

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



There's A Problem with Anarchist Media

Nerd Teacher

12 August 2022

Much in the way that I'm immensely disappointed in the media made "by teachers, for teachers," I am finding that I am equally disenchanted with 'anarchist' media. This really *shouldn't* be the case, but it is.

In a lot of ways, they share a lot in common. They shut out voices to focus on a few key people even if they don't share common values, they ask individuals with little knowledge to cover topics they're unfamiliar with, they're incredibly insular and require an immense following to even be considered for projects, and they commodify pain.

However, the "by teachers, for teachers" media model at least doesn't generally *pretend* that it's doing something else. They make their goals of "reforming schools" known and tend to act similarly to traditional media by occasionally paying lip service to more humane options and co-opting radical movements. They *know* they're selling something, and they *know* they're doing it largely for profit or to maintain their positions within the system.

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This makes perfect sense when you look into their funders and find the ‘charitable’ organisations of Bezos and Gates supporting them, even for the so-called nonprofits. And though the end result is them muddying the waters and obscuring the pain that our school systems cause in order to further their existence, it’s at least *clear* what their purpose is.

Meanwhile, many anarchist media organisations seem to have *forgotten* what their purpose was beyond producing goods and services for people to consume and buy.

Perhaps it starts with the fact that these anarchist media organisations are often established as formal businesses and nonprofits (even if they call themselves worker-run collectives). Infuriating though it might be, they have to be established in *some* way because they’re aware that they have to exist within a capitalist system. If they sell things and generate any kind of revenue, they’re required to submit taxes so that they can continue to provide their products for our “intellectual self-defense,” a term that feels a bit holier-than-thou for what *buying a book* or *listening to a podcast* is.

And honestly, I’m not here to say that *all* of the work they publish and share is meaningless because it isn’t. I have found numerous texts that have shifted my own ideas or helped me build upon or articulate others, and I’ve listened to people who have improved my understanding of different topics or sent me down rabbit holes I never expected to follow.

But it is telling that, though they claim to hold anti-capitalist values, they persist in using capitalist *strategies* and fail to recognise how that impacts them, the way they organise, and their customers. And that third category *is* customers because it’s not really *comradeship* to sell stuff. It can be seen in the ways they talk about their work and what they do, and it can be understood in the gaps they create because they’re *too focused* on *competing* in a capital-

ist system *against* traditional media (whether they recognise it or not).

It's a bit perplexing that we've bought into this model so thoroughly, they've *actively chosen* to use these strategies. They recognise that traditional media is their competition, but they're *choosing* to compete with them using their tools.

Should we be there? Yes. Should it be our primary focus? I really don't think so.

So far, this has been somewhat vague, so let's get into specific *choices* about strategies that feel counterproductive to an anarchist media and the development of anarchist communities.

For people who claim they want to "kill their idols," there is an absurd amount of name recognition needed to even participate in some of these spaces. When new books are announced, it's difficult to find authors that you've *never* heard from because the same few people keep popping up. Books about labour have the same few people, books about anarchist education are almost always around the same project because they're written by the one expert anyone recognises, and books about anti-fascism are always from the perspectives of the same few supposed researchers (many of whom have gifted their way to popularity and run defense for "leftist" abusers).

The same voices, the same ideas, the same topics are constantly dredged up in apparently 'new' ways with very little space given to anyone else.

How many books do we need about Francisco Ferrer y Guardia? How many other anarchist pedagogical projects are there that we're ignoring in favour of always talking about the Modern School, if we even deem talking about pedagogy important *at all* (and we rarely do)? Why do we need yet another collection of essays from the same few classical anarchists, like Emma Goldman

or Pyotr Kropotkin, as if *no one else* existed with them or even exists now?

I can't explain how *tired* I am of seeing the same few things all the time. How is this helping us *learn* and *grow*? How does this *build* anything other than a personal library or an ego?

And how many times can the same author repackage the same topics and essays for *our consumption*? Rarely do I see *new* authors being promoted or given even a glimmer of a platform, but I will see the same few people being touted around as the *most* knowledgeable about a topic or the *best* at editing anthologies. It's a jarring development of a hierarchy that is intentionally overlooked because the people involved are supposedly anarchists, but it's more than a little obvious that there are far too many people focusing on building up *their friends* and *people they know* to everyone else's silence and detriment. They almost never step outside of their comfort zones, and they rarely go out of their way to engage people doing things *differently* to them.

