turn triggered a set of other uncertainties.

One of them was temporality, as the media producers were unable to occupy a particular space over a long period of time. *Discours* changed six locations between the year of its creation (2015) until my field work in 2018 (Interview with Artur). *DOXA*, too, had changed multiple venues. Another problematic consequence was dependency, meaning that the conditions of the process were partially located outside the process itself. While chapter 8 will analyze the role of the constitutive outside in shaping participation, the internal instability of the process created material dependencies of its own. One key area was the access to venues, most often provided by external actors on unstable grounds – often simply oral agreements – and therefore easily withdrawn by the hosts. This was the experience of *Discours*:

> **Artur**: The café offered us their VIP room. Then the café said that the room could be used for people whose checks are much longer than ours, so we amicably separated… We felt very comfortable [there], but the café noticed the lack of profit.

The need to change places because of the inability to pay rent occurred to *Discours* on numerous occasions. Below is another example when the media producers were unexpectedly asked to either pay or leave.

> **Artur**: Then we moved to *** *[name omitted]*. It's a café in central Moscow. We liked it there, collaborated with each other and the café, but at some point, the café, which was economically unprofitable, decided that since we are its only visitors, we need to be charged because they don't have enough money. We don't have money, so we parted ways with them.

In a similar vein, *DOXA's* need for free venues and dependency on external hosts restricted conditions for access. As previously mentioned, *DOXA* held its core group's meetings in an educational establishment in central Moscow. The venue was chosen thanks to *DOXA* coordinator's contacts there and the fact that it was "a small community where everyone is open to each other" (Levan). The building was shared by three different organizations, with the access protected by security checks. Although the access used to be, as Levan put it, "liberal" in the beginning, at some point "the open border regime" has come to an end, he explained. *DOXA* tried to argue for an open access regime, at least for students of other universities, but to no avail. I was given *DOXA* coordinator's phone number; in order to get inside the building, I had to dial it and let him know I arrived. He would then call the security officer who would look at my ID and decide whether I can get in. I was far from being the only one affected by the strict access policy; before and during a lot of community meetings, *DOXA's* Telegram chat was buzzing with messages from people who could not get inside because their name was not on the list. Sometimes, the *DOXA* coordinator forgot to warn the security in advance and had

to fix the access ad hoc. Once again, the community found themselves in a situation where the conditions of participation were partly determined outside of the process itself.

Compromises necessitated by the scarce resources disproportionately affected more vulnerable (potential) participants. In fall of 2018, *Discours* was offered an affordable rent on the sixth floor in an office located in central Moscow. The initial excitement was sobered by the realization that the elevator would only take one as high up as to the third floor; the rest of the distance could only be covered by using stairs. Such a venue would exclude certain bodies, as one informant noted when commenting on the affordability of the place: "Perhaps they have elderly people there" (Field notes, October 2018). *Discours* decided to go forward with the application (in what turned out to be an unsuccessful bid), rationalizing that the need for a stable, affordable and centrally located place justified a potential future exclusion of certain bodies.

7.4.1.2. Limits of the body

The social and affective dimension of the participatory process – the need for individuals to gather in physical spaces and engage in collective action for participation to be performed – activated its corporeal component. Bodies assembled in certain spaces, but also experienced various sorts of affects, such as pain and exhaustion. Corporeal vulnerability extends the understanding of the process's contingency, showing not only its fragility – one cannot have a participatory process without the presence of a (fragile) body – but also its affective dimension.

Bodily vulnerability was directly experienced by *Avtonom*, with their involvement in some of the more violent forms of activism. It was especially the case for its antifascist wing, which had historically been more positive towards direct physical action. Although this analysis is focused on media production rather than the activities of *Avtonomnoye Deystviye* as a social movement, it needs to be pointed out that *AD* have long articulated physical violence as part of the discourse on civil engagement. Examples include the name of *Avtonom's* antifascist section – *Kind Fists* – and statements such as this: "Antifa do not intend to kill. They beat up, they educate through action" (*Avtonom* text samples, n.d.). In this sense, bodily exposure was conditioned by the very articulation of *AD's* ideological position, even if this articulation remains problematic from a democratic perspective and was not shared by each and every core group member.

Furthermore, this more radical bodily investment, articulated as a central element of the identity of the movement, limited the opportunities for particular bodies to become part of the process. Women, in particular, remained in a significant minority in the activist environment where physical violence was welcome:

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Antti: For Antifa, participation in street fights was important <…> 95-98% of Antifa were men. *AD* is not the same as Antifa, but they had many intersections. Half of *AD* members in Moscow and other cities were involved with Antifa. And their priorities, their overall orientation… After that, the number of women has decreased, and their role has become more marginal.

While bodily vulnerabilities emerging from the existing antagonisms will be analyzed in chapter 8, there are a number of internal dynamics of the process that shed light on them, too. One of them is mental issues, with burnout being one of the most common risks in the process:

Levan: One gets the impression that nobody's doing anything, so I shouldn't [care] either, but [since] there's no one else to do it… Alexander and I invest a lot into this, but it doesn't harvest results, so burnout [follows], we have even discussed this in terms of mental health.

Olya: [B]asically one needs to… live in a constant moral mobilization because there is no financial boost. The people who have… some internal moral engine that can work without steady additional petroleum probably constitute the core of *DOXA* now. But again, one needs to look at it in the dynamic – whether something changes, someone burns out.

Burnout in these articulations is understood primarily as a low return on a high emotional investment, conditioned by the numerous financial, organizational and political pressures experienced by the media producers. Burnouts became especially acute for *DOXA* in the as they engaged in an essentially non-stop coverage of arrests and trials following protests in Moscow. In a late evening chat in August 2019, as the participants were allocating shifts for online broadcasts, one of them directly withdrew from the process: "I've burned out and I can't, sorry." This statement was met with understanding by the rest of the group, with another participant quickly stepping in. This interaction did not only illustrate the corporeal vulnerability, but also demonstrated a high level of awareness and acceptance of this condition; in a previously quoted rebuke to a fellow activist the following day, Levan wrote: "Stop critiquing other people's ideas so rudely. This leads to burnouts." Working essentially non-stop, the participants reached some extreme levels of exhaustion: "Sorry, I've barely eaten today and I'm about to collapse" (*DOXA* chat logs, 28/7/19); "Sorry guys, I literally collapsed yesterday" (*DOXA* chat logs, 4/8/19). These mental and bodily responses exposed the utter fragility of the participatory process, occasionally dissolving the very process, until new resources were mobilized.

7.4.2. Internal power structures

Despite horizontality being the supporting logic of the process, informal hierarchical structures were continuously emerging. As shown earlier in this chapter, many of them were meant to protect the communities from dissolution. They did, to a greater or lesser extent, perform the discourse on horizontality for those who had access to them. However, some hierarchies were informed by, and reproduced, larger social structures of inequality, such as gender, age, and professional privilege.

We need to be reminded here that the organizing process of the three alternative media was characterized with varying degrees of fluidity. At the time of my participant observations, *Discours* had a relatively stable organizational structure, run by a core group of two editors working full-time, a foreign-based IT specialist, and two unpaid interns who changed once every few months. The temporality and professionally underqualified status of the interns' position, as well as their tendency to be younger and female (as opposed to two full-time male editors), reduced their symbolic power, despite their presence in the core group. Semi-formal recruitment interviews were particularly interesting performances of those structurally unequal power relations. At one of those, where I was present, the prospective female intern (who was later enrolled) was asked questions such as whether or not she spoke foreign languages (and was requested to actually speak in English), what domestic and foreign media she read and who her favorite poet and author were. When the intern named Dostoyevsky, she was asked to name her favorite books of his. On one occasion, one editor rebuked the other for asking a leading question: "Ask an open question, don't impose your opinion and don't give hints" (Field notes, November 2018). The setting, recalling simultaneously a job interview and an exam (the participants spoke formally, using the pronoun vy [*вы*]), immediately establishing power boundaries between the participants, although in the end the formal 'vy' [*вы*] was replaced by the informal pronoun 'ty' [*ты*] and the interaction ensued on more friendly terms. As the interns and the core editors worked side by side, shared much of the responsibility for everyday operations, and socialized together, the power structure appeared largely informal. However, different actors applied different articulations. In a casual lunch conversation with me, one intern complained about not being able to fully participate in the work of the editorial office where she was not heard amid the endless arguments taking place between the two male editors. Another intern experienced this constellation as flexible enough, as long as one is sufficiently persistent:

> **Valentina**: In fact, most often there is one person who would hear me. It's not too bad. Plus, sometimes I can just get mad, pound the table and yell, like, 'listen to me bastards'. It works.

A similar, albeit more fluid, case could be observed in *DOXA* whose editors had to combine part-time media production with full-time studies. Also there, the informal hierarchy included unpaid interns – students in need of course credits who could count collaboration with *DOXA* as a professional internship ("free workers", as Olya put it in her interview with a bitter irony). Here, too, the unequal power relationship was performed through the recruitment procedure, where prospective interns were selected through test assignments that were checked by core team members. Once enrolled, the interns were generally given some of the more tedious tasks, such as transcriptions of interviews and preparation of social media posts.

Much of the symbolic power was enacted through the professionally articulated position of the *editor,* which brings us back to the discursive struggles between professionals and non-professionals in media production (see chapter 6). Professional employment, a demonstrated ability to write well, find exclusive sources, as well as media savviness supported the privileged symbolic status of particular community members. Even those who had not received professional journalistic training or employment in media organizations, but nonetheless had the status of an editor, enjoyed a certain privilege. "I am formally not *your* editor, but this is how we do it", said one *Discours* editor to me, trying to resolve a dispute between us (I described its substance in section 6.2.2). Eventually, his symbolically privileged position in the core group (coupled with my guest status as an observer-participant) ensured that his point of view prevailed. My observations in *Discours* were echoed by an intern who shared her experience of dealing with an incoming text expressing far-right views, "well-written, very well-structured and interesting", that was nevertheless rejected by the editors as something "we will neither publish nor edit" (Veronica).

