

BA Communication Arts

Community Media: Citizenship, Advocacy, Ethics

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1 Community Media - Citizenship, Advocacy, Ethics

1.1 Introduction - Forms of Engagement

Alternative media and community media share a sense of enthusiasm for *engagement* and *participation* that presumes that each individual has a valuable role to play in the communication process, and who can be seen as active citizens contributing to a wider sense of community identity (Editors, 2012; Tehranian, 2002). At the core of community and alternative media, therefore, is an overriding sense of *citizenship* with attendant accomplishments that are wrought by active citizens who undertake meaningful actions within a community lifeworld, and who engage in meaningful collaborative deliberations that help to resolve contentious social issues that might otherwise lead to disruption and antagonism, rather than social solidarity (Merrifield, 2002). As William M. Sullivan suggests, the “key variable is the willingness and capacities of citizens to cooperate actively in the strengthening of their associational life” (Sullivan, 1995, p. 180). Which means that, as Kevin Howley notes, “to be effective [...] democratic communication demands active and engaged civic participation” (Howley, 2005, p. 19); and as Robert Putnam suggests, “citizenship is not a spectator sport” (Putnam, 2000, p. 341). Instead, citizenship is a form of social engagement that is grounded in an awareness of shared experience and community solidarity.¹ Alternative and community media, furthermore, operate a democratic model of participation in which citizens are regarded as embedded in “one of many (micro-) spheres relevant to daily life,” and hence are responsible for organising “different forms of deliberation” that allow them to “exert their rights to communicate” (Bailey, Cammaerts, & Carpenter, 2008, p. 24). Chris Atton quotes Jo Freeman, who maps out seven principles of democratic structuring that are essential to a functional and working citizenship. These include:

(1) the delegation of authority; (2) taking responsibility for the authority; (3) the distribution of authority; (4) the rotation of tasks; (5) the allocation of tasks along rational criteria; (6) the diffusion of information; and (7) equal access to resources (Atton, 2002, p. 101; Freeman, 1972-73, pp. 163-164).

Underpinning this sequence, moreover, is a process of deliberation and discussion that allows citizens to communicate and share ideas about what might constitute a *good life*, and what might constitute unwarranted intrusions into the private sphere. This is a model of “communicative

¹ For example, “The impression given by sections of the British media is that refugees are attracted by the welfare benefits in ‘soft touch’ Britain. But anecdotal evidence from some of those who have come from Holland, Sweden, and Norway suggest that living standards there are better than in the UK” (Harris, 2004, p. 24)

democracy” (Howley, 2010, p. 10) that relates to what Porta & Mattoni call a “deliberative democracy,” which

Refers to the decisional processes that occur under conditions of equality, inclusiveness and transparency, and where communicative process based on reason (the strength of a good argument) [that are] are able to transform individual preferences, leading to decisions oriented to the public good (Porta & Mattoni, 2013, p. 173).

In its ideal form participatory and deliberative citizenship is said to enable individuals and groups to contribute to the “creation of an open, transparent and collaborative environment for government-citizens-stakeholders interaction” (Ferro & Molinari, 2010, p. 2), in which, as Sherry Arnstein suggests, citizens are informed of their “rights, responsibilities, and options,” and who are able to distinguish the “important first step towards legitimate citizen participation.” Arnstein cautions, however, that

Too frequently the emphasis is placed on a one-way flow of information – from officials to citizens – with no channel provided for feedback and no power for negotiation. Under these conditions, particularly when information is provided at a late stage in planning, people have little opportunity to influence the program designed ‘for their benefit’. The most frequent tools used for such one-way communication are the news media, pamphlets, posters, and responses to inquires (Arnstein, 1969, p. 220).

A number of challenges, therefore, are manifest on the way to an “open, transparent and collaborative government” (Ferro & Molinari, 2010, p. 3). This includes examining how as a “society, we cannot simply design more civic tools, without offering participants more meaningful choices” (Stokes, 2013, p. 144), while at the same time bringing more “marginal actors” into the scope of “representative democracy.” In this way, as Porta and Mattoni attest, “social movements acquire instead more and more relevance in (participatory) conceptions of counter-democracy, as they contribute to the creation of critical public spheres” (Porta & Mattoni, 2013, p. 178).

This *critical public sphere* stresses how the preferences that individuals hold are expressed, and how the idea of the public good is oriented through argument and debate, and by the achievement of consensus. This means adopting “deliberative norms” that allow communities to work out “complex social problems” without resorting to conflict or deriving solutions from ideological, rather than pragmatic positions. As Porta and Mattoni suggests:

Many conflicts must be approached by reliance on the potential for mutual understanding that might develop in an open, high-quality debate. The notion of a common good is often recalled (e.g. water as a common good) as is democracy as a common good, which is constructed through communication, exchange of ideas, knowledge sharing (Porta & Mattoni, 2013, p. 173).

