

BA Communication Arts

Why Study Community Media

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1 Why Study Community Media

1.1 Introduction - Why Study Community Media?

Community media is a broad and encompassing term that describes a varied set of social phenomenon and media practices that are related to a number of civic issues. On the one hand, community media is said to encompass media, and media production communities, that are *local*, and that are founded in *grassroots* activism (Carpentier, Lie, & Servaes, 2003). In this instance community media is conceived as a set of social practices that function as a *counterweight* to ideologically founded, corporate, national and mainstream media interests. However, as Kevin Howley suggests, “community media is a notoriously vague concept” (Howley, 2010, p. 5), and so these definitions are not easy to affix and affirm. Those that are able to participate in forms of community media, moreover, are said to do so because they have a deep sense of disillusion with conventional media practice and content, and as a result, want to act-out their commitment to the values of free expression and participatory democracy (McLeod et al., 1996). It is through the ‘have-a-go’ ethic of community media that volunteers are said to seek-out and fulfil an ethical and political rebalancing of the inequities of public communication and representation. This rebalancing, it’s argued, is achieved by encouraging, supporting and enacting alternative media routines, which in the process, raise the profile and presence of alternative voices that are otherwise marginalised in the everyday practices of community life (Milan, 2008). In this way community media is said to be able to augment community relations and foster community solidarity. Community media, therefore, is not just concerned with its own sustainable operation within the more general symbolic, economic and political media landscape, but is also a sustained and measurable act of *cultural resistance*. As Bailey, Cammaerts, & Carpenter suggest, community media is concerned with a “wider set of notions and practices, such as participation by communities in their self-controlled media,” while at the same time “producing content for the communities they serve” (Bailey, Cammaerts, & Carpenter, 2008, p. 54). As Kevin Howley explains,

By community media, [we] refer to grassroots or locally oriented media access initiatives predicated on a profound sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream media form and content, dedicated to the principles of free expression and participatory democracy, and committed to enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity (Howley, 2005, p. 2).

Community media, therefore, is noticeably positioned as an independent set of social practices that are separate from the state and the market, and by which communities support the “articulation of alternative media as part of civil society” (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 20).

Chris Atton suggests that community media can be understood by its commitments in three ways. Firstly, by the “validation of a marginalised cultural activity;” secondly, in the “formation of community;” and finally, in regarding “publishing as political action” (Atton, 2002, p. 56). There are many “umbrella terms” (Order, 2012, p. 65) and “terms in vogue” (Jankowski, 2003, p. 7) that encompass community media’s scope and activities, such as: alternative media, citizen’s media, radical alternative media, democratic media, emancipatory media, independent media, participatory media, citizen’s journalism, social movement media, community radio, fanzines, and so on. Perhaps the most commonplace and recognised characteristic of community media, however, is the desire to “provide news and information relevant to the needs of [...] community members,” thus engaging these members in “public discussion” while contributing to their “social and political ‘empowerment’” (Jankowski, 2003, p. 8). On the one hand these community media volunteers and activists emphasise the value of citizenship, while on the other hand they “emphasise the progressive nature of the participants and the organisational structure” that they are integral to (Order, 2012, p. 68). Perhaps the most radical gesture of community media, however, is that,

The *ownership and control* of community media is often shared by local residents, municipal government and community-based organisations. [So] the *content* is locally oriented and produced (Jankowski, 2003, p. 8).

The Community Media Association encapsulates this attitude in their mission statement, describing their approach as a representative organisation for the United Kingdom community media sector, noting that,

Community Media is rooted in an ethos of inclusivity and universal access to opportunity, and that it is sourced and produced by organisations, by individuals and by informal groups, whether characterised by geography, interest, ethnicity, age, gender or social background (CMA, 2012).