While the reproduction of larger social structures within the communities limited equal expression of voice, the establishment of some internal hierarchies attempted to support their ability to act together in the face of utter fragility. Unpacking this fragility in terms of sporadicity, the next section shows how the flow of people, discourses and objects invariably endangered the participatory process.

7.4.3. Sporadicity

The participatory process was substantially limited, and in some cases thwarted, by its sporadicity. By sporadicity, I understand the tendency of (and, often, the need for) the alternative media to rely on informal membership and withdrawal, experimental formats and initiative-based involvement. Paradoxically, however, sporadicity simultaneously made the process more accessible to outsiders, in some cases expanding the field of participation.

Professional media organizations commonly offer a formalized membership process: one becomes a member of the organization through employment and, often, the cherished prior vocational training. Alternative media suggest a more sporadic involvement that does not require formal membership, with a largely informal entry into the process:

> **Nadya**: I came there – it was super informal, we sat in the backyard of the library for foreign literature, I was asked what I want to do, what I can do.

> **Agatha**: I was invited to come and chat with them, [I] didn't understand what was going on. They were discussing Žižek and laughing. I was like, is that it? They were like, yes, we're easy here, we'll keep in touch.

Although access to the decision-making core teams had to be negotiated, membership in the media community was sporadically enacted rather than formally fixated. Especially in the case of *Discours*, weekly meetings in a bar provided the opportunity for newcomers – and, potentially, also individual audience members – to gather and share their ideas, get feedback, and start writing, thereby joining the ranks of the community outside of a formalized process. These meetings were not publicly announced, but were not kept in secret, either; they were held on a weekly basis in the same bar at the same time. In other words, although no specific effort was made to promote the meetings, people in the *tusovka* knew about them. On my very first day of observations in October 2018, a young historian, unknown to most participants but presented as a friend of mutual friends, came by to make a suggestion about a text. For over quarter of an hour, the four other attendees were politely listening to his proposal, making suggestions for improvements. In another example, a young student attended the weekly meeting (which on that day consisted only of one person, the *Discours* founder himself) and, although the student was obviously inexperienced in media production and unfamiliar with the community, the founder spent over half an hour discussing possible topics which she could work with. Some of these visitors left and never stayed in touch, others came back occasionally, a few have become regulars. While the primary purpose of these meetings was to coordinate the production of future content, these places enabled people within *tusovka* to get to know each other and possibly join the community. It needs to be mentioned, however, that such informality of entry was more particular to *Discours* and *DOXA* than *Avtonom*, where trust remained an important condition for access (section 8.2.3 will explore trust in more detail).

The withdrawal, too, was normally organic. There was no official membership to cancel, and even press cards, if ever issued, had expiry dates. Grigory of *Avtonom* illustrated this informal withdrawal of an activist whose views evolved from anarchism to Bolshevism, and he "naturally stopped participating in the activities of both *AD* and *Avtonom*. Somehow this happened

organically." To be sure, there is a difference between *AD* as a more structured organization – where membership was indeed formal – and *Avtonom* as its medium. Although extremely rare, *AD* as an organization has seen formal exclusions of its members: in one case, an activist who agreed to collaborate with the authorities and disclose the names of fellow activists was excluded from *AD* (Interview with Grigory). The same happened to an activist has violated the privacy of other *AD* members by publicizing their personal data (Interview with Alexey). *Discours*, not having any formal memberships to cancel, reserved the right to stop an ongoing collaboration, which had happened in the rare cases of plagiarism.

The flow of participants caused instability and confusion, as people "come and go" (Grigory):

> **Grigory**: [I]n the past few years, we haven't had the status of a member of the editorial team at all <…> some people come to meetings, maybe once, maybe [they would] stay for a year, maybe not, so it's always very difficult to differentiate and fixate.

As there is no formal membership, participation becomes sporadic. This was the word used by Olya of *DOXA*, who in our interview suggested the existence of a continuum "sporadic/permanent author", attributing herself to the more permanent part of the spectrum, while some others may be more occasional contributors. Especially when events develop quickly, as was the case in the amid mass detentions in Moscow, this sporadicity, as well as the lack of a clear structure and distribution of responsibility, become evident. Below is an example from the *DOXA* group chat, where one participant was urgently seeking help to cover the release of one of the protestors. The franticness was evident in multiple typos, caps lock letters and omittance of punctuation marks, which I partly tried to capture in my translation:

> **Participant 1:** GUYS it's urgent who can arrive to Nakhimosvkyi Prospekt by 20:45
> **Participant 1:** *** *[name omitted]* is being freed need to make a short interview and record it on camera
> **Participant 1:** The camerawoman is ready to go
> **Participant 1**: Need a *DOXA* editor
> **Participant 1:** This needs to be done very quickly
> **Participant 2:** I won't make it
> **Participant 3**: Not me either. Maybe anyone who's in [the bar] now?
> **Participant 3:** I can take over
> **Participant 3:** The broadcast or
> **Participant 1:** Called Tatyana now
> **Participant 1:** She probably can
> **Participant 1**: She'll confirm in a moment. (*DOXA* chat logs, 3/8/19)

In another example, the community cannot get a task done in the middle of an examination season, as everyone is busy with their own studies:

> **Participant 1:** *** *[name 1 omitted]*, can you upload this on the website?
> **Participant 2**: No I [must] upload my thesis in an hour
> **Participant 3:** It's quite urgent
> **Participant 3**: Come on faster
> **Participant 1**: *** *[name 2 omitted]*?
> **Participant 3:** No, I'm at a rally now:))))
> **Participant 1**: I'm just super busy with macroeconomics [exam] myself. (*DOXA* chat logs, 10/6/19)

Naturally, this unstructured and sporadic involvement triggered a number of contingencies. In the case of *Avtonom*, one informant spoke of the "chaotic" production process amid the lack of formal structures:

> **Grigory**: We may take a wonderful decision: we'll prepare an issue on unions. But no one writes anything about the unions. I mean, everything is extremely chaotic <…> We don't have a single aesthetic [of the magazine], it changes from issue to issue, chaotically.

This is echoed by a *DOXA* participant: "[I]t would have been great if this was somehow systematized and conducted in an orderly way, not as frantically as it's happening now" (Alexander).

Another characteristic of sporadicity – experimentality – has long been considered a distinctive trait of alternative media (see e.g. Atton 2002b). Unlike larger news organizations that may take higher risks, their alternative counterparts are often more flexible when it comes to changes in structure, content and formats. Here, too, fluidity remains central. One *DOXA* participant explained the ease with which their community made major changes in its internal structure in 2019 as follows: "Everything here is very fluid. If this model won't work, we'll simply reject it. We don't risk anything, we'll just try it this way" (Agatha). It is equally easy for individual contributors to try different roles, seamlessly moving within the structure: "I see that he has grown tired of this format and would be interested in trying something new" (Vera). The formats, too, remain subject for frequent change. *Avtonom* magazine has tried multiple: In the words of one participant, "[w]e've always experimented… The reason is that our lineup has always been changing, was very fluid, wasn't fixed."

The negative effects of sporadicity were amplified by the predominant dependency of the production process on personal commitments and initiatives, as opposed to formally structured responsibilities supported by employments and salaries. Passivity and the lack of engagement remained of the most common problems.

Viktor: Most authors of *Discours*, let's be honest, are people who just wrote something, 1-2 articles, and don't care about anything else. They don't write, don't communicate, don't show up, don't take interest.

Tatyana: [W]e had serious problems publishing the new issue because we can't find a layout designer who could do it for free and, I'm sorry, won't f*** off. I beg your pardon, but we've lost two people in this way. One girl made a cover and immediately vanished. Another one said, "Yeah, I'll make the layout soon", and also vanished.

The very invitational character of participation brought an additional instability into the daily operation of the alternative media, and had to be remedied by extra mobilization efforts (see section 7.2.2).

7.4.4. Limits of diversity

Despite the oft-celebratory rhetorics on diversity, the necessary condition for a vibrant sociality within the *tusovka* was its relative homogeneity (in section 7.1, I argued that *tusovka* was, in sociodemographic terms, a relatively homogeneous pool of individuals in terms of age, education, and interests). Especially in the case of *DOXA* and *Discours*, the claim to diversity, rather than an accurate depiction of their social environment, was part of the fantasy of an ever-growing community. *Avtonom*, as an older medium with slightly older pool of participants, was not part of the same immediate social surrounding, but its positioning at the crossroads of civil society brought some of its (younger) participants closer to the *tusovka*. Most prominently, the anarchist almanac Moloko Plus (published since 2016) included some younger *Avtonom* contributors and had developed collaborations and close personal ties with both *Discours* and *DOXA* participants. Through those partnerships and friendships, *Avtonom* participants were part of the broader social environment; for instance, some of them attended *DOXA's* anniversary party (Field notes, April 2019).