This means recognising the innate capability that people have for participation in “decision-making processes,” which as Kevin Howley suggests, is at risk from taking place in an “informed and deliberative fashion” only through “corporate-controlled and commercially sponsored media” (Howley, 2005, p. 18), in which only dominant forms of communication are privileged. According to Porta & Mattoni,

The value of discussion among ‘free and equal’ citizens is mirrored in the positive emphasis on diversity and inclusion, but also in the attention paid to the development of structured arenas for the exchange of ideas, with the experimentation of some rules that should allow for horizontal flows of communication and reciprocal listening (Porta & Mattoni, 2013, p. 173).

The idea of “good communication” is seen, then, as a way of maintaining and sustaining effective participatory models of civic engagement that are based on the “transformation of preferences” and the “achievement of satisfactory instances of participatory and deliberative democracy within social movement networks” (Porta & Mattoni, 2013, p. 175). Philip Selznick suggests that “particularism is diluted as the community expands,” and so as “more and more people are recognised” as members of the same community or “in-group,” then there is greater willingness to attenuate the experience of citizens from a “larger perspectives.” A perspective that “undercuts primordial ties of family, tribe, religion, and locality,” and which rejects “patriotism and nationalism” as the sole “expressions of the particularist impulse” (Selznick, 1995, p. 112). This suggests a route available is to move away from instrumental conceptions of identity and community, and instead investing in “plausible” accounts of “how to sustain the character and customs necessary for a civic regime” (Sullivan, 1995, p. 174). Therefore, and as Kevin Howley explains,

By treating community members as citizens, not as consumers, community media foster a greater awareness of the interdependent nature of social relations and shared environments both locally and globally (Howley, 2005, p. 268).

Emphasis is placed, furthermore, on media that is “citizen-controlled as opposed to state- or corporate-controlled” (Atton, 2002, p. 17), and which advocates “collaborative forms of political

involvement” that are able to “engage broader public interests,” and to go beyond the “more individualistic” and more “narrowly defined interests” of consumerist thinking. As Robert Putnam argues, “any political system needs to counterpoise moments for articulating grievances and moments for resolving differences” (Putnam, 2000, p. 45). If this process is left solely in the hands of the commercial or state communications institutions, then there will be a diminution of the networks and practices of communication that exist *in-situ* between people and communities, and instead there will be an “erecting [of] institutional and policy barriers to citizens access to, and control over, what were once viewed as local media institutions” (Wurtzler, 2003, p. 52). Hence, as a way of counteracting this retrenchment, *media advocacy* is posited as an operational mode that “encompasses a range of strategies aimed at reframing public debate of issues” (Holder & Treno, 1997, p. 190).

1.2 Media Advocacy

Media advocacy is the strategic use of community-based communicative resources by people and groups who are “seeking to advance a social or public policy initiative.” This can either be done through “specifically designed public information campaigns,” or by utilising media advocacy techniques that are aimed at increasing public attention to specific public issues, such as public health campaigns (Dreher, 2010). As Fontes suggests,

Media are usually used within a social movement to reflect the social movement back to itself, to identify and develop leadership as a means of communication between the members of a social movement, and to inform other sectors of society of the movement’s goals and activities (Fontes, 2010, p. 384).

According to Holder & Treno, moreover, this is “accomplished primarily by providing actual local data in support of news stories or creating news events that reporters and news crews can cover” (Holder & Treno, 1997, p. 190). The aim for supporters of media advocacy is to provide training in the techniques of communication management that would increase coverage of the issues that are generated by the voluntary groups involved (Trust, 2009). The promise for this increased coverage is based on a number of principles, starting with the idea that coverage of events and issues that people find meaningful will have more salience if it engenders a sense of “personal power or self-efficacy.” If community members do not believe that they can achieve change, or feel that they can have only limited affect on the performance of the services that they use, then there is a loss of potential in bringing change about (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Timebanking-UK, 2011). As Holder &

Treno suggest, the longer people persevere in the “face of difficulties,” the greater the sense of reciprocation and strengthened relationships they are able to build in the formation of their community. But unlike the formalised campaigns of health education, for example, “media advocacy generally is not used simply to change individual behaviour directly” (Holder & Treno, 1997, p. 190). Instead, individuals are offered behaviour changing awareness options that are based on both improved information about a subject, and a stronger sense of participation in the media attention that is given to a problem.² As Holder & Treno summarise,

In short, the primary theoretical relationship is that community pressure affects decision maker behaviour and this pressure is caused by clearly stated policy objectives, increased community awareness and active community support of the policy objectives (Holder & Treno, 1997, p. 190).

Media advocacy is therefore a mechanism for focussing public attention on intransigent and urgent problems through the use of non-professionally produced materials, literacy skills and the development in social capabilities. Once these skills are taught they can become embedded in both community life and the institutional repertoires that come from techniques of community development (Hughes, 2003). The question is, however, what happens once the funding that these skills development initiative cease, and people have to develop the independent habits that sustain significant social change? Media advocacy is therefore about *skills development*, advocacy for *communicative exposure*, and outcomes in terms of practical *awareness and capability*.