And this isn't uncommon: Rarely do I see anarchist media organisations going out of their way to *meet* new people, to *find* people in the areas they want to know more about. Instead, they put all of their energies on building connections to rising stars, to people with established platforms because those people will bring *their* audiences with them.

Much like their competitors, they're using the *same strategies* that shut people out as they promote their own supposed *growth*.

But why bother doing any of that *hard work* to build a community when your publishing house can, instead of working on a range of books and pamphlets about lesser known union struggles or pedagogical projects, support one of the most exploitative traditional publishers that they *pretend* they're competing against? Why create *your own* media from people who are genuinely trying to share information when you can just purchase and sell books from the people you claim to be competing against in this "intellectual war?"

on by the systems of bureaucracy that influence our everyday lives. These same systems continue to shape the media organisations in anarchist spaces, and I don't think it's necessarily for the better.

It's bad enough that we have multiple organisations that have to deal with legal channels, whether they want to or not. Sometimes it's necessary. It's bad enough that there are people who have to play by the State's rules if they want even a modicum of safety in their everyday lives.

It's beyond absurd that we keep losing spaces, we keep losing ground, and the organisations that claim to support us rarely put forth any work to help them continue or get off the ground. It's like they're not even trying to fight but are just *waiting* until the next book fair or the next conference. Hell, even when they *can't* help, they rarely talk about any of the issues affecting even the most *globally recognised* communities, like Rog in Ljubljana or Exarcheia in Athens. Rarely do we get perspectives of the people living in these places until something *bad* is already happening, if we get that *at all*.

If that's internationalism, why are they bothering?

And while our media is but one small part of this, we need to think: How do these spaces and the way they operate, the way they're structured, the choices they make "to survive" help us get to the futures we want to see? How does this impact the ways in which *we* think about other spaces we develop *for us*?

How do we build what we *really* need?

And Hello Fresh? What rubbish. They want you to believe that they're a healthy food alternative for busy people! That you can reduce your food waste by purchasing their products (while somehow neglecting increases in both transportation and packaging). But if you look into them, they have horrendous conditions for their workers in packing facilities and have worked pretty hard to secure a no-vote for a union through intimidation.

If you're choosing to have them as sponsors or know that the company you choose to work with gives them ad space on your work, what does that say about your views?

This is something that *all* anarchist organisations, particularly those that choose to formalise themselves under their local laws, need to consider.

This is something even David Graeber highlighted when discussing the time someone donated a car to the New York Direct Action Network, which he described in "Dead Zones of the Imagination":

"The DAN car caused a minor, but ongoing, crisis. We soon discovered that legally, it is impossible for a decentralized network to own a car. Cars can be owned by individuals, or they can be owned by corporations (which are fictive individuals), or by governments. But they cannot be owned by networks. Unless we were willing to incorporate ourselves as a nonprofit corporation (which would have required a complete reorganization and an abandonment of most of our egalitarian principles), the only expedient was to find a volunteer willing to claim to be the legal owner."

He continues by stating that the car caused more problems than it solved. It became a headache for the group, one that was brought

Instead, we just get the same old things from people who claim to have politics that more align with ours. More of the same, and more of the hegemonic structures.

These publishing houses, though this can extend to other media organisations along with the academic groups, get to "keep going" and "continue surviving" while selling people books that are almost entirely devoid of praxis and experience simply because the person who wrote them is an "ally" of movements they claim to support. Much of this is supported by them sending their "community" (in reality, their customer base) notifications about sales during major tragedies and strike actions.

Did you know that there are strikes across multiple Starbucks? Well, if you want to learn more, buy this book!

And I wish I were kidding, but *every single time* some horrible event happens, like abortion rights being rolled back by the Supreme Court in the United States or a Black person being murdered by police, there is *always* some kind of sale ad in my email that *talks about it* and *tells me what books to buy* so that I can "learn more" about why I should support abolition.

It's grotesque.

This absurd commodification of organising or awful events is something that, when mainstream media outlets do it, we critique. Rightfully so, too! But the sheer number of times that I've watched sales start on the backs of union organising or the countless deaths of migrants at highly politicised borders astounds me, and it often continues with little pushback. Instead, I often see people whose books are on sale try to promote more people *buying them*.