The respect for diversity, which characterizes the operation of alternative media, did not preclude an outright exclusion of certain participants from the process. Such methods were only deployed on a rare number of occasions, all of which had occurred in *Avtonomnoye Deystviye* (AD) prior to the participant observations. One example was considered in section 7.4.3 and concerned a potentially damaging collaboration with the state institutions. Another, more consequential, exclusion occurred in *AD* in 2013 and took such a heavy toll on the entire community that it repeatedly emerged in the data, with the informants still holding different opinions on the outcome of that decision. One way to give the context of that story would be to recall the 2013 legislation outlawing the so-called "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships among minors" in Russia (see also section 1.2.1). This hegemonic intervention

triggered a vibrant discussion in Russian society, but also internal power struggles in political movements such as *AD*. Already before that, the movement had been plagued by ideological struggles between, on the one hand, supporters of a class-oriented approach and a more rigid hierarchical organization, and, on the one hand, participants that were more supportive of identity politics and a decentralized organization. Below follow quotes of two representatives of the latter group who remained part of *Avtonom* at the time of the interviews.

> **Alexey**: The LGBT agenda has always repulsed misogynist antifascists who were based in St. Petersburg and Moscow <…> The dissidents were exactly the people who believed that gays are bad, that we should only focus on the class struggle.

> **Grigory**: From the opposite side, we had people of very diverse views, they didn't like it. They believed that, at the very least, ecology, feminism, minorities' rights are issues that are no less important than the struggle of the proletariat.

The disagreement was further fueled by already existing interpersonal conflicts in the movement. One *Avtonom* informant suggested that the LGBTQ+ agenda had, in fact, little to do with the split ("this [was] more about personal conflicts. There were no two fundamentally opposite strategies"), although this account was contradicted by two other informants who insisted that the homophobia, sexism and misogyny within the movement at the time were a significant cause of the split. Anyhow, in August 2013 the congress of the movement made the final decision to exclude the dissidents, who went on to launch their own movement that focused on the class struggle under the name Social Revolutionary Autonomous Action.

The case suggested that in order to protect the space in the participatory process for structurally vulnerable groups, such as LGBTQ+ people, *AD* had to withdraw access to the very same process from another group. Paradoxically, by that very act of exclusion, the community performed the respect for diversity:

> **Grigory**: The vast majority of the editorial team of that time, myself included, believed this [exclusion] to be essential, justified, important, necessary, non-accidental, and so on.

Another limit of diversity emphasizes the role of a social antagonism in establishing the logic of equivalence and, consequently, temporary eradication of heterogeneity. The model was observed in *DOXA* over the summer of 2019, as the community attempted to navigate between its more academic vector, focusing on social critique, creation of space for academic discussions and dissemination of knowledge, and a more political one, where students were

represented as subjects fighting for their rights. Interviews that were recorded in June 2019 showed the internal split between the two vectors among the participants. The unexpected outbreak of protests in July 2019 shifted all of the community's resources towards the more political vector, forcing the participants to cover ongoing arrests of students and following trials round the clock. The constitutive outside – the state – has effectively suspended all internal discussions on *DOXA's* future direction. The antagonism temporarily annulled the existing differential relations within the community, encouraging them to join forces against a common adversary. The antagonism, and its constitutive role for the communities, will be addressed in more detail in chapter 8.

Chapter 8. Undoing participation: Alternative media and the state

> We endlessly rail against Comrade Stalin – and, of course, with reason.
> All the same, I would like to ask – who wrote four million denunciations
> in the times of the Stalinist terror?
> *– Sergei Dovlatov, The Zone*

The discourse-theoretical notion of antagonism captures the limits of the subject and the multiple, complex ways of interaction between the self and the Other. It is the presence of the Other that constitutes the subject, but it is also the force that prevents it from realizing its full potential and asserting a (new) hegemony. Antagonism, in this sense, is the "blockage of identity" (Howarth, 2000, p. 105; see also section 2.4.4).[42]

Antagonism is embedded in the ontology of alternative media, in their quest to go beyond the taken-for-granted order, exposing the failures of the status quo to deliver on the democratic promise of equality. The theory of alternative media (see chapter 4) emphasizes their antagonistic positioning in relation to the state and the market, and their equidistance from both.

Russia, with its long tradition of state-run mass media, has seen an increasing presence of the state on the media market over the 2000s (see chapter 1 for a contextual discussion). The contemporary Russian mediascape forces alternative media to find their voice in the context of a strong state. Although other "others" occasionally enter the picture, this chapter will show that the state is understood as the one particular actor blocking the identity of alternative media, and one that does occasionally disrupt the participatory process. Consider, for instance, *Avtonom's* rather unequivocal articulation: "Throughout all of its existence, the anarchist movement has been suffering repressions from its main enemy, the state" (*Avtonom.org*, 22/8/18); or elsewhere: "the enemy of humans and humanity is the state as an organized system of power, coercion and hierarchy" (*Avtonom.org*, 15/8/17).

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[42] To remind the reader of the discussion in section 2.4.4, I approach antagonism as a demarcation of the political field of "us" versus "them" – a necessary process for the formation of political identities. This is a different reading from the later theorization of antagonism as a construction of the enemy.

This chapter explores the relationship between the state as a constitutive outside of the alternative media and its consequences for the participatory process. The state, as previously argued, is an assemblage of discursive elements and material apparatuses. Here, I show that, on the one hand, attacks by the *material apparatuses* of the state create a permanent condition of fragility that is invariably undoing participation through hegemonic interventions, elimination of spaces for participation, isolation of bodies that enter them, and so on. On the other hand, this very condition of vulnerability encourages alternative media to mobilize their scarce resources and forge a war of position against the state *as a discourse*, creating structures and spaces where counter-hegemonic discourses can be performed. In the critical discussion, I argue that the antagonistic relationship is detrimental to maximalist participation in that it restricts access of individuals into the process.

8.1. Attacks by the state

Vulnerability is the key condition brought upon the alternative media by the constitutive outside of the state. Far from being only material – although certainly manifesting in invariable material acts and conditions, such as deprivation of space, health, residence or freedom – it is also a discursive condition, a price to pay for occasional overreaches of the legitimate framework of the discourse of state. Butler (2009), in her analysis of "grievable lives", writes about the frameworks which establish in advance the worthy and the unworthy of preserving and mourning: "we react to certain forms of violence with horror and to other forms with a sense of acceptance" (p. 49). These frameworks are often demarcated in relation to the state, where the "just or justified" is enacted by the states, and the "unjustifiable" by non-state actors or actors opposed to existing states (Butler, 2009). In a similar vein, finding themselves outside of the normative frameworks that support legitimacy, alternative media are rendered precarious and vulnerable, unworthy of protection, and the use of force is viewed as justifiable and often desirable.

Vulnerability then becomes the very terrain on which the community media have to operate, effectively becoming the condition for a very particular articulation of participation that has to constantly draw on this highly precarious context. The conditions for inclusion and exclusion, interaction and decision-making, are at least partly located outside the communities, defined by the powerful Other which is supported by norms, institutions and discursive conditions: "I am", as Butler (2009, p. 53) put it, "already in hands of the other." In the following sections, I analyze the interrelation of the state assemblage and the performance of participation in alternative media.

8.1.1. Discursive constraints

The discursive framework of the state, discussed in sections 2.4.5 and 4.2, protects its privileged position in the "politics of signification" (Hall, 2005), understood as an ideological practice of defining the properties of social reality in particular ways. The state itself is one of the central actors in this process, producing signifying practices supported by a significant legitimacy. Although counter-hegemonic articulations by other actors, such as alternative media, always remain possible, they are made from a more vulnerable discursive position. The antagonistic relationship with the powerful significatory apparatus of the state limits the participatory process in a number of ways, organizing the "scene of constraint" (Butler, 2004, p. 1) that characterizes performativity.

A series of hegemonic interventions by the Russian state in the mid-2010s restricted the space for political activism (see chapter 1). This was particularly noteworthy for *Avtonom*, as the one case study most deeply invested in radical politics. Various informants from *Avtonom* pointed out at the tightening discursive framework for counter-hegemony:

> **Grigory**: The entire atmosphere in society has incredibly worsened for our civil rights activists. [We are] in the situation where there's a patriotic frenzy *(patriotitcheskyi ugar)* all around, and the security services have become significantly more repressive.

> **Alexey**: It's [always] been difficult to hold rallies, now it's become even more difficult. The infamous law on demonstrations that imposes huge fines, you can't just easily hold a rally and then pay a fine of 100,000-300,000 rubles[43]… A few fines, and you end up in prison. In this sense, they've done everything to worsen opportunities and future prospects.

In the previous chapter, I already touched upon the split that had happened in *Avtonomnoye Deystviye* (AD), the movement in which *Avtonom* magazine was embedded, due to disagreements on identity politics. Some *Avtonom* informants found a connection between the conservative discourse fostered by the ideological apparatus of the state and the political struggles within the anarchist movement:

> **Antti**: We are now seeing a conservative turn, the media spread propaganda against 'Gayrope'[44], against the 'decaying West', the decay of moral values, and to some extent this affects the anarchist movement, too... Some people are sensitive to propaganda and start thinking in a conservative vein, too.

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[43] €1100-3300, as per the exchange rate in October 2020.
[44] A derogatory term popular with some conservative Russians to ridicule Europe's acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community, and used by some liberal Russians to ridicule the conservatives.

The split within *AD* exemplified the power of the constitutive outside to shape the participatory process, forcing *Avtonom* to decide on the conditions of access and withdrawal. In this particular case, the conservative hegemonic interventions resulted in revising the manifesto in a way that required the participants to respect the broad diversity within the movement or leave it altogether.

The power of the state to impose a particular politics of signification, detrimental to counter-hegemonic actors, can be further illustrated by the legal use of pejorative labels "extremism" and "foreign agent."[45] The gravity of the potential charges, coupled with the breadth of the definition, puts the media in a highly precarious position:

> **Artur**: This is external control. It takes various forms, [but] you can shut down any mass medium after two warnings on extremist content are issued. This is a danger hanging upon [the media], like a sword of Damocles.