1.3 Policy Objectives

Coverage of community issues, as championed by local media advocates, has the aim of providing local data that informs debate within the press and other mainstream broadcasting and news institutions. In this sense media advocates seek to “provided local data which [becomes] news” (Holder & Treno, 1997, p. 192), and which contributes to the adoption of social policies that make a difference to standards of life for members of the community. The opinions of “community opinion leaders and gatekeepers,” in addition to raising general levels of concern and awareness across specific community groups, also implies that media advocates are working towards a “specific policy objective,” and that “awareness and support of this objective by the community and key decision

² Indeed, the Marmot Review of health inequalities in the UK argued that “effective local delivery requires effective participatory decision-making at local level. This can only happen by empowering individuals and local communities” (Marmot, 2010).

makers” is crucial if they are able to actually bring about these desired policy changes (Holder & Treno, 1997, p. 193). Where media advocacy differs from mainstream public relations and advertising, however, is the sense that the message that is developed and communicated is “embedded within or is the prevention project itself” (Holder & Treno, 1997, p. 196). This contrast is further illustrated when the costs of campaigns are considered, and the duration of the campaign is factored into the design and production process. So, on the one-hand, a professional public information campaign might purchase local media advertising, while a non-professional media advocacy campaign will make use of local news outlets. According to Holder & Treno,

Thus media advocacy, beyond initial training and early technical assistance, has no message to design, nor media costs and can be maintained by trained volunteers. Since it is not based upon a particular planned message, media advocacy focuses community attention to specific local problems and solutions or politics which can address local problems (Holder & Treno, 1997, p. 196).

Media advocates, therefore, seek to increase awareness of social issues within communities, but they do them “independent of the professional and planned information campaigns” (Holder & Treno, 1997, p. 197), and they achieve this by focussing on training of members of the community in “media advocacy techniques and approaches” that “can increase news events and material generated by local community members” (Holder & Treno, 1997, p. 198). These are techniques, literacies and capabilities that can be taught to people *in-situ* within their own community, and from the perspective that local news and communication resources are a legitimate way of advancing stories that are for the benefit of community life (Fenton, Metykova, Schlosberg, & Freedman, 2010). As Holder & Treno suggest,

Media advocacy can be most effective when real local stories or authentic community spokespeople (voices) form the news. True local news increases readership or audience and the validity of content (Holder & Treno, 1997, p. 198).

1.4 Citizen Participation

An essential foregrounding to this discussion is the model put forward by Sherry Arnstein and the “Ladders of Citizen Participation” (Arnstein, 1969; Ferro & Molinari, 2010, p. 3). Arnstein argues that inviting citizen’s opinions in the development of social policies is a “legitimate step toward their full participation” in a community’s own governance. However, Arnstein cautions that if consulting with members of a community is “not combined with other modes of participation,” then this part of the process of engagement will be a “sham since it offers no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas

will be taken into account.” As Arnstein suggests, the most “frequent methods used for consulting people are attitude surveys, neighbourhood meetings, and public hearings” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 221), but according to Arnstein, these forms of consultation only produce a restricted form of input that “remains just a window-dressing ritual.” In the bureaucratic and instrumental model of consultation and community engagement “people are primarily perceived as statistical abstractions, and participation is measured by how many come to meetings, take brochures home, or answer a questionnaire.”

Arnstein argues that citizens should not be observed simply as having “participated in participation,” in which power-holders have sought to create “evidence that they have gone through the required motions of involving ‘those people’” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 221). Instead, participation should be seen as a mode of engagement that foregrounds “*access, skills, motivation and representation*” (Ferro & Molinari, 2010, p. 12). Models of access have to look, therefore, at how resources are allocated in social situations that prevent or weaken participation, such as the digital divide for access to ICT and Internet enabled technologies (Ang, 2011; Bruns, 2003; Ferro & Molinari, 2010). General awareness of what these communicative technologies and practices are able to achieve, however, means that participants might have more opportunity to use and develop these techniques of production, and will be able to integrate them with their own routines and personal experiences. This is a form of integration that is dependent on having adequate skills and capability in the *use* and the *processes* by which communicative actions are realised. Training and education therefore play a vital role in promoting inclusion and extending the potential of *co-creation* between citizens and civic institutions of government. So in extending these motivation points, “representation becomes the main and only condition for enabling uptake” (Ferro & Molinari, 2010, p. 12), which is a result of these efforts to raise wider awareness. This implies, as Ferro & Molinari point out, the

Development of significantly new policy intelligence skills as well as the implementation of articulated public programmes that are capable to deal with the complexity and the heterogeneity present among actors involved in this process (citizens, businesses, government agencies, etc....) (Ferro & Molinari, 2010, p. 13).

Hence, if the aim is comprehensive self-governance, based on inclusion and collaboration, then there is a need to examine the “fusion of interests” that contribute to forms of “social theory” that judge these phenomenon through the “normative concern[s] for supporting social change” (Jankowski, 2003, p. 12). As Kevin Howley notes,

When it comes down to it, citizens' media facilitate issues of access, self-representation, participation, and the democratisation of mediated communication at the same time as they advance the principles of societal diversity, discursive multiplicity, and pluralistic democracy in significant ways (Howley, 2010, p. 38).

Furthermore, what once worked well as a model of communication and representation in the mass media age may no longer be fit or capable of fulfilling these changed expectations. As Dan Gillmor suggests,

In the emerging world of Internet-enabled communication, obfuscations and lies will work even less well than before. Activists and informed customers will catch the cheaters and hold them accountable (Gillmor, 2006, p. 68).