And none of this considers how this consumer-focused structure of selling stuff, be it merchandise or ideas, really impacts the *physical* world we live in. How many objects do I need sold to me that tell me about climate change? Why don't these emails ever

tell me, or anyone at all, how we can support actions in different places and what groups, particularly small-scale organisations, are doing?

I don't feel informed by someone selling me something, and I certainly don't feel connected.

We are supposed to be anarchists, not salesmen or capitalists. And yet, here we are, being sold books that will help inform our politics while the organisations (structured as companies and NGOs, usually residing in the United States or the United Kingdom) are doing very little to *show* that they share the values we claim to share.

This really is a particular issue with anarchist media in the *Anglosphere*, for it ignores everyone outside of it almost entirely. And though I am originally from the United States, I see the absolute *lack of care* these 'anarchist' media organisations have for areas outside of their boundaries. I see them asking people who are unfamiliar with politics or regions to write or speak about *what should be done* in far-flung places that they've barely even thought of, as if the only answers can come from people within my country of origin.

I see them putting a great deal of focus on people in Western Europe to discuss places they *rarely* engage with, as if places within Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, or South America are anomalies that can never be explained or understood by anyone else except people who have always discriminated against the people living there.

Calls for internationalism are almost entirely superficial, for those in many of the anarchist media organisations want *very little* to do with people from somewhere else and do very little to even offer a glimmer of solidarity to help projects get off the ground or continue. They leave many of us at the grassroots level, watching us all burn out as they put forward their next few rising stars.

cred mantra all over again: "No ethical consumption under capitalism."

But if the money you receive comes from organisations that promote and host media influencing parasocial relationships with CEOs while taking money from State institutions to advertise their police force, I really have to wonder what the *ethics* here even are. Even if many listeners don't agree with those, it starts building a way for it to *creep* into our thoughts and support the ideas that we haven't fully engaged with. It's one more way to support someone in the development of their conflicting views that we should both abolish the police but work from within the institution.

What about some of these individuals who are also hawking their books on Amazon? While they may not have the ability to control that it's sold there, why do they *choose* to advertise its availability there instead of finding places *more aligned* with their own views? And that's especially in a time where we all know what Amazon is doing: how they treat their workers individually, how they put immense efforts into busting up unions and organising efforts, and how they collectively penalise whole staff at warehouses (especially those trying to unionise) by letting them fall into disrepair and outright closing them.

And it's not just people advertising their own work on Amazon, we can say the same thing of the sponsorships that people *choose* to work with, like BetterHelp or Hello Fresh. These things have *actively hurt people*, even if they seem "nice."

BetterHelp definitely wants you to believe that it's really helpful for mental health, that it's great because they provide people access to therapists whenever they need since they're an online platform. But have you stopped to consider anything about their business model and how that *harms* and *undermines* our understanding of mental health treatment? How it exploits everyone in the process? How they manipulate users? How they mistreat their own therapists?

when advertisements are often front and center in their work? Are they subvertising at all *or* are they using the aesthetics of subvertising to maintain their own space?

Clearly, it's *still* functioning in building some degree of sales for the companies, otherwise they'd request that their advertisement be pulled from that show or just stop having those people do ads. Not only does it clearly function the way it's intended to, but it still serves a purpose in normalising whatever they're selling and the idea that advertisements are necessary. It creates a range of conflicting interests within people.

But we all need to eat, right? We need to make money somehow, right? So who cares where we get our money...

Right?

There has to be a point where you stop laughing about the advertisements that a company *you choose to work with* puts on your shit and the mixed messages you're sending because of the jokes you make about it. Subvertising can only go so far.

There has to be a point where you recognise that you're *tacitly* supporting companies and organisations that act *directly* in contradiction with your stated values, even when they claim to stand with you. Perhaps one of the best examples here are all the people who take sponsorships from a "carbon offsetting" subscription model called Wren, taking advantage of their audience's desire to do better for the environment and failing to engage with the psychology of how their program makes people *feel* like they're doing something when they actually aren't.

This is a common problem with "carbon off-setting." It's gimmicky manipulation, not a functional solution, and it's one that rakes in enough money on the backs of people *hoping* to do something good.