The label "foreign agent", in turn, is applied to organizations that receive funding from abroad. Levan of *DOXA* explained that the label of foreign agent, understandably repulsive for its potential recipients, complicates the already unstable financial situation of their community: "Foreign foundations cannot finance media because [it turns them into] foreign agents." The application of this pejorative label affects all media, restricting their ability to speak out, but particularly affects small media outlets.

This precarious discursive position forces the alternative media into conduct on terms defined by the Other. Performing participation, they carefully balance between compliance and resistance. One example is the decision on whether to formally register their media product as a mass medium. On the one hand, such registration grants media producers the official status of a journalist, including the right to possess a press card and send official requests to state and public organizations that are then legally obliged to respond. It formally confirms and recognizes the subject position of a professional journalist, which in turn offers the coveted symbolic status. On the other hand, official registration entails an association with the legal framework defined by the state, including its ability to issue warnings and shut down media in case of non-compliance. *Avtonom*, in its defiance of the state, has remained unregistered. This, however, came at a price. Confiscations of the magazine were not uncommon and its producers were aware that the magazine is "in the crosshairs" (*na karandashe*) of security services: according to Tatyana, the discovery of the magazine by police in case of searches immediately raised suspicions; on one occasion, a bookstore in central Moscow selling a fresh issue of *Avtonom* was subjected to a police raid with public confiscations of the copies.

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[45] They were explained in more detail in section 1.2.1.

Discours, too, attempted to partially comply with the state regulations, without substantially restricting its own liberty: the core group has registered *Discours* as a printed almanac, not a website. *Discours's* website, according to their logic, only acted as a support for the almanac and hence did not require a special registration. Yet, as of 2018, the first almanac was yet to be published, while the website was already running. Thus, *Discours* contributors formally complied with the legislation, enjoyed the status of journalists but the content of the website was subjected to lesser legal scrutiny than it would have been otherwise.

DOXA, as a student medium that worked at the premises of one particular state university, also found itself performing a practice that is not entirely *theirs* but is happening on terms designed on and by the outside:

> **Alexander**: For the University, [we are] a way to sell themselves, to construct the image of a melting pot with many different opinions, many different interesting ideas. This mythology needs different characters, and so we are needed as a character for this mythology.
>
> **Olya**: The University, with their concern about their public image, is a kind of Catherine the Great who corresponds with Voltaire <…> Perhaps we are the Voltaire?

The powerful position of the state in the ongoing politics of signification sets a scene of constraint for the performance of participation by alternative media. The cases of *Avtonom*, *Discours* and *DOXA* illustrate at least two of the arenas where this power is enacted: mass media and higher education. It is an important starting point, since, as will be later argued in this chapter, the war of position of alternative media consists in challenging the hegemonic articulation of these and other fields and spaces claimed by the state. It needs, however, to be established that the blockage of identity is linked to the non-privileged position in the politics of signification. To further explore this fragile condition, I turn to its embodied dimension.

8.1.2. Bodily harm

The condition of vulnerability imposed by the Other triggered a series of material effects, integrating them in the participatory assemblage. One of them concerns bodies, whose presence in physical space enables the performance of participation. Chapter 7 analyzed what bodies were activated in the process and were articulated as part of the process. Yet, as repeatedly pointed out above, the process is characterized by invariable constraints; a lot of decisions affecting participating bodies are made outside of the process, exposing their vulnerability.

The discourse on the state legitimizes a number of functions attributed to the state by default. One of them is law and order and the monopoly on violence, performed by law enforcement. Given that performance of participation included expressed forms of solidarity (see section 6.5), primarily enacted through physical protests, interactions with law enforcement were integrated into the process. In the context of a strong state exercising its power, participation could also be experienced as a pain. When detained and taken to a police office after a demonstration, a participant reported a hand injury when an officer shut the door on him (*DOXA* chat logs, 27/7/19). In another excerpt, a participant talks about the physical costs of participation in the face of restrictions imposed by the state:

> **Olya**: A person taking videos an unauthorized demonstration *(nesankts)* is number one trigger for the cops *(dlya politsayev)*… If anyone is ready to spend part of the day and perhaps the whole night in the [police] office, just be ready. I was detained at an unauthorized rally *(vintilas' na nesaktse),* the whole pleasure cost me 16 thousand [rubles], plus attending court hearings afterwards. Besides, the detained one *(svinchennyi)* needs a support group outside, with water, food and a sweater in case of spending the night on the floor. Just keep this in mind if you are planning to take videos. (*DOXA* chat logs, 11/6/19)

Avtonom, too, covered multiple stories that directly speak of the bodily vulnerability of anarchist activists *vis-à-vis* the state, including their arrests, convictions and tortures. I was doing my field work in Moscow when an anarchist sympathizer detonated an explosive device in the Federal Security Service (FSB) headquarters in Archangelsk, in a cruelly vivid performance of the antagonistic relationship with the state. The incident came as a surprise to many anarchists, who feared an imminent crackdown on radical activism; some preferred to avoid the issue at our interviews, others decided to keep a low profile for the time being.

Migration, as a process enabling, forcing or impeding bodies to move and relocate, is another function articulated as part of the discourse on the state and performed through border security. In 2012, Antti, a prominent Finnish-born Russian anarchist activist and a participant of *Avtonom's* core group, had his residence permit abruptly annulled over alleged calls to overthrow Russia's constitutional order. His deportation to Finland has essentially ended his longstanding active engagement with the Russian anarchist activism, he said in our interview: "Since my deportation… I have basically given up on my organizational responsibilities, because I needed to get things going [in Finland]." While some bodies are forced to flee by direct institutional coercion, others move under the force of circumstances: in the 2010s, a number of anarchist activists, including *Avtonom* contributors, left Russia to seek political asylum elsewhere.

In the articulatory practices of alternative media producers, the state is articulated not only as an agent directly impeding participation, but also as an enabler of other antagonistic forces. Most notably, the neo-Nazis, who were a prominent part of Russia's underground political landscape in the 1990s-2000s, enter the equation:

> **Alexey**: I've always had problems with police. I was threatened with jail, my phone was tapped <…> my apartment was set on fire. This was done by Nazis but was orchestrated by police *(delala politsiya rukami natsistov)*. The police had their puppet Nazis <...> They are like dogs on a leash *(sobaki na privyazi)*.

The fragility of participating bodies is forcefully illustrated by the case of one informant who worked as an editor in *Avtonom*. A brutal attack by the neo-Nazis in 2004 left him with a disability, which still required expensive medical therapy; when I met him for an interview in 2017, he was on his way to the hospital for a regular checkup. The authorities, he said, appeared reluctant to investigate the attack. His home city of Izhevsk, just west of the Urals, carries the memories of the bloody confrontations of those years: on our walk across the city center, the activist showed me the spot where an 18-year-old activist had been murdered by neo-Nazis in a street fight ten years earlier. Although open bloodshed has ceased since, primarily due to an overall decline in political activity, the activist's apartment was repeatedly attacked in the following years, with no ensuing investigation. The damage suffered has affected his role in the participatory process. Unable to engage in the forms of activism that require frequent physical presence, such as rallies, he has focused on what he calls information activism, maintaining *Avtonom's* website.

Bodily vulnerability, brought upon the alternative media by the existing antagonistic relationships, further constrained the already unstable process. Participation can physically damage, hurt, and cause spatial relocations. This fragile condition, however, also triggered resistance and activated affect. Alleged tortures of anarchist activists and documented police brutality at public assemblies sparked anger and mobilization – often, after periods of prolonged apathy and unsuccessful efforts to come together. In this violent form, the antagonistic relationship with the state was constitutive of participatory process.

8.1.3. Enforced crampedness

Participation requires the presence of bodies, but bodies need to gather in particular spaces. Like the rest of the participatory assemblage, the spaces are endangered, creating a highly unstable environment for participation, beyond the communities' control. They continuously have to move around cities, unable to settle down at one specific place and, often, being physically removed from their locations. This insufficiency of space, brought upon the alternative

media from the outside, permeates the participatory process and, as we will see later in the chapter, forces the communities to come up with strategies of protection that limit power-sharing.

Apart from the media's own scarce resources (see chapter 7), the intervention of the state could quickly force them out of any given venue. One of *Discours's* venues was a café in central Moscow, which hosted them until the night they helped organize an auction in support of political prisoners: *Discours* founder recalls how the event was abrupted by the arrival of riot police. A few days later, the café was shut down. A similar, if less violent, story happened in the public library that allowed *Discours* to work at their premises, which the community also used as a venue for poetry events with invited speakers. Despite the official ban on cursing at public cultural events in Russia, a swear word was used in one of the poems; *Discours* received an official warning but, after another poet failed to censor his text at the following library event, *Discours* was asked to leave for good.

DOXA, too, had been forced out through the intervention of the state on multiple occasions. Their anniversary party in April 2019 was shut down by police a few hours before the start of the event, forcing the community to urgently search for a new venue (Field notes, April 2019). Later that month, the state university that hosted *DOXA* canceled the previously approved seminar on the Belarusian student movement under the pretext of urgent security issues, causing the closure of the entire university building. Together with other seminar participants, we were standing on the street, unable to enter but looking at people effortlessly walking in and out of the building that was said to be shut down. The event had to be relocated to a nearby café (Field notes, April 2019). In September the same year, the university cancelled *DOXA's* registration at the annual student event, arguing that their support for students arrested at Moscow protests would compromise the university's political neutrality. Besides, and on an everyday basis, the community has struggled to get any workspace at all.

> **Levan:** The university doesn't want the students to have a separate space. So all of our requests to get our own little room have failed. We were told that there is a common space for all students, why would we create it for separate organizations, and so on.