Indeed, the opportunity that is presented by these new forms of communication mean that some of the traditional forms of civic engagement and participation (i.e. meetings, pamphlets, etc.) may have "already crumbled or mutated beyond recognition." Thus the new forms of personalised and network-based models of communication signify a "significant step forward in the ability of citizens to share, annotate, publish, and remix digital information" (Delwiche & Henderson, 2013, p. 6). If, as Dan Gillmor suggests, even "blogs can be acts of civic engagement" (Gillmor, 2006, p. 139), then we are likely to see challenges, not only in the way that we think about the methods of communication, but also about the way that we practice and undertake politics. How, for example, are citizen's views understood and respected in an era of *crowdsourcing* and the aggregate contributions of social media communities (Cross, Liedtka, & Weiss, 2005)? In what way might democratic power be filtered if the forms of citizenship and community are less stable aggregates of opinion, rather than being fixed representations of community identity? How can the socially excluded be integrated into the political process, as Ferro & Molinari ask, by "means of a heterogeneous set of methods, tools and devices" (Ferro & Molinari, 2010, p. 13)? This shift also calls for new roles for citizens in terms of the contribution that they make to the wider social order, such as "The 'Activists', The 'Socialisers', The 'Connected', The 'Unplugged'" (Ferro & Molinari, 2010, p. 9). Benjamin Stokes suggests that reactions to this problem can be thought of as a process of *design*. A process in which the appropriate symbolic-manufacturing tools, such as electronic games, make it possible to help "online civics to become more conversational," because as Stokes argues, it is through conversation that we "develop the social ties to sustain participation." Moreover, it is "through conversation," according to Stokes, that we "reflect and build the skills and identities to become more effective in civic life" (Stokes, 2013, p. 146). The question, therefore, is what does this form of civic participation look like?

Is it a model that demands a concerted effort to produce “structures of participation” or, alternatively, to look at the need to develop “tools” (Stokes, 2013, p. 148) that will enable citizens to deliberate on their social problems on the basis of recognised “cognitive diversity”? A breadth of cognitive diversity, it might be added, that grasps that the “underlying societal problems are profoundly difficult” (Stokes, 2013, p. 149).

1.5 Intersection Points

Community media, then, is set at an intersection point that encompasses issues of citizenship, media advocacy and democratic activism. Kevin Howley suggests that,

Central to these discussions is a commitment to the movement for communicative democracy, or popular struggles to achieve greater correspondence between the democratic principles of freedom of speech and expression, the political economy of the media industries, and the content and character of public communication (Howley, 2005, p. 222).

When local orientations are thrown into this mix, and the context of participation is expressed as a set of “likeminded efforts to reform existing media institutions and practices,” that are otherwise unresponsive, then the challenge is to “construct more responsive, responsible, and egalitarian systems,” by using the tools and practices of community media. These tools and practices are, according to Howley, “deeply implicated in an emerging global struggle for communicative democracy” (Howley, 2005, p. 259), and as a result are able to “enable local communities to articulate relations of solidarity and significance through a variety of communicative forms and practices” (Howley, 2010, p. 9). This means entering into public discourse and

Thereby supporting popular participation in decision-making processes and promoting a greater sense of individual and collective agency in directing the community’s growth and development (Howley, 2010, p. 16).

This reorientation shifts civic engagement from the top-down models of production and distribution, and instead favours a “decentralised approach to communication that supports dialogue and exchange” (Howley, 2010, p. 16).

These new forms of “citizenship and civic engagement,” moreover, are “enacted through community media” (Howley, 2010, p. 19), and are thus sites where “social subjects negotiate and renegotiate social definitions, their identities, cultures, and lifestyles, on the personal as well as on the collective level.” Hence, according to Howley, “citizens have to enact their citizenship on a day-to-day basis, through their participation in everyday political practice” (Howley, 2010, p. 37), and against a terrain of claims and counter-claims for the right to occupy those public spaces. “From this perspective,” according to Howley, “citizenship is conceived as a lived multidimensional source of empowerment” (Howley, 2010, p. 38). In democratic societies access to knowledge and information corresponds with the ability of citizens to engage in debate and discussion through open forums and symbolic spaces in which knowledge can be shared. The emphasis is on the way that community media contributes to the defence of civic and political rights, and offers protection through monitoring of institutional abuse and political misalignment (Collins, 2010). According to Howley, it’s possible to examine community and activist-based media to “detect the importance of ‘citizenship,’ ‘pluralism,’ ‘the rule of law,’ and ‘the common good’ to the theory and practice of civil society” (Howley, 2010, p. 72), and therefore, “what makes community media distinctive is the opportunity that they offer various elements of civil society to ‘talk back; to the large institutions of public life” (Howley, 2010, p. 73). As Henderson suggests, the “ability to speak freely is fundamental to the human condition” (Henderson, 2013, p. 278), but without the mechanisms to discuss and negotiate these views through open and transparent media, then there can be little hope that conflicts can be resolved and democratic accountability can be realised. And without full investment in the capabilities of the people involved and touched by these democratic initiatives, the “debilitating effects of political economic systems that cater to well-heeled special interests” will be maintained. As such, only by “enhancing the capacity of local communities to organise themselves and participate in political process” (Howley, 2010, p. 35) will the inequities of civic participation be addressed. As Howley explains,

By providing civil society groups – such as environmental activists, cultural associations, peace and social justice advocates, and youth groups – with the technical infrastructure and training to use communication technologies to communicate with wider publics, community media represents a unique intermediary institution that emerges from, supports, and regenerates civil society. This last point is critical, in as much as it indicates that mediating structures have value for local populations precisely because they reflect the community’s desires to create institutions and cultivate practice that are relevant and accountable to the local community (Howley, 2010, p. 73).