Community media, then, involves non-professionals and volunteers in the production and the distribution of content, either through open-access broadcast media, such as community radio or community television, through alternative forms of publishing, such as newspapers and local magazines, and increasingly, through the internet by using social media platforms and communication technologies (Dagron, 2006; Deuze, 2006; Ewart, 2000). Moreover, community media most often takes the form of non-commercial work, with funding coming from sponsorship, limited advertising, government subsidies or direct fundraising activities (Pearson, Kingsbury, & Fox, 2013; Radcliffe, 2012; J. Tacchi, 2000). What defines community media groups above all else, however, is the commitment that “these media are ‘of, by and for’ members of the community.” Community media is therefore

generally concerned with, and committed to, “some form of community action or development[,] contributing, in a phrase, to social change” (Jankowski, 2003, p. 8).

Community media, furthermore, is regarded as a medium for “cultural and creative expression, community development and entertainment” (CMA, 2012), because in recognising the “production, practice and content” of community media, it is possible to “foster greater understanding among communities, including those most marginalised and support peace, tolerance, democracy and development” (CMA, 2012). Nicholas Jankowski has noted that “five general themes dominate much of the research undertaken with regard to community media: democratic process, cultural identity, the concept of community, and an action perspective to communication” (Jankowski, 2003, p. 11). This discussion will therefore attempt to summarise and present an overview of these debates and discussions, however, this debate will be widened to include (and even challenge) views and explanations of community media that have themselves become the standard accounts of community media development (Myers, 2011). This discussion will introduce concepts, therefore, that are associated with *pragmatic analysis of lived experience*, as it is tied with a social constructivist and a pragmatist evaluation of the explanations that are associated with the study of community media as outlined in the previous section. This discussion, however, is itself circled by a range of wider and related issues that also consider how community media might be evaluated with regard to:

- Media, democratic processes and the concept of the public sphere (Couldry & Dreher, 2007; Lax, 2009; van Vuuren, 2006).
- Cultural identity and expression through local, transcultural and fragmented forms of community.
- Globalisation and cultural marginality.
- The dominance of virtual community utopianism as shaped by emerging media and communication technologies (Bimber, 1998; Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004; Kennedy, Naaman, Ahern, Nair, & Rattenbury, 2007).
- How collaborative and creative communities prefigure participation.
- How social capital and media literacies are shaped by reflexive experience (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Opubor, 2000; Price-Davies & Tacchi, 2001; Vuuren, 2001).

According to Ellie Rennie “community media is distinguished by its aspirations and motivations as much as by its methods and structures” (Rennie, 2006, p. 4). Therefore, any account of community media has to look at different ways that content is produce and circulated (or shared), and what the

expectations are of the producers and the collaborators who want to engage with audiences, their families, their friends, their social groups, and the myriad of other networks of association that bring people together around culturally shared and mediated experiences. Rennie points out that “community media holds a promise of a different way of doing things – not just in terms of aesthetic qualities and production practices, but in terms of organisation” (Rennie, 2006, p. 16). So in this sense, “a conception of community media that is generative rather than oppositional” (Rennie, 2006, p. 11), is likely to be more productive for the observer who wants to make sense of what is being communicated or experienced. However, for a pragmatic observer this will involve holding back on judgments about the form, standards and quality of any symbolic products or texts that are associated with community media, because, as Rennie argues,

Community media is not an easy object of study. If you have seen or heard much community media content then this will not surprise you – it defies generalisation, is unconventional at its best, and ambitious in what it sets out to achieve. But it is also persistent; community media has proven again and again it is here to stay and it demands to be taken seriously (Rennie, 2006, p. 12).