This enforced crampedness permeated the spaces for participation, forcing the communities to use spaces characterized by temporality (they can only stay inside for a few hours) and the failure to signify them in their own way (public spaces such as cafés and bars or apartments of individual participants). These spatial hindrances contributed to the discursive blockage of identity, feeding the antagonism and exposing the communities' precarity, but also making them adjust their participatory practices to the rather hostile context.

8.2. Beyond vulnerability: Alternative media and the war of position

As the previous section has sought to establish, vulnerability is the key condition that characterizes the antagonism between alternative media and the state. The antagonism harms the participatory process, but paradoxically also constitutes it, acting as an "enabling vulnerability" (Butler, 1997, p. 2). As Ferrarese (2018) reminds us, "a large part of our capacities are deployed against, or set out from, a vulnerability" (p. 10). Triggered by the attacks from the state, a reverse process takes place: the alternative media are actively undoing the chain of equivalence sustaining the state, the process to which Mouffe (2018), inspired by Gramsci, referred as "becoming state" (p. 47; see also theoretical discussion in section 2.4.5). The idea of "becoming state" does not refer to achieving a necessary superiority in institutional politics, but to redefining previously taken-for-granted positions and spaces where the state can legitimately exercise hegemony.

Arguably, the process does not have to take radically antagonistic forms, but is often performed as a quiet competition. Gramsci's concept of a war of position helps explain the process of the oft-indirect confrontation, sometimes initiated by the alternative media and sometimes imposed on them. To recap the theoretical discussion in chapter 2, the war of position can be defined as process characterized by "creating alternative institutions and alternative intellectual resources within existing society" (Cox, 1983, p. 165). The process of state transformation, in this sense, invokes the logic of its gradual replacement by redrawing discursive boundaries between the legitimate and the illegitimate, the sacred and the profane. Alternative media's role in this war of position was emphasized by Rodríguez (2001) who described their political function as "contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations" (p. 20).

In this section, I show that alternative media (re)negotiate their position in relation to the state in three ways. One is the reactivation of the political origin of identities and spaces activated in the process, shifting them away from the domain of sedimentation into the level of active contestation. Secondly, the war of position is forged by the creation of horizontal structures, where democratic participation as such is seen as enactment of resistance to the hierarchical order associated with the state. Lastly, it consists in the fostering of safe spaces, supported by sociality, where counter-hegemonic articulations can be enacted. In this assemblage of counter-hegemonic practices, the communities effectively engage themselves in the war of position through "propagating a new conception of the world" (Bobbio, 1988, p. 93), based on practices lacking in the institutional political domain.

8.2.1. Reactivation of the political

The first manifestation of the war of position can be found in a continuous contestation of institutionalized positions, whose political origin is reactivated through hegemonic interventions. In particular, this contestation could be observed in the case of *DOXA* that rearticulated the student as a political subject with a set of demands. It needs to be noted that this rearticulation was embedded in a very particular context, where a number of professors and high-profile representatives of the university hosting *DOXA* – a public university under the direct subordination of the government – repeatedly reproduced the motto "the university is outside of politics" in their public appearances and media publications (e.g. Penskaya, 2019; Polyakov, 2019).[46] It was claimed that the motto signified the defense of academic freedoms from the pressure of political actors. Arguably, however, the idea imposed the logic of sedimentation: it supported the fixation of the student as a static subject of the discourse on educational hierarchies with minimal participatory agency. An article by professor Leonid Polyakov, published in the popular *MK* newspaper, read:

> The purpose of being part of the university is not to struggle against the 'bosses', but to perform a formidably difficult intellectual labor… The only choice the university offers you… is the right to choose your study program by selecting particular courses.

Such a depoliticized view of the students goes in line with the narrow institutionalist understanding of politics, precludes the articulation of the student as a subject with a set of *political* demands, and thereby protects the status-quo. Other depoliticized articulations also include elements from neoliberal discourse, where studentship is articulated in terms of leisure and lifestyle. Coffeeshops in particular emerged as a signifier of the sedimented identity, a symbol of a space for idle middle-class young people willingly accepting the position of a consumerist subject. Articles with titles such as "Best coffeeshops around the campus", published by a competing student newspaper, were a source of expressed frustration for *DOXA* informants who viewed them as an attempt to conceal the political component of the student identity.

In response, *DOXA* resorted to the logic of reactivation: understanding themselves as "agents of critique" (see chapter 6), they directed their efforts towards deconstruction of power inequalities on various levels of the university life. Among their more prominent initiatives was a rare discussion on

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[46] Penskaya, E. (2019). Universitet bol'she kazhdogo iz nas. *KP*. https://www.kp.ru/daily/27017.5/4079842/;
Polyakov, L. (2019). Universitet i politika. Svoyevremennyie mysli. *MK*. https://www.mk.ru/politics/2019/08/18/universitet-i-politika-svoevremennye-mysli.html (both accessed 22 November 2020).

sexual harassment in Russian universities, in which they accused a lecturer of inappropriate behavior towards a female student. In another example, *DOXA* supported a campaign against a new grading system that made it easier to expel students from the university. Although the universities have not always taken the critique easily, the alternative media producers still prioritized the expansion of the field of contestations: "Even if our actions are negatively taken, we are still provoking a discussion, which is important anyway" (Vera).

Resignifying the subject position of the student, *DOXA* also broadened the space for performing participation from this newly articulated identity. The motto "the university is outside of politics" confined the student to the campus, allowing other, competing articulations to emerge only in outside spaces, such as the aforementioned coffeeshops. In the summer of 2019, *DOXA* engaged in the coverage of student detentions and public defense of detainees. In so doing, they extended the arena of political contestation to public spaces, streets and squares, where the new student subjectivity could be expressed on new, broadly political terms, as opposed to the subordinated position of someone whose choice is limited to technical issues such as course selection. Acting from this newly articulated subject position, the student was an active subject of the democratic process that stretches well beyond the university and its campus. The alternative medium, in this sense, functioned as a tribune for a collective expression of this position: "The university is not an administration or a commercial enterprise, but a community… As a community, we must defend our right to be free" (*DOXA* chat logs, 28/7/19). At the same time, there is an invitation for its active enactment on campus, too:

> **Alexander**: We think it is important… to at least shed light on stories that are usually ignored… There was a [police] raid in my student dorm. I've talked about it to my roommate, he said, 'So what? This is police, this is the way they behave, we are living in Russia'. Everyone knows what is going on but [they] don't consider it strange. Our task is to show that, guys, this isn't 'just happening', look at what exactly this means.

The above example illustrates how the shifting boundaries of the position of the student allowed the challenging of some of the sedimented practices and spaces, which set them on a collision course with the state institutions and ensured their proactive stance into the ongoing war of position. These discursive struggles were supported by a series of material arrangements, which I address in the next section.

8.2.2. Horizontality as subversion of the logic of the state

Individual intentionality, discourse theory maintains, does not necessarily matter for the discursive order as a whole. While strategic reactivation of the

political origin of identities was integrated into the logic of counter-hegemony, a series of practices related to the participatory process supported the war of position without being labeled as resistance to the state. It was, however, performed as a form of deterritorialization, the rejection and subversion of the hierarchical and arborescent structure attributed to the state (see theoretical discussion on the state and alternative structures in chapter 4).

The participatory structure was central in the production of alternative, non-institutional spaces for decision-making. By performing participation through horizontality and respect for diversity (see chapter 7) and by actively showing awareness of their internal power dynamics, the alternative media created political arenas outside of institutional politics. Such "everyday politics" (Boyte, 2005) both made up for the deficit of participation within the institutional domain (embodied by the state) *and* undermined the hegemonic position of institutional politics as the privileged arena for power contestation. In this way, fostering participatory practices on the periphery of the political process challenged the discourse on and of the state.

We see a concern for fostering non-institutional participatory structures across the three case studies. Practices such as a formal voting procedure and contestations of leadership within the core group (see chapter 7) were performed as a resistance to the rigidities and restrictions associated with the state. In the words of one informant from *Discours*:

> **Artur**: This system where one person…vetoes, blocks certain topics, an editor-in-chief or an investor, is a corrupt practice for society. There's always a risk of individual preferences of this particular person, there's risk of political pressure, of threats; in Russia, this risk it quite high because things are bad with freedom of speech and the rights of journalists.

For *DOXA*, discursive struggles against university administrations went hand in hand with the subversion of the logic of the state: in the words of one participant, "every [Russian] university is hierarchically organized. It is, in essence, the model of the state" (Olya). *DOXA* participants showed awareness of the broader need for alternative, participatory structures as part of the war of position, as is clear from the excerpt below:

> Horizontal student movements are needed precisely to subvert conventional political categories and reconstruct the political imagination… [S]tudent movements can lead to reconfiguration of the democratic action and civil solidarity. (*DOXA* text samples, 16/8/19)

The anarchists' focus on self-governance made them particularly eager to perform participation as an alternative to the state institutions and their logic. One informant recalled the practice of periodic assemblies *(veche)*, popular with Moscow anarchists in the 2000s, "when a hundred people sat down in a

circle and decided on [different] matters. Say, organizing the Labour Day demonstration or solving conflicts" (Grigory). When the activity of the anarchist movement declined, organizing media production on the principles of collegiality and equality (see section 7.3.1) enabled *Avtonom* to carry on enactments of the discourse on participation.

8.2.3. Safe spaces and the politics of trust

Sociality, as previously discussed (see chapter 7), was one of the key conditions of participation, and as such it did not feed the logic of antagonism. On the contrary, the very fantasy of community expansion implied that many alternative media producers, rather than enacting resistance and deepening their own vulnerability, would prefer to live a satisfying and vibrant social life away from the threat. It was however, precisely the logic that fueled the ongoing war of position. It was forged by the communities' focus on the creation of autonomous spaces outside of the state control, away from the threats coming from the outside, by "isolating yourself from society in your own cozy world" (Avtonon text samples, 15/5/17).