1.6 Civic Engagement

So, in adopting participatory forms of civic engagement and decision making, community media is able to encourage a sense of belonging *to*, and responsibility *for*, the aims of the community as identified in civic groups. Participation is said to promote a sense of belonging to the wider community, and encourages a sense of sociability through collaboration and shared meaningful practices. Either working individually, or by cultivating a deliberative approach to civic issues, community media is thus able to “nurture social networks within and between communities, and, potentially at least, encourage innovative ways to think about the practice of democracy” (Howley, 2010, p. 73). Robert Putnam suggests that the “recent flurry of interest in ‘civic journalism’ could be one strand to this strategy.” However, Putnam also suggests that civic communications media should not be interpreted as a “substitute for genuine grassroots participation, but as a goad and soapbox for such participation” (Putnam, 2000, p. 410). Moreover, civic activism and community media advocacy are founded on the belief that “ordinary citizens should be structurally enabled and indeed encouraged to function as producers as well as consumers” of civic media information services. Therefore, by providing citizens with access to the technologies of production and training in its use and distribution, then efforts to provide services and channels of communication via a “geographically dispersed, locally originated, non-profit model for media,” ensures that the goal of empowering local communities, and giving a “voice to citizens” can be achieved (Wurtzler, 2003, p. 41). As Benjamin Stokes notes,

Facing this dilemma, organisations must reflect on how to recombine their content, reward structures and choices with a new goal: to make their values emerge as natural consequences of problem-solving. Of course, traditional community organising also resolves around problem-solving, by listening to communities and empowering them to act. For the first time, civic media can begin to communicate this experientially: training communities to spread feedback loops to experience their perspective, not just their voices. Such efforts are inherently imperfect, but over time may become preferred strategies for communicating worldviews through interactivity (Stokes, 2013, p. 150).

1.7 Ethics and Community Solidarity

At the centre of the community media approach, as it is led *by* and engaged *in* by conscientious activists and advocates, is a set of moral and ethical sensibilities and stances that promote a version of good communal life through social solidarity, empathy and collective responsibilities. These forms of cultural collectivism and compassion are based around ideas of communitarian engagement and social cohesion (Maynard-Lewis, 2008). As David Weinberger notes, “being a creature who cares

about others is a precondition for being moral” (Weinberger, 2002, p. 183). We live in a world, it seems, that is continuously set to test the limits of individual and collective tolerance that we have toward our fellow community members (and those beyond), and which is sometimes shaped by the jarring patterns of interaction that are generated and found in our relationships with *others*. Undeniably, and according to Weinberger, as we are *caring*, so we are also *moral* (Weinberger, 2002, p. 195). However, as Weinberger also notes

Morality arises only because we share a world with others about whom we care. If we shared a world with creatures about whom we cared nothing, we could do whatever we wanted without feeling any moral constraints (Weinberger, 2002, p. 190).

Community media, then, in addition to being a social *milieu* that is shaped by economic, material, and symbolic resources, can be regarded as a site of *moral* and *ethical* concern as well. If the objective of the community media advocate is to furnish participants and community members with practical tools of communication, media production and social distribution, then consideration also has to be given to what the impact might be for those involved, particularly in the way that these resources may challenge established notions of social value, the social relationships that are often asserted by dominant groups about moral worth, and the resulting explanations that are circulated that explain, or justify, regimes of advantage and disadvantage. There is a need, therefore, as Kevin Howley suggests, for community media activists to articulate the “common concerns and express feelings of fellowship and solidarity” (Howley, 2005, p. 199). The question that arises, however, is on what basis this is initiated, and to what extent it can be practically articulated?

1.8 Social Differences

Communities are replete with social differences, indeed notions of the social are primarily defined by how these differences are symbolically communicated, reproduced and managed. Zygmunt Bauman argues that “not every difference has the same value, and some lifestyles and forms of community are ethically more praiseworthy than others.” The question, according to Bauman, is how do we find out which of these instance of social difference has primacy and which does not? For as Bauman states, “if both sides are not given equal rights to present their arguments and prove their points”, then it will not be possible to consider and assess the claims of each (Bauman, 2011, p. 93). Invisibility from civic and ethical debate is the critical challenge that must be overcome by all marginalised and disadvantaged social groups and actors. Is this then simply a question of practicality and access to resources? Are there embedded principles that govern community life that

are independent of the negotiations that people in their lifeworlds make in order to ensure they have access to resources? David Weinberger suggests that

Our default philosophy thinks that morality is really about principles, not analogies. To think about morality, we're supposed to find a principle and then apply it. Morality, we've been taught, consists of a set of rules. Follow the rights ones and you're a good person. Get them wrong or don't follow them and you're a naughty, bad, wicked, or evil person (Weinberger, 2002, p. 188).