The critical engagement with the companies that these advertisements come from *isn't* happening, and it feels like one more example of people shrugging their shoulders and muttering the sa-

Of course, they'll never *admit* to having 'rising stars', but they do.

You can see it every single time the same handful of people are trotted out to talk about union campaigns, as if they did anything beyond observing them. You see it every time they put a focus on certain antifascist researchers, people who've often built a career on talking about what fascism *looks* like and ironically collaborating *with the police*, while they continue ignoring the people fighting antifascism *on the frontlines*. Ironically, some of them are people who will discuss the kinds of responsibility that people with large platforms have, only to completely dogpile teenagers.

They talk as if their experiences are the only ones, often extrapolating what happened to them to everyone else. These people *fail* to recognise how different their experiences are to everyone anywhere else, and that is to their own detriment and our own. Yet, they are held up as experts for us to trust.

When they do support some degree of internationalism, it is to support names that have already been made, people who already have established platforms. I wonder if they realise how difficult it is for people who experience life in places that are so commonly left out to even be heard, since it's more common for their voices to be drowned out. I wonder if they recognise that, for a lot of us, *they* are one of the few sources of information we have access to because our own have all shuttered.

And that information is mostly in English.

I have little issue with any of those people in particular who 'make it' and can talk about their experiences as widely as possible, as many of them do beautiful work and offer insights that are otherwise ignored. But it is beyond frustrating that organisations proclaiming to be anarchist require some degree of name recognition in order for them to acknowledge someone, meaning that *many* people are going to be left out.

These are supposed to be systems that we fight against, and yet the organisations purporting to support us perpetuate them instead.

Along with their production and sales strategies, I can't help feeling disappointed when I see *anarchist* publishing houses supporting the traditional models of publishing instead of actually doing the work to *break them down*. If that is your stated goal, if that is a belief you claim to hold, then *why aren't you doing it?* If you think there's a problem with the Big 5 Publishers, such as their attacks on projects like the Internet Archive or the constant development of imprints so that they can continue to profit off of right-wing filth while catering to everyone else, why do *you* support them and why do *you* encourage *your customers* to do the same *through you*?

The *strategies* and the *politics* don't match up.

One claim that I've seen is that it's *in self-defense* of our collective knowledge. What's published is decided *collectively* and *democratically* among the workers within the organisation, just as the decisions about what to sell in their stores are. But wait, it's important to know that it *supports* the author to sell those books, too! So that way those authors can keep going on with their very important work, sustained by the very people who water every radical idea down just enough to make it palatable for their own sales or use their authors to do so.

They're sustained by the very people who would prefer to see any form of revolution crushed beneath their boots before it ever got off the ground.

What difference is it if I buy a poorly written labour anthology of "untold stories," all of which were told before because they all come with a whole host of citations, from my local chain book store or an anarchist publishing house when it's *still* profiting Simon

& Schuster (which is still trying to merge with Penguin Random House to create an even smaller oligopoly of publishers)?

Why would an *anarchist* publishing house even want to support them rather than build a space for ourselves? It's beyond me.

At some point, though, those reasons all sound like *excuses*. It's the same vibe as someone mumbling "no ethical consumption under capitalism" and continuing to make intentionally harmful decisions despite all the knowledge they have about how *not* to.

Something has to give.

But this continues into other spaces where, rather than rely on donations (something difficult to come by because of how limited our collective resources are), they incorporate the strategies around including sponsorships and advertisements or grant funding.

Look, I get it. We have to exist somehow in this capitalist hellscape and make sure others can, too. If we want to develop spaces where people can create and share and build, we often find that we have to use those tools in order to get what we need. There's an element of coercion here, and it's important that we *don't forget that*.

It's during those times that a lot of radical media, and this does include anarchist media, engage in subvertising. They make funny jokes when doing outright ad-reads or prior to ad breaks, even though they fully acknowledge that people are likely to engage with the products being sold because of who is selling it and where this advertisement is located. It *feels* as if there is an element of disdain for the company whose product or service they're advertising, but that ultimately feels shallow.

It functions in that unclear middle ground: To what extent is this a joke? If they genuinely want to develop an anti-capitalist space or promote anti-capitalist values, how is that being done