Building a parallel, autonomous life requires safe spaces. The previous chapter already analyzed how particular forms of sociality acted as a key pillar of the participatory process. Here, I consider how the social antagonism was "spatially articulated" (Clewer et al., 2012, p. 4) and what consequences this brought for participatory dynamics. The struggle for some physical space of their own was perpetual. Much like the entire unstable process, spaces for participatory process were sporadically organized, highly mobile, never fixated, and invariably endangered.

In the absence of spaces of their own, the media producers had to rely on available public spaces, adjusting them for the needs of a safe space and re-signifying them by their physical presence. *Discours* held Monday meetings in one of the smaller bars close to the city center, taking over much of the inner space. *DOXA* opted for the centrally located bar selling affordable food and beer, which rose to popularity among Moscow students in the end of the 2010s. Offering an unpretentious cozy interior design, playing trendy alternative music of the likes of La Femme or St. Vincent or long videos of Yellow Vests protests in Paris on the big screen, it was a meeting point for many young Muscovites and the place where *DOXA* periodically held their meetings. The bar gave a comforting sense of safety insofar as one was surrounded by *svoi,* people of similar age and occupations from the broader *tusovka* (see section 7.1); sometimes, friends of *DOXA* participants would drop by and the more formal meeting would evolve into a casual hangout. On exceptional occasions, the place was literally transformed into a safe space protecting its guests: during one of the demonstrations in the , the bar announced they were

going to shelter protesters escaping from the riot police (*DOXA* chat logs, 3/8/19).

Other resources for safe spaces were available within the broader civil society scene. In the late 2010s, *Avtonom* produced a series of lectures related to the anarchist agenda *(Lektoriy Avtonoma).* They were based in a well-known venue for human rights projects whose credentials largely, if not fully, ensured the safety of participants:

> **Valery**: The only advantage is that *** *[venue name omitted]* is not attended by the people from the Centre E (*eshniki*). The thing is, we could pay money to some Subway restaurant; hypothetically you could hold *Avtonom* lectures there when there are few or no clients. But… you will either be caught by the riot police or the Centre E, the manager will tear up your contract and you will hold the lecture under a bridge in the winter. With *** *[venue name omitted]* this won't work… If the riot police intervene, they will get a lot of shit and they understand it.

> **Grigory**: [P]erhaps *** *[venue name omitted]* is the only place [in Moscow] where *Avtonom* lectures can be held without the risk of interruptions by the police or the fascists. That's how large the scale of repressions has become.

The third strategy consisted in searches for autonomous semi-private spaces, not a far cry from Bey's (1991) temporary autonomous zones. Describing their dream space, both *Discours* and *DOXA* participants gave a strikingly similar account of a centrally located place suitable for work, but where a vibrant social life would also be possible. Designed primarily as spaces for sociality, they were not intended to be "little islands of resistance", to use one informant's expression. Rather, it was an enactment of the fantasy of a large self-organized community that would establish its own order and avoid abrupt attacks and evictions. During my participant observations, *DOXA's* core group was indeed searching for an apartment to share between the core group members (see section 7.2.1.3). The fact that they were jokingly referring to the future apartment as a "commune of the Lefties" (Interview with Levan) underscored the willingness to design a political order of their own on the micro level, on conditions determined by the core group and not the outside.

The logic of a safe space necessitated a particular politics of access, which brings trust into the picture. Here, certain differences in approach could be felt between the three case studies. *Discours*, where antagonism with the state was only triggered on a number of occasions, kept a relatively high level of trust towards the community's outsiders. *DOXA*, initially, was equally trusting, although access became tighter as the community found itself confronting the state in the . In *Avtonom*, however, the participants are wary of opening up too much, too quickly. Although, according to Grigory, they did not "use encoding, people openly ask me on the phone when and where I prefer to meet", I could feel a certain uneasiness about conversation on the meetings throughout

my field work. One activist said access depended on how active the prospective participant would be, another one went completely silent when I asked about the location of the meetings. The uneasiness was further aggravated by the explosion in Archangelsk that preceded a few of our interviews with *Avtonom* contributors. One informant spoke of the developing "paranoia" the longer one stays in the process as an anarchist activist: "To be honest with you, 2-3 years ago I also thought that you have to be open <…> But the longer you stay in this, the more paranoid you get yourself" (Tatyana). The importance of trust entailed the need to be part of an existing network to enter the participatory process.

> **Tatyana**: If you want to include someone, you need 2-3 people who would vouch for you and say: yes, this dude is reliable, we can trust [them]. The vouchers' rule is applied to any initiative. When I just met people from the activist group *(iz dvizhukhi)*, I had already met two guys who could vouch for me and say: yes, she's normal, don't worry. Yes, unfortunately, we have to create these filters.

Texts on *Avtonom* website, too, repeatedly called for caution in relying on strangers. In one example, a new initiative to launch an international solidarity network for anarchists explicitly indicated the need to find people who would vouch for novices: "Keep in mind that if you do not have someone to vouch for you *(poruchitel')*, we will most likely not be able to accept you into the collective because trust is important to us" (*Avtonom* texts samples, 10/9/17). Another informant from *Avtonom* mentioned time as a necessary filter for joining the core group: "Usually, [the editors] are those activists who have been in the movement for some time, have proved their worth *(proyavili sebya)* and expressed their wish to become an editor" (Alexey).

Technology played a particular role in this politics of trust, providing handy tools to restrict access and control inclusion. Earlier in the 2010s, *Avtonom's* core team relied on mailing lists, where access was negotiated through relations of trust. In one text published on their website, an author suggested an immediate verification of the identity of another activist, questioning their trustworthiness and proposing a "cleansing":

> Considering the fact that this person (or these people) is sketchy and unknown, and that in the Russian Federation you can easily end up in prison for two years because of a like or a repost, this is, at the very least, very trashy. To activists <…> reading this: I really recommend you to think of whom you are including in your mailing list *(rassylka)*, and to do a proper cleansing. (*Avtonom* texts samples, 16/2/17).

Considering that the mailing lists were spaces where some of the key decisions were taken for much of the 2010s, the quote amounted to a call for

diminished participatory intensities. There, trust – and, by extension, interaction – would remain the crucial filter guaranteeing access to the process.

By the late 2010s, almost all communication between the three media communities was taking place on Telegram. Despite multiple attempts to block the app (see section 1.2.2), the alternative media producers kept using it on a daily basis. The protection strategies remained in place, with those revolving around access and trust remaining central for a successful performance of the war of position. At our interview in November 2018, an *Avtonom* editor refused to disclose the number of participants in the community's Telegram chat, which I never got access to. *DOXA* provided me with access to its chat, yet in the end of August 2019, in the midst of the Moscow arrests crisis, I noticed that I had been removed from the chat. I contacted the coordinator who told me that I had been removed alongside a number of other participants after failing to respond to a question on whether I still want to be part of the chat for my research purposes (the question got lost in the thousands of messages in the chat). He quickly replied:

> This was [done] not so much for security purposes, but for the sense of security. Often, we deal with unprofessionalism of certain people that leak important things discussed in the chat. The fewer ears, the lesser suspicion and the more mutual trust. And then you always know how many people received information, it can be important with sensitive information.

When asked if shared information had become sensitive since the summer arrests – given that *DOXA* had seemed more relaxed in the spring – he responded that "maybe it's just that everyone is nervous now, myself included." He then added me back – I promised that I would let them know once I was done with my data collection, and was removed from the chat in the fall of 2019.

It was notable that *DOXA's* approach to communication has experienced a transformation throughout the summer of arrests, which lifted them from the position of a relatively unknown local medium struggling to reach out to students from other universities to a national champion of the student community, attracting the attention of the likes of the BBC, but also raising the stakes of gaffes and leaks. The laidback attitude was replaced by a caution more akin to *Avtonom's*. It demonstrated the transformative role of antagonism for the performance of participation and its paradoxical vicious circle: while aiming to defy the state with their internal practices, the media communities, unable to control external conditions of participation, end up reproducing exclusion, which is justified by the very danger produced by the antagonism. Participatory intensities are reduced, the communities resort to protection of their safe spaces and discourse on trust takes the center stage, limiting access to both interactions and decision-making. The fantasy of maximalist participation becomes structurally impossible in the field demarcated by social antagonisms.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

9.1. Summary

The study set out to understand how participation was performed in three alternative media. The broader point was that discourses come into being through performances that involve individuals and their bodies, as well as material artefacts, spaces, and affects. Taking this theoretical point into the empirical field of alternative media, the research was concerned with the extent to which discourses on democracy are performed in a setting that explicitly articulates its aim to redress existing inequalities in the representation and distribution of voice. The fieldwork in Russia added an additional complexity to the study, bringing the state into the frame. Employing a discourse-theoretical perspective coupled with a performative lens, the study sought to answer the main research question "*How is participation performed in three Russian alternative media?*"

First, I outlined the discursive conditions of the process, looking into what discourses were activated in the process, and how they were reproduced or re-articulated. The study specifically addressed the identities of the participants by conceptualizing them as subject positions within the activated discourses, enacted with a variety of material means. In so doing, the secondary research question was: "*How do participants understand their engagement, contribution, and the collective identity of the communities, and how do they materially enact them?*"

The analysis paints an ambivalent picture, where identity construction was invariably shaped in relation to professional journalism. On the one hand, the professional discourse retained its privileged position, with the alternative media producers largely taking their cues from the discursive and material practices of the mainstream media. In particular, the adversarial notion of journalism, objectivity, independence, immediacy, and professional ethics – the nodal points of professional journalistic discourse – were reproduced as part of the alternative media practice. The identification with professional journalistic discourse was performed in a variety of material ways: through an exclusive possession of press cards, vocational training, occupation of spaces shared with professionally employed journalists, employment of some

alternative media producers by professional media outlets, and public displays of solidarity with journalists.