A pragmatic and social constructivist approach to community life, however, suggests that the forms of moral reasoning that we have inherited often don't hold-up to critical examination when we consider in *what way*, and *how* these principles are negotiated in practice. According to Weinberger:

Rather than first finding the principles we should uphold, we decided which principles to accept by consulting our pre-existing moral sense. If someone proposes a principle that says what's right is wrong and what's wrong is right, we'll reject the principle. Principles come late to the party. They are ways of expressing and making sense of our moral intuitions (Weinberger, 2002, p. 190).

This is a tactical view of ethical and moral debate that distinguishes what it means to link representations with access to resources. It is all very well linking assertions of social value with ideals of moral and ethical concern, but if the politics and policies of debate and mutual engagement are absent, then these principled assertions will remain untested and unchallenged. Structuralist and positivist approaches to community life often prefigure the *processes, ideals and structures of control* that are embedded in the technologies of governance, and for which academic observers seek to map and represent. However, rather than considering the "ethical competence" of individuals in practice, as they seek to meet the challenges of social life, the typical response is often to seek out the strategic, tactical, and process-led procedures of social governance that controls, regulates, shapes and masters the authority that some have over others, either in the form of "nations, organisation or locality." As Ellie Rennie points out, alternative community media models are therefore a way of thinking about social interaction that is an "enabling category, rather than one of policy/government standing over and against the individual and civil society." As Rennie goes on to suggest, in taking this stance

Its application is broad, referring also to mechanisms such as the ethical competence of the individual as well as interactions and interdependencies of various actors – public, private, and voluntary (Rennie, 2006, p. 8).

What is called for, then, is a “realist conception of the nature of value,” as Janna Thompson suggests. This would be a pragmatic view that regards “ethical collectivism” as compatible with, and understood in regard to, the “claims that constructive discourse is the means we have for discovering the ethical truths of the world.” Thomson takes the view that “some aspects of reality can only be discovered collectively – at least by creatures like us” (Thompson, 1998, p. 3). Ethical collectivism, however, depends on “individuals having the ability to make judgements for themselves about meta-ethical claims, including the statements made by ethical collectivists” (Thompson, 1998, p. 3). This mutualised view of ethical deliberation and reasoning is achieved, moreover, in a different manner to “empirical reasoning,” because in the collectivist model the “nature of ethical judgments and the way they are justified motivate ethical collectivism to reject monology” (Thompson, 1998, p. 3). What is sought, instead, is a sense of *plausibility* in the different accounts of social disagreement. So, rather than seeking fixed certainties, the collectivist attempts to manage and resolve disagreements by identifying those issues that can be “resolved by construction and which cannot” (Thompson, 1998, p. 6). As Thompson goes on to assert, “ethical collectivism encourages respect for differences and along with that, a modesty about our own opinions” (Thompson, 1998, p. 7). Which means that, as a consequence, “ethical dissonance seems to be a permanent fixture of our ethical lives” (Thompson, 1998, p. 21). Consensus, in this model, is the primary operational mode that functions as an “alternative to majoritarian decision-making.” The deliberation process that is used to come to a consensus is said to be able to counter the majoritarian forces that repress or alienate minorities. Moreover, as Porta & Mattoni suggest, “consensual decision-making, instead, increases the awareness of collective contribution to decisions,” and therefore facilitates “dialogue between different points of views.” A dialogue that will help communities to work on what unites them, and therefore, “constructing a shared vision while respecting diversity” (Porta & Mattoni, 2013, p. 174).

1.9 Practical Agents

Anyone who acts as a “conscientious ethical agent,” therefore, would normally take into account the “criticisms and opinions of others,” so that they are able to come to an understanding of how their own views fit against the views of others. This is not a process that is achieved abstractly, the “result of impeccable reasoning,” but is instead achieved through negotiation and the assessment of the views that are presented by others. The practically engaged social agent, therefore, “thinks his judgement

is objective because it seems to him that he has transcended the merely personal, and has arrived at a conclusion that should be accepted by all rational agents” (Thompson, 1998, p. 62). But as Thompson also attests,

An individual’s ethical reasoning, properly appreciated, is not capable of being impartial. It is not capable of achieving the kind of objectivity that would entitle him to make such a claim (Thompson, 1998, p. 62).

Ethical judgements, therefore, come about in the situations that they are related to and are born in; so comprehending and accounting for these situations is essential. Situations limit and define the freedom of action that agents perceive that they have, and therefore, as Kevin Howley suggests, by

Foregrounding the fundamental role communication and culture play in reproducing and maintaining community relations, this perspective informs contemporary theories of community that conceptualise these ubiquitous yet enigmatic social formations in terms of ‘processes of social solidarity, material processes of production and consumption, law making and symbolic processes of collective experience and cultural meaning (Howley, 2010, p. 20).