1.2 Community Resourcefulness

A simple starting point in accounting for community media, then, might be to question the way that community media accommodates and negotiates the rules and repertoires of mainstream and commercial media, and the extent to which community media groups otherwise seek to define themselves in *opposition* to the normative values of commercial and mainstream culture. Meanings, competences and capabilities are disputed by community media practitioners and volunteers every bit as much as they are guarded by mainstream, professionalised media specialists, it’s just that they are contested in different ways and for different reasons. As Kevin Howley points out, community media tends to “underscore the creativity, pragmatism, and resourcefulness of local populations in their struggle to control media production and distribution” (Howley, 2005, p. 3), offering instead, an alternative set of self-defined concepts as to what might be in the interests of these differing social groups acting within overlapping communities, and who are themselves engaging in different types of media production and civic activity. As Ellie Rennie suggests, “community media offers an alternative idea of the public interest and this sets it apart from public service broadcasting” and commercial media (Rennie, 2006, p. 10), and thereby holds out the hope, as Kevin Howley suggests, that “another media is possible” (Howley, 2010, p. 284). According to Howley “community media is a significant, if largely overlooked, feature of contemporary media culture,” and as such “warrants scholarly attention” (Howley, 2010, p. 2). On the one hand it is possible to pay attention to community media

on its own terms, and to view the “hopes and contradictions” of a “neglected aspect of media history;” while on the other hand, it is equally possible to use community media as a way to “help us to understand the media at large” (Rennie, 2006, p. 5), and to contextualise both community and mediated experiences more generally. Thus, in whatever way scholars choose to scrutinise community media it represents, as Howley states, “a significant, but largely untapped site of analysis into the dynamics of media culture” (Howley, 2005, p. 4). Community media is a phenomenon, according to Howley, that offers “distinctive contexts” through which media scholars are able to test different “theoretical propositions,” and draw different “analytical insights to the everyday lived experience of their local communities” (Howley, 2005, p. 269). However, the study of community media suffers, consequently, from “assumptions of marginality” (Rennie, 2006, p. 16), which means that in terms of studies and scholarship, “community media is a surprisingly underrepresented area within media studies.” As Ellie Rennie explains,

Public service and commercial broadcasting have both been studied as a part of the public sphere, as the promotion and enactment of citizenship and in relation to the laws and policies of government. This is not the case with community media; its vision has not been clearly articulated or its contradictions exposed” (Rennie, 2006, p. 6).

Part of the reason for this is because the terms of debate are often disruptive, leaving observers to wonder if the discussions about alternative media, community media, citizen’s media, and so on, are really about the same set of social phenomena? Community media isn’t easy to clearly define or to account for, it has many different procedures of formal and informal regulation, many different motivating criteria for volunteers, and it has numerous procedures of production that generally function through *ad hoc* and makeshift practices (Buckley, 2001; J. A. Tacchi, 2002). While state regulated broadcasting and commercial publishing are more often than not managed and controlled through centralised mechanisms of administration and policy enforcement, community media is more often characterised by configurations that are “more random, messy, and ‘natural,’” and thus, emblematic of the emergent social “configurations of the community media sphere” (Rennie, 2006, p. 25). So, while community media is valued in principle for its role in reflecting a diversity of opinion, different cultural values, different languages and different models of community life, it does this against a backdrop of weak and indeterminate “evaluative tools” that ensures that the “value” and “social impact” that community media achieves often remains an “intangible notion” (Order, 2012, p. 64). It is commonplace enough to make this claim, but community media really is a “highly contested terrain” in which “dominant themes are transient” and hard to pin down (Order, 2012, p. 65).

1.3 New Media Challenges

In more recent times the challenges presented by digital and online media have opened opportunities for the study of community media to be looked at afresh (Fernback, 2007). The potential for new ideas, new policy approaches, and innovation in the forms and practices of media engagement, have been noticeably refreshed, particularly as media has shifted from the broadcast model to the network model, complete with dynamic and interactive forms of socialisation and decentralisation. Community media has usually been regarded by scholars as a useful area of study that has significant potential when wishing to challenge ideas about the role of media in the *public sphere*, however, the “efforts to ‘democratise’ the media,” that have characterised much of the community media sectors ambitions within the public sphere, have placed constraints on the way that community media is perceived (Wallace, 2008). Any study that attempts to challenge the “domination of the corporate media and the economic and political media structures that [have] favoured some interests over the others” (Rennie, 2006, p. 17) will always gain some purchase in academic circles, but as Ellie Rennie explains,

It does not make sense to ignore community media when the starting point of media studies is the way in which the media represents our own – or others’ – reality, which in turn influences our status and the repercussions flowing from our actions (symbolic power). Ordinary people’s efforts to put themselves within the media frame may be only a small contribution to the mediascape compared with the large amount of material generated by the media industry. However, this alone should not make it marginal as an object of study (Rennie, 2006, p. 20).