The identity of media producer was also constructed in relation to that of the audience, emphasizing their different positionings. The articulations of the subject position of the audience member included both negative and positive aspects, but the very position nonetheless remained clearly present in the discursive practices. Some of the more disempowering articulations pictured the audience members as passive outsiders of the process and a mass with insufficient expertise and skills. These articulations were mainly expressed by media producers who were working, had worked or aspired to work within professional journalism, importing some of the elitist approaches to media practice into alternative media production.

These articulations of the audience, however, co-existed with some more positive outlooks. The audience of the media outlets was also viewed as educated, curious and critical. These more empowering articulations tended to come from people without any current formal affiliations with professional journalism. This resulted in discursive struggles around "what journalism could be" (Zelizer, 2017), largely falling on the old borderlines of professionals vs. non-professionals – where the latter were more eager to challenge some of the sedimented journalistic practices and power relations. At the same time, the hegemonic discourse on journalism appealed to many newcomers who were willing to master the language and material practices of professional journalism for various reasons (such as winning over the audience or associating oneself with the prestigious and symbolically powerful subject position), rather than challenge them.

Yet, the identity of the alternative media and its producers remained present in the discursive practices, enabled by reconfiguration of some of the elements of professional journalism. First, alternative media were understood as an arena for the expression of counter-hegemonic individual voices and collective demands, opening up a broader space for representation. This was partially viewed as a remedy for the perceived abdication of mainstream media from their professional and civic duty in representing the diversity of the political spectrum. The second way of articulating the alternative focused on the display of social commitment. Although this somewhat contradicted objectivity, which was still cherished by some participants, they protected their right to open partisanship, thus bringing alternative media production closer to political activism. Thirdly, the performance of the alternative focused on the elimination of formal hierarchies within the communities of producers. Rather than re-enacting the formal processes of recruitment, alternative media resorted to more informal and sporadic practices of engagement by means of association with their targeted communities, such as students or anarchists.

These communities played a central role in enabling the participatory process. Here, access into the process was negotiated through deployment of particular political logics. Not every student and not every anarchist could be

meaningfully considered to be part of *DOXA* and *Avtonom*; only individuals with a particular reading of those respective subject positions (one that emphasized solidarity, commitment to the broader cause and a sense of belonging) were invited to become part of the media community and participate. This different logic of recruitment – embedded in the discourse on community rather than loyalty to professional ideology – presented a stark contrast to mainstream media practice in terms of performance of a collective identity.

Next, the study analyzed the internal characteristics of the participatory process, to address the secondary research question "*How are co-decision processes performed in the alternative media?*" Here, I argued that the participatory model of the media outlets consisted of four layers, structured by particular dynamics of interaction (the model was visualized on figure 2 in section 7.1; table 3 below presents its textual summary). The form of close interaction, which I labeled sociality, remained a key condition of (access into) the decision-making process and formed a vibrant social environment that sustained the affective dimension of participation.

Table 3. *Textual summary of the analytical model (see p. 121).*

Layer	Characteristics
Audience	No participation; Limited interaction with the communities of the production process.
Targeted community (*tusovka*)	No participation; Outside the political logics of the media community; Active socialization with the media community – might not (yet) be familiar to the core group; Can enter the media community: similar background and current occupations.
Media community	Limited participation; Constructed through the political logics: share values and perform solidarity and belonging; Active socialization with the *tusovka* and the core group; Can enter the core group.
Core group	Key decision-making; Concentration of power; Maximalist forms of participation: horizontality, collegiality, equality, respect for diversity.

At the outer layer of the four layers, we find the audience, whose opportunities were mainly restricted to interaction – on terms defined by the media producers – and no power-sharing. As summarized above, this disempowered

position of the audience was conditioned by exclusionary discursive practices imported from professional journalistic discourse. However, these practices existed alongside some more positive articulations of the audience, which still offered some of its members the opportunity to enter the adjacent layer of the targeted communities around the media outlets.

It is these targeted communities that I labeled with the Russian word *tusovka* – a tight social milieu of people with similar sociodemographic characteristics that engaged in frequent and largely sporadic exchanges. The predominant embeddedness of the alternative media in the urban setting of Moscow played an enabling role for this socialization, with people sharing similar spaces in the city, hanging out with each other in cafés, running into each other in bars or co-working in the same educational establishments. The targeted communities acted as both audience and a pool of prospective contributors. The presence of *tusovka* was a crucial driving force of the entire production process, as it supported the fantasy – in the Lacanian sense – of a limitless sociality and an ever-growing community.

Some individuals from the targeted community (*tusovka*) could potentially enter the *media* community, the next layer of the model. The media community was delegated certain decision-making rights – mainly related to media content – and could, under particular conditions, enter the decision-making core that takes some of the more crucial operational decisions. The media community was structured by the political logics, relying on ongoing identifications with the community, rather than any sort of a formalized membership.

At the most inner layer, the core team of producers is located – a relatively stable group of people taking key operational decisions. Here, we find the most maximalist forms of participation, performed through the logics of horizontality and respect for diversity. Participation is protected by collegiality and equality, and various procedures (such as polls) were occasionally initiated to validate these principles. Although the position of the leader is still very much present, and is often delegated the right to take operational decisions bypassing a collegial vote, emergency procedures may be triggered if objections from the group are raised. In this sense, we find democratic expressions of leadership, performed through facilitation of the process and protection of the group's well-being. Although the leadership may have temporarily slipped into a highly mobilized mode at times of crisis, the coordinators generally avoided taking a commanding lead. Furthermore, individual leadership was limited by internal autonomy, where central management often had restricted capacity to coordinate the work of separate units or individuals working under broadly shared values and goals.

A series of limitations constrained the participatory process. Some stemmed from the internal dynamics, while others were imposed by the constitutive outside – the state. This brings us to the final secondary research question: *What are the limitations of these performances of participation, in relation to the presence of a plurality of voices?* One group of limitations

related to the scarce resources of the media outlets: financial uncertainty, temporality of spaces, limited time and physical stamina, and repercussions of the above for mental health. The plurality of voices was further constrained by inherent power dynamics of the process and its actors, such as gender or age – even though those constraints remained a matter of ongoing internal contestations. In addition, respect to the atmosphere of friendly sociality was a condition for entering the core groups that directly took decisions on the process. Despite diversity being one of the key characteristics of the process, informal practices of blacklisting or ostracism remained an option for the core groups.

Paradoxically, the urge to protect diversity, too, contributed to the restraints of the plurality of voices. The participants showed readiness to exclude individuals who were unwilling to accept diversity as a condition of media production, as was the case with the split in *AD*. Finally, another major constraint was caused by the sporadicity of the process. Amidst the lack of formal organizational structures and responsibilities, participation remained invitational, experimental and thus rather time-consuming. Given the severely strained resources, sporadicity occasionally risked thwarting the entire process.

The scarce resources, however, were quickly mobilized in the face of an external threat, which brings us to the antagonistic relationship with the state as the final stage of analysis. I argued that the state acted as the constitutive outside of the process, and was perceived as the blockage to the identity of the alternative media due to the many disruptions it inflicted upon the process. To unpack the complex dynamics of that antagonistic relationship, I suggested approaching the state as an assemblage of both material and discursive practices. The state apparatus intervened into the production process in various material ways – by closing down venues, cutting financial ties, confiscating magazines, detaining participants or even deporting them from its territory. But, the state also exercised discursive power by setting boundaries of the legitimate and the illegitimate. This politics of signification of the state was particularly exemplified with the deployment of stigmatizing labels such as "foreign agent" onto alternative media alongside many other civil society groups.

The sense of vulnerability and the immediate physical fragility activated the affective dimension of the antagonistic relationship, triggering a quick and active mobilization of the media communities. While material resources were understandably unequal, the alternative media responded by what I labeled with the Gramscian notion of the war of position. Rather than challenging the state on the level of institutional politics, the alternative media focused on re-defining the taken-for-granted positions and spaces where the state could enact its power. This war of position was forged by re-activating the political origin of sedimented social identities; developing and enacting non-hierarchical structures of decision-making, drastically different from the logic of the state; and creating safe spaces away from state institutions, where this alternative order could be performed.

The war of position spoke to the radical potential of alternative media and showed the mobilizing potential of the antagonism with the state, but also exposed the damage the antagonistic relationship had inflicted on the opportunities for maximalist participation. The articulation of the state as a static and threatening Other – resembling Foucault's image of the "cold monster" (see section 4.2.2) – shaped access to the communities and produced a politics of trust, defining participation on terms unfavorable to the outsiders. To be sure, the threat largely remained, and occasional material attacks of the state only confirmed its ongoing presence. However, one participant's distinction between "security" and "the sense of security" (quoted in section 8.2.3) may help to explain the point. Despite the material confrontations with the state, the threat remained primarily affective, non-rationalized, experienced through what Massumi (2010) calls a *would-have/could-have* logic (see section 3.3). Forcing the participants to act upon the "sense of security", the state remained discursively present even when materially absent, and produced truth effects that enabled its power to be enacted without any immediate involvement. In this, we find a paradox of participation: whereas the process had been set out to defy the Other, it continued to be shaped *in relation to* the Other – and, sometimes, *by* the Other.