Ultimately, this is an ethical process of deliberation through which symbolic resources are tied with practical resources, on the basis of justifications and rationalisation of moral difference and the advancement of some members of the community above others. As Howley states, “symbolic relations of power constitute a critical site for democratic struggle” (Howley, 2010, p. 20), with community media organisations playing a role in the construction and development of democratic and ethical debate, which are geared towards social solidarity through a “series of acts of mutual choice” (Howley, 2010, p. 24). Community media, moreover, adopts and reinforces the “virtues of tolerance and humility,” while recognising that as individuals none of us is “in a position to lay down the moral law.” This collectivist form of ethical deliberation suggest that agents are not likely to encounter an objective *truth* as a result of their deliberations, but might instead, feel justified in acknowledging the views of others because they are “not the same as her own.” The collectivist ethical agent, therefore, will not try to “bully people into accepting what she feels is right,” but instead the ethical agent recognises that by acting in a community they will be able to makes sense of the proposition that their “ability to be a good moral judge essentially depends on others” (Thompson, 1998, p. 142).

1.10 Consensus Building

As well as being an effective general value, organising deliberation by consensus is moreover an essential principle in the development of internal and external communities (Wissenbach, 2007). By investing in the process of training and an awareness of the principles of consensus building practices, community media may be able to offer a response to the demands of community life that do not get answered by the state or by commercial interests (Murkens, 2009). The public mode of operation that takes a systematic approach to civic engagement is dependent on the sharing of organisational knowledge and the volunteering of time and resources by individual contributors. So, as Benjamin Stokes suggests, this process “begins by appropriately valuing participants’ contributions” (Stokes, 2013, p. 150), and relies on the practices that are otherwise obscured by instrumental forms of measurement and calculation. The tacit negotiations that take place between agents, the slipped-meanings, the misunderstandings and the diffusion of different knowledge resources, suggests that different models of recognition and expectation have to be found to understand and situate these practices. This pragmatic view acknowledges the widespread challenges of ethical deliberation that are articulated in local community media groups, and through the forms of “autonomous tradition,” that “resonates with an anti-authoritarian emphasis and an egalitarian view.” In deliberative and ethically oriented communities, according to Porta & Mattoni, group life also “assumes a prefigurative value,” on the basis that an “alternative, and more pragmatic, view” is able to spread into “new (even transnational) networks.” These are networks in which “consensual decision-making is accompanied especially by an emphasis on diversity and the need to respect it, but also improve mutual understanding through good communication” (Porta & Mattoni, 2013, p. 174). Good communication forms and practices are ones that are able to organise “coordinated dissent, protest, or direct action in authoritarian [societies]” as a “collective action problem.” So it is by addressing these collective problems that the “dilemma of persuading individuals to contribute to the production of a public good (in this case a more democratic order)” is articulated, on the basis that associated community members “cannot reasonably be excluded even if they do not participate themselves” (Faris & Meier, 2013, p. 199). Furthermore, according to Faris & Meier:

The ability to organise, innovate tactically, and adapt rapidly is key in [community] activism. It remains to be seen whether repressive regimes can alter their hierarchical organisational structure to make more effective use of changing technologies or whether this pressure to adapt will force authoritarian states to become more democratic over time (Faris & Meier, 2013, p. 204).

1.11 Open Expression Issues

Therefore, community media “constitute prime areas for contending interests, values, and viewpoints – in pursuits of public recognition, legitimacy, and strategic aims” (Ndela, 2010, p. 88). According to Howley, “internally democratic structure[s]” that are “based on open expression and dialogue,” are able to “permit both material and discursive space for lateral communication,” which in turn is itself capable of “enabling individual and collective action to challenge the wider socio-political structure” (Howley, 2010, p. 103). As Nkosi Martin Ndela suggests, however, “in authoritarian societies, or during periods of conflict, there is an inclination by the powerful sectors towards controlling the communicative spaces” (Ndela, 2010, p. 88). Thus, as Faris & Meier state, “repressive regimes are not getting dumber,” indeed, “they are becoming more sophisticated in leveraging social media networks to further their own ends” (Faris & Meier, 2013, p. 203). Community media’s ethical priority, therefore, is to encourage more accountable and representative process of organisation and deliberation.

Therefore, community media promotes the use of communication tools that have the capability of “lowering the costs of group-formation,” while ensuring that barriers to “group-joining, and information-sharing” are minimal. Community media networks and practices are designed, moreover, to “make it easier for members of such groups to agree upon ideas and courses of action, and dividing the labour accordingly.” Furthermore, by “lowering the cost of contribution, they make it more likely that individuals will participate in one of the many ways afforded by the technologies themselves” (Faris & Meier, 2013, p. 199), and by lowering the barriers to contribution, it is possible to make deliberation more inclusive. Community media’s ethical orientation facilitate, therefore, the mode of “culture-debating” that challenges the mass media function of “culture consuming,” and prioritises the ethical and civic role of public debate over the economic and commercial role of mass media (Howley, 2010, p. 32). Social responsibility and community service are stressed as *ends in themselves*, as they make it possible to maintain a focus on the uses of communication media that are *self-defined* in relation to the local communities “social, cultural, economic, and political goals” (Goodwin, 2010, p. 106). Hence, there is a clear emphasis in descriptions of community media of the need to “enhance public participation in communication policy debates” (Howley, 2010, p. 279), that serve the needs of localised communities, and the need to advance the cause of economic and social justice. As Stefania Milan summarises:

Community media's attempts to influence policy makers can be considered as part of the current mobilisation for communications justice. Specifically, community media activists ground their advocacy interventions in their daily practices of grassroots communication and derive legitimacy as social actors in policy arenas from their 'applied' expertise (Milan, 2010, p. 308).