Therefore, by questioning the role and the function of community media as a *viscerally lived social experience*, and noting the *difference* that it makes to the agents and activists engaged in media production practices and organisations, it may be possible to come to an understanding of the individual *stances* and the *perspectives* that are experienced by the people who volunteer for, and get involved with community media. What might be gained by these volunteers and participants, as they engage in these alternative forms of media, is a basic question that ought to be asked frequently in community media studies? How adequate are the forms of organisation of community media to the many and varied tasks that volunteers seek to undertake? What are the models of engagement and participation that are characteristic of community media, and how can they influence policy debates? In what way might community media “disrupt the rise of transnational media conglomerates and provide an alternative to the mainstream media” (Rennie, 2006, p. 7)? Furthermore, to what extent is community media able to resist the prevailing governmental and economic orthodoxies and forms of social administration, and to what extent can community media be accounted for as a symbolic place of negotiation that allows for and facilitates expressions of identity?

These, and many questions like them, are frequently put forward in the hope that community media might take-on an aura of cohesive social change, however, and in so doing, these questions may have helped maintain the distance that studies of community media have experienced from mainstream media studies opinion. This is because the association with “advocacy efforts to democratise the media” are practically oriented, and can fly in the face of theoretically and textually oriented forms of research. Rennie describes how many of the earliest studies of community media depicted an ethos of *opposition* that “kept community media out of touch with developments in media studies at large” (Rennie, 2006, p. 9). Traditional forms of media studies can be characterised by a search for a cohesive and structured theoretical grounding that can unmistakably give a role in *history* to media technologies and systems. What is confounding, however, is that community media is clearly far from a cohesive force, as it is too often dysfunctional and resistant to strategic development, either economically, politically or culturally. Dominant principles in media studies, moreover, tend to look for cohesive theoretical groundings in the “social, cultural, and political dynamics” of community life, but as Kevin Howley explains, this overlooks the “fundamental but paradoxical relationship between communicative forms and practices and popular conceptions and articulations of community” (Howley, 2005, p. 10).

The challenge, then, is to disregard the structuring principles found in hypothetically cohesive approaches to the study of community media, what Jankowski calls the “construction of theoretically-grounded models for understanding the place of community media in society” (Jankowski, 2003, p. 5). Instead, the task is to contemplate and observe the rapidly changing, fluid and dynamic experiences of people who are situated in community media lifeworlds. Kevin Howley’s challenge to media scholars is to put aside concept-driven appreciations of “local cultural production,” and affirmations of “popular forms of resistance” (Howley, 2005, p. 3), and instead to seek out the “wider contours of our rapidly changing communication environment” (Howley, 2005, p. 5). Howley argues that this changing communication environment defines the “fundamental, yet enigmatic relationship between communication and community: a relationship that stirs the popular imagination and stimulates academic debate” (Howley, 2005, p. 258). Hence, understanding contemporary media culture and community life as a dynamic lifeworld, constituted by expressions of participation and practice (or accomplishment), offer observers of community media the chance to guide further investigation

by focusing on the local orientation of the participants and the meanings that they draw from their experience (Forde, Meadows, & Foxwell, 2003; Kanayama, 2007). As Howley explains,

We can better appreciate the central role communication plays in distinguishing communities by containing difference within unity while simultaneously forging a shared collective identity. Furthermore, each of the case studies demonstrates how locally oriented, participatory media systems are fashioned out of strategic alliances operating under particular historical and cultural conditions (Howley, 2005, p. 259).

Furthermore, Rennie believes that community media may have already made an “unrecognised” set of contributions to the wider debate about “alternative models of organisation and information distribution” (Rennie, 2006, p. 37), because in the “flow and exchange of information between the educated and uneducated,” as Bruce Girard argues, community media acts as a “conduit for the flow and exchange between new knowledge resources and traditional knowledge systems, in which both are able to express their full potential.” This exchange of information is said to be transcultural and international, it crosses boundaries and borders, it crosses languages and literacies, and is, according to Girard, a “force for community cohesion” (Girard, 2003, p. 9). Community media groups, for example, are often allocated public funding with the expectation that they are pursuant to social change, either by bringing new skills to a community, for example, or by “helping community members to participate in the knowledge economy” (Rennie, 2006, p. 37). This is a model of community media that recognises wider political and social ambitions that are often built-in to the principles and the forms of community media practice. Practices that are clearly different from the (arguably) *out-dated routines* that are inherent in more mainstream broadcast industries, in which the effective passivity of audiences is generally equated with arrangements of participation. As Rennie asks, “what does it mean to implement communications policies that involve the unknowable and ‘messy’ domain of community” (Rennie, 2006, p. 7)? Especially as those communities might themselves have high expectations about the participation and involvement of non-traditional and marginalised people?

1.4 Notions of Utility

Context is therefore a necessary factor in understanding the function and the role that community media organisations play. Simon Order suggests that it is possible to “examine the concept of value” (Order, 2012, p. 62) in these differing contexts, since a clearer understanding of the sense of utility that a community media organisation has, means that it can promote its own function more clearly. As has already been stated, however, producers and participants in community media are often

keen to offer access to media resources and facilities to those who eschew notions of utility as they are “marginalised or demonised by mainstream media” (Order, 2012, p. 66). The question that arises, therefore, is not *what* the objectives are that a social media group should aspire to meet, but rather, *who* gets to decide on the objectives (Order, 2012, p. 65)? The participation of amateurs, activists and ordinary citizens in community media is highly regarded, but as Rennie explains, a note of caution should be expressed, because it is clear also that “community media is not always intended to be an alternative to the mainstream or alternative in its values,” and that descriptions and analysis of community media need also to “encompass its conservative, ordinary, and mundane elements and not just that which is radical or alternative” (Rennie, 2006, p. 9).

One such area of challenge to the radical agenda of community media is found in forms of citizen-generated media and grassroots journalism. Dan Gillmor describes this as a “global conversation that is growing in strength, complexity, and power” (Gillmor, 2006, p. xv) based on the notion that

Tomorrow’s news reporting and production will be more of a conversation, or a seminar. The lines will blur between producers and consumers, changing the role of both in ways we’re only beginning to grasp now (Gillmor, 2006, p. xxiv).

This does not mean, by itself, that grassroots journalism is aiming to dissolve or confront the prevailing order of community life. In fact, community media and grassroots journalism may do more to support and enhance the traditional roles of local “knowledge-brokers” who are already participating in community conversations. But as Bruce Girard notes, it is often more important to a community that local media and programming is “trusted” at times of general change, so that they can help, as professionals do now by acting as gatekeepers to “shape larger conversations – and to provide context.” This is an approach to community media that recognises that the tools inherited from established forms of media will not be entirely “consigned to history” (Gillmor, 2006, p. xxv), but may well become, instead, a varied set of *core values* that are more widely shared. As technology is changing, so is the need for people to adopt and gather new practical tools that will facilitate their interpersonal, their local, their regional, their national, and their international conversations. As Dan Gillmor suggests, this gives rise to the “realisation that putting the tools of [media] creation into millions of hands could lead to an unprecedented community” (Gillmor, 2006, p. 14). So it is how these forms of *community-through-conversation* are fostered that attention must be given (Kautsky & Widholm, 2008).

The question that arises, however, is what will be the *differences* that are noted that enable participants and observers of community media to recognise the *shifts* and the *redefinitions* concomitant with existing media and communication routines, and the social and cultural practices that are allied with them? Is this a question of redrawing and changing the theoretical standards and models that form the basis of accounts of community media? Is it a burden on policy institutions to explain how the *experiences* and the *practices* that are represented in community media might undermine the existing infrastructure of civic participation and mainstream media markets? Is it a question of establishing a wider picture of the community media landscape, as was suggested earlier, or assessing how the “individual characteristics and community media use” (Jankowski, 2003, p. 9) are shifting between boundaries that have previously been designated and affixed (Cottle, 2000)? Chris Atton reports how Steve Buckley [at the time of the interview the director of the Community Media Association], responded to this perceived change in the role of community, radical and alternative media. According to Buckley there is a “‘dual strategy of co-option and marginalisation’ that has led to the de-radicalisation of the community media sector.” So, instead of presenting society with an aggressive agenda of transformation and challenge, Buckley now “looks for co-operation and networking across the entire range of alternative media, erasing the polarities of advocacy/activism and local community/global struggles” (Atton, 2002, p. 142). What was once conceptualised as a *radical political approach* is now more likely, and perhaps unavoidably, to be perceived as a *service network* in which the role of the citizen is enacted largely as a private matter. This social process, what Zygmunt Bauman calls *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2012), heralds the primacy of the individual, while discharging the idea that there is any social benefit in collective structures that promise collective emancipation. This is a social model that is resolutely concerned with the empowerment of individuals as consumers, rather than being about the consequences of acting as members of a community. Simon Order describes how “Clemencia Rodriguez’s preference is for the term ‘citizen’s media’” rather than community media, for she believes that “value and empowerment lies less in a battle with the mainstream and more in the power that comes from quotidian citizen participation in restating and reshaping of participant’s cultural codes.” According to Order, “Rodriguez believed that citizenship is not a passive legal right but something to be enacted on a daily basis via participation in media production” (Order, 2012, p. 67).¹

¹ Rodriguez describes how “Corporate broadcasting and print existed in a universe of advertisers, target audiences, and a continuous commodification of leisure and information. In a separate sphere, social movements and media activists appropriated media technologies, divorced them from their corporate originators, and re-invented technology’s uses in ways not intended by the designers” (Rodriguez, Ferron, & Shamas, 2014).

1.5 Communities or Publics?

And so, in examining the scope of community media, time should therefore be given to the role of the citizen and the sphere in which they operate. Usually this is defined in terms of the Habermasian public sphere (Jurgen Habermas, 1989; Jürgen Habermas, 1994), but crucial disparities can be identified which suggest that this concept has a number of significant limitations, because community media goes beyond the formal classifications that are often offered in the language of the public sphere - classifications such as: the state and the market; for-profit or not-for-profit; democratic and corporate, and so on (Barlow, 1988). Usually, media studies reflects on the 'scarcity' of resources in relation to community media, and the sense of "marginal priority" (Rennie, 2006, p. 5) that community media is given when spectrum allocations are made by different national governments (Chambers, 2003). Often, however, when community media is discussed, it is done so as a practical matter of utility, and as a way to encourage "subtle and context-sensitive political change" (Rennie, 2006, p. 7). As Rennie explains:

Democracy – meaning to rule in the interests of the people – is also a central concept in community media studies as access and participation have been pursued out of a belief that people have a right to directly represent themselves within the media. This has an impact upon how power – symbolic and political – is circulated (Rennie, 2006, p. 6).

Hence community media promotes *access* and *participation* as a way of challenging otherwise closed-off professional discourses, in which the control of the apparatus of communication and the mediated messages that emerge from that apparatus, is limited to a few narrow voices drawn from limited set of social circles (Markus, 1987). The primary instrument of community media, therefore, is to celebrate the role of the *volunteer* in the practices of community media production, because *anti-professionalism* and *amateurism* often form the distinctive core of community media practice (Trust, 2012; Wenger, 1998). And while this might be occasionally frustrating, it does point towards a form of innovation that challenges the "patterns in work and consumption" (Rennie, 2006, p. 11) that are otherwise closed to people in their every-day lifeworlds. So, community media is rooted in the aspirations and values of "free speech, the public interest, access, and social change," all of which are political concerns generated in wider debates of community life, and therefore are "deeply rooted in democracy's intellectual traditions," and which are "often at odds with the dominant system" (Rennie, 2006, p. 16). As Rennie clarifies

Community and alternative media can be seen as an articulation of citizenship, when citizenship is seen as the day-to-day endeavour to renegotiate and construct new levels of democracy and equality. Central to this conception of alternative media is an idea of citizenship that is inclusive of pluralism and yet able to account for different subject positions and social relations (Rennie, 2006, p. 21).

As an alternative to mainstream media, then, community media is sometimes thought capable of “doing things which mass media systems cannot do” (P. M. Lewis, 1984, p. 1). According to Peter Lewis, alternative media differs from the mainstream media in the following ways: either by the motive or purpose of its practices, because community media often rejects commercial motives and assertions that people are best served in relation to economic ends rather than human, cultural or educational ends; either by community media’s reliance on alternative sources of funding, such as state or municipal grants that reject advertising, and commercial models that would leave them subject to the marketplace; either by regulatory privilege, through which community media is overseen by agencies different from those who are typically concerned with the regulation of media economies; either because community media prioritises autonomous and local organisational structures, which provide scope for more pronounced local remits; and finally, by adopting a critical stance to established professional practices by encouraging amateur volunteers whose primary concern is the experience that they gain from participation, and the control that they exercise by being involved and acknowledged for their involvement. This means that community media generally applies different criteria for the development of programming, articles and news features, as there is a desire to express a range of alternative points of views that are not necessarily complementary to what is more widely available in commercial and mainstream media (Walker, 1997).

1.6 Social Needs

As a consequence, the relationship with the audience, and its perceived desires, may be very different from commercial and public service media audiences. The use of technology and media platforms may also be very different from established broadcasting and commercial operations, leading to a diffused view of the make-up of the audiences for community media, along the lines of age, gender, urban or rural identity, and so on (Mhlanga, 2011). As communities of identity and interest, rather than marketing oriented demographics of purchasing potential. There is less emphasis in community media, therefore, on the so-called *needs of the consumer* and more emphasis instead on *social needs*, such as community solidarity, cultural representation and civic education, particularly as these are tied with the aims that the community itself wishes to achieve (Cankaya, Güney, & Köksalan, 2008). Consequently, any attempt to observe and account for these practices also needs a different approach to research methodologies, as the picture that is generated through scholarly or critical analysis cannot be entirely accounted for by traditional media effects and discourse models

(P. Lewis, 1984; Order, 2012, p. 69).² As Simon Order summarise, “Lewis’s guidelines are a telling indication that the field is far from unified in its objectives” (Order, 2012, p. 70), and therefore the definitions that are put forward must view community media in its “widest sense” and take account of the “massive array of activities and outcomes” that it offers, and which means, as Rennie suggests, that “not all of which are small or non-profit” (Rennie, 2006, p. 22).

For example, the Community Media Association asserts that community media groups and networks should:

- Promote the right to communicate, foster freedom of expression and freedom to form and confront opinions, assist the free flow of information and opinions, encourage creative expression, contribute to the democratic process and to a pluralist society.
- Provide access to training, production and distribution facilities, encourage creative talent and foster local traditions and culture, provide services for the benefit, entertainment, education, engagement and development of the wider community.
- Seek to have their ownership representative of local geographically recognisable communities or of communities of common interest.
- Be editorially independent of government, commercial interests, religious institutions and political parties.
- Honestly inform an audience on the basis of information drawn from various sources, and provide a right of reply to any person or organisation who is or may be subject to serious misrepresentation.
- Ensure a right of access to production facilities and platforms for minority and marginalised groups, in order to promote and protect cultural diversity.
- Be established as not-for-profit organisations, which reinvest any surplus and ensure their independence by being financed from a variety of sources.
- Recognise and respect the contribution of volunteers, affirm the right of paid workers to join appropriate trade unions and provide equally satisfactory working conditions for all.
- Operate management, programming and employment practices that oppose discrimination, promote equality, and are open and accountable to all.
- Promote and foster improved communication and partnership working in the community media sector, building networks at all levels to further