9.2. Contributions and future research

The study has positioned itself at the intersection of media and communication studies, discourse theory, and participation studies. The results of the study provide new theoretical and empirical insights into the three fields, which are discussed below one by one. A set of suggestions for future research is presented along the summary of contributions.

9.2.1. Contribution to discourse theory

Discourse theory lies at heart of this research project and has proved a useful theoretical guide. Despite its predominant use for the analysis of texts, this study has demonstrated the empirical applicability of discourse theory within the context of a fieldwork-based study. The poststructuralist notion of performance was instrumental for this purpose. Although this concept had earlier been used to connect discourse with the material acts that constitute it, the focus had remained on the level of the discursive. This dissertation has aimed to address the previously overlooked dimension of the specific enactments of discourse – through, for instance, embodiment and spatiality, which contain possibilities of its reproduction and re-articulation. Thus, the notion of performance has made it possible to take the discourse-theoretical apparatus into the

study of an ongoing process in a real-world setting, approaching it as an assemblage of discursive and material practices.

Taking a discourse-theoretical study into the field also encouraged a closer analytical attention to affects that structure the process. Discourse theory does touch upon affect,[47], although mainly connecting it with social antagonism and thus reserving affect for the relationship with the Other. This more negative side of affect was indeed also present in the case study. The sense of threat, engendered by the antagonistic relationship with the state, triggered two sorts of responses with direct implications for participation in the media: it encouraged mobilization of limited resources, but also a particular politics of trust, which, as I argued, was detrimental to maximalist participation.

However, this study made a few steps further connecting affect with the discursive and the material. One helpful anchor point was the Lacanian strand within discourse theory. The notion of fantasmatic logic proved a helpful explanatory notion for the positive affects that sustained the participatory process under study. Here, the fantasy consisted in the yet-to-be-achieved community fullness, which depended on an ongoing sociality and the sense of togetherness. This togetherness was enacted through gregariousness – a sense of an embodied unity, when the participants felt the need to be physically co-present to fully enjoy the process. Another important connection between affect, discourse and materiality was solidarity, which enabled the participants to perform belonging within the informal structure of the media communities. Further research may find a more nuanced connection between affect theory and discourse theory – for instance, by bringing attention to the variety of mobilizing affects in the participatory process.

The study also proposed an original deployment of the old concept of the war of position, first used by Gramsci and later embraced by discourse theory. However, discourse theorists (and especially Mouffe) mainly used it to theorize the notion of articulation. This study turned to Gramsci's initial meaning of the war of position to bring it into the empirical context of alternative media production in Russia. This allowed me to make a broader point on the contingent dynamic between the subject and its constitutive outside, which in the case of this study goes beyond the commonsensical idea of resistance to the state as a stable institutional entity. By engaging with the anthropological notion of the state as a discourse, I developed two points that bring together discourse theory and the theory of state. The first point emphasized the discursive vulnerabilities of the state, which could be confronted by political contestations of the positions and spaces that had previously been unproblematically attributed to it – in Mouffe's terms, I labeled this process as *becoming state.* At the same time, this approach enabled me to emphasize some of the strengths of the state, showing how it continued to produce discursive effects despite its material absence. It seems promising to take a deeper look into this

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[47] See the discussion on Chantal Mouffe's notion of passions in sections 2.6 and 3.4.

power dynamic in future research, identifying other elements of contestation between the state and counter-hegemonic actors.

9.2.2. Contribution to participation studies

Participation studies is the second field to which this research has contributed. The discussion of this contribution is inseparable from the chosen discourse-theoretical perspective and its notion of radical contingency. One important takeaway from the analysis is that the idea of maximalist participation – a process based on multidirectionality, heterogeneity and a broad understanding of the political (see section 3.2) – finds an empirical validation. While the notion is still more helpful as a fantasy in the Lacanian sense rather than an accurate depiction of a specific empirical reality (Carpentier, 2014), it was reflected in a series of decisions, acts, and articulatory practices analyzed in the study. Section 7.3 specifically addressed the explicit effort undertaken by the alternative media to configure and protect horizontality and foster diversity within their communities. Despite these attempts, the process was still characterized by an utter fragility and instability, but occasional mobilizations allowed it to keep going even with some severely strained resources. These results provide a much-needed empirical support to the more optimistic argument in the ongoing dialogue on the future prospects of participation, as outlined in the introductory chapter.

Bringing radical contingency into the focus, the study problematized the identities of the actors of the participatory process, whose stability is often taken for granted (see discussion in chapter 3). Instead, the discourse-theoretical notion of subject position was employed to account for how individuals are brought to perform particular discourses in the process, and the various participatory models replicated by these performances. These subject positions may co-exist with, overlap and contradict each other. For instance, the subject position of professional journalist, which brings in the replication of power relations between media producers and their audience, was performed side by side with the counter-hegemonic subject position of alternative media producer (see further discussion in section 9.2.3). These tensions emphasized both the discursive conditions that delineated the process and the limitations of the process itself, as it was structured by discourses activated in the articulatory process.

Radical contingency, therefore, was a valuable theoretical concept with substantial implications for the political dynamics at play. Apart from capturing the dynamics of identification, it brought in the notion of the logics of a practice (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). The study offered empirical illustrations to the ways in which political and fantasmatic logics structured participation and interaction within the alternative media. The political logics captured the attempts to hegemonize particular interpretations of the media communities'

identity. The fantasmatic logics, in turn, constructed a horizon for their further action, in which sociality, with its positive affective investment, was crucial. The model of participation, as presented in section 7.1, clarified how the (Lacanian) fantasy of media community expansion encouraged the core group to continue the production process in spite of the many obstacles along the way. It was largely the quality of sociality that structured power relations in these alternative media, determining the conditions and level of access. Furthermore, these affective forms of interaction helped maintain participation in the absence of formal organizational structures, as expressed forms of solidarity enabled the performance of community membership.

Antagonism proved another key concept explaining the inner dynamics and limits of the participatory process. The antagonistic relationship of alternative media and the state brought a perpetual risk of undoing participation. Threats to participation were not only a direct making of the constitutive outside, but also its indirect effects: the perceived danger was undoing maximalist participation by imposing stricter access and thereby making the enjoyment of participation a privilege of the selected few. Simultaneously – and paradoxically – the antagonism protected participation by enabling a broader mobilization of the limited resources, directed against the perceived "theft of enjoyment" (Žižek, 1993, p. 205). In this dynamic, one may hear the echo of Laclau (antagonism as the condition of possibility of the subject), Foucault (the productive role of antagonism), and Butler (condition of vulnerability that enables and stimulates political action). More time spent in the field – including the physical co-presence of the researcher at the times of direct confrontations with the state – could generate a deeper account of the variety of ways in which the perceived antagonism influences participatory practices.

9.2.3. Contribution to media and communication studies

The results of this study give insights into the theoretical discussion on power distribution in media and journalism production. They contribute to the theorizations of the hybridity of mainstream and alternative media, but also suggest a nuanced analysis of which elements of the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse remained intact and supported the new, hybrid discursive formations.

While the very *raison d'être* of the alternative consists in challenging the organizational structures and representations of the mainstream, a number of discursive elements from professional journalism are integrated into and performed in the counter-hegemonic practice. In other words, these discourses are positioned antagonistically, but their performance is not. The study presented multiple illustrations to the simultaneous enactments of journalistic professionalism *and* resistance to professional media practices, where some professional notions remained more accepted than others (for instance, the

value of immediacy was contested, but the role of journalists as critical agents was not). The analysis in chapter 6 suggested that rather than entirely rejecting the hegemonic discourse on journalism, some alternative media producers instead attempted to provide a remedy for what was seen as a corrupt media practice (for instance, insufficiently independent and ethical, or failing to represent the diversity of the political spectrum). Furthermore, there is an expressed desirability of re-integration of the professional discourse into the counter-hegemonic practice. The study showed the symbolic privilege of a variety of professional practices, vocabulary and artefacts in the alternative media operation. These findings demonstrate the persistence of professional discourses and material practices beyond the immediate organizational settings of their deployment such as editorial offices of mainstream media. In a broader sense, these results also suggest that the empowering potential of alternative media finds its limits precisely on the level of this reproduction. Here, the power largely remains with individuals in more privileged positions in terms access to cultural and symbolic resources.

It is noteworthy that the professional discourses within alternative media largely relied on the reproduction of the subject position of the audience member. In this context, the famous notion of the "people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006) may seem overly optimistic and insufficiently accurate for the empirical reality at hand. The articulations of the audience varied from more empowering to more negative, but the very subject position firmly remained as an outside of the production process, with no option to participate.

The argument of this study, however, does not end on this rather pessimistic conclusion. It contributes to the discussion on participation in media by bringing attention to the multiple and occasionally overlapping communities around the media production (see figure 2 in section 7.1), and the ability of participants to move from one to another. Power-sharing here relied on the flexibility of their borders, and the access to the communities, rather than being formally fixed, was negotiated through ongoing identifications. While the audience ("the readers") remained on the outside of the media production, each individual audience member could still enter the vaguely delineated targeted community – the *tusovka*. This targeted community acted both as a pool of prospective contributors and a more immediate audience of the produced content. From there, access into the participatory process was more readily facilitated – provided the *tusovka* members could comply with the political logics of the media community, as well as the politics of trust that structured access into the core of the process.

It is thus clear that amidst the lack of formal organizational structures, power relations in alternative media production were shaped on the level of the communities where the sociality that supported participation was taking place. The study has particularly highlighted the targeted community and the media community around the media outlets, keeping in mind their instability and partial overlapping. It is through access to these communities, and their

internal social dynamics, that participatory intensities within the alternative media production were structured. Future research into alternative media may find it helpful to use these conclusions as a starting point when untangling power dynamics in a participatory process.

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