Social justice and political recognition is therefore founded on a sense of *entitlement* that different social actors possess which enables them to participate in the discussions and deliberations that form social policy and social discourse. But as Zygmunt Bauman suggests, it does not follow that these forms of recognition are necessarily the basis for an ethical entitlement to equality and social justice. Community media activists generally underpin their efforts with the belief that "all have equal right to social esteem," and that "all values are equal and every difference is worth cultivating by the very fact of being a difference." Equal opportunities to participation and the struggle for recognition in communication media are subsequently "squeezed into the framework of cultural self-determination and self-realisation," that underpins models of community media advocacy. If, however, these conceptions are just left, and there is no attention given to the antagonisms that these differences generate, then the potential for social division is instead heightened. Bauman suggests, however, that

When located in the problematics of social justice [...] demands for recognition and their consequent political actions become a catalyst for encounters, dialogue and negotiations, which can (though they don't have to) eventually lead to integration of a higher order – widening, not concealing the range of ethical community (Bauman, 2011, p. 92).

Where there is less discussion about the role of community media, however, is the extent to which ethical considerations are given to cultural differences, and the way that those differences maintained in social regimes are accounted for. As Bauman asks, are differences in identity or economic situation inherently important, or are they merely a mask for human qualities that are best managed elsewhere, i.e. in the entitlement to human rights? Bauman questions the extent to which difference is seen as an inherent social value, and draws attention to the task of identifying the social and cultural qualities that unravel as one set of differences are examined separately from the "mass of interhuman differences." Bauman suggests that it is "first necessary to find 'the difference that makes a difference,' and then to identify the forms of "entitlement" that are attached to their social expression. It is unjust, according to Bauman, that

Some individuals and groups are denied the status of rightful partners in social interactions, simply on the basis of institutionalised schemes of cultural values, in the building of which they did not participate on equal terms with others, and which discredit qualities which distinguish them or are attributed to them (Bauman, 2011, p. 91).

Besides, the management of these differences can be undertaken in a number of different ways. Firstly, there can be calls for members of a community to respect others differences for their own sake, “regardless of who they are and what they do.” This posits *human rights*, according to Bauman, as a “blank cheque” because there is little regard for the “merits and defects of the differences under construction,” and because there is no “a priori agreement to the way of life” that is under discussion. Instead, rather than viewing differences as inalienable, Bauman suggests that there should be a recognition that such rights are “nothing more and nothing less than an invention to a dialogue.” What is being sought through this dialogue is simply that “an agreement on their recognition can be reached” (Bauman, 2011, p. 94). As Bauman explains:

One can’t be sure of one’s personal rights unless one is able to exercise political rights and make that ability count in the law-making process; and the prospects for making that ability count will be dim to say the least unless the assets (economic and social) personally commanded and protected by personal rights are large enough to be reckoned with in the calculations of the powers that be (Bauman, 2007, p. 62).

Therefore, those people that do not have social rights will find that their political rights are “useless and unworthy of their attention,” because, as Bauman explains, “political rights are necessary to set social rights in place,” and “social rights are indispensable to keep political rights in operation” (Bauman, 2007, p. 66). Neither can exist without the other, each needs the other to survive, and this survival can only be achieved jointly.

1.12 Summary – Discussions and Review

To summarise, while traditional media studies approaches have accounted for community, alternative and collaborative media as the product of a social order, the pragmatic and rhizomic framework has the potential to account for community and collaborative media as a civic, ethical and political (i.e. tactical) lifeworld. The challenge in making this shift, from one vocabulary to another, is in accommodating the practical functions of organisation and management that support and enable civic and ethical regimes of practice to emerge. There is no ultimate goal to be aimed for in promoting and articulating community and collaborative media participation, other than the

immediate practical concerns of intersubjective engagement and accomplishment. This does not mean that a sense of social justice is excluded from the nexus of possibilities that one might want to see enacted through community and collaborative media. Rather, this shift to the ethical and the tactical simply puts it in its proper position and recognises that it is only through *continuous conversation* and the *redescription* of the *vocabularies* and *symbolic frames* that it will be possible to support change. In undertaking these practical observations, it is necessary to introduce further concepts of orientation that help to frame the practice of agents acting in their lifeworlds. Reference is made to Michael Oakeshott's concepts of *Universitas* and *Societas* (Oakeshott, 1975), allowing for a further differentiation of the vocabularies that are associated with community and collaborative media. The following sections, therefore, report on the practical implication of working in the field to find evidence of these practices and discourses. The starting point is a review of symbolic interactionism as a form of ethnographic researcher, which is followed by an account of time that was spent working with community media activists in everyday social situations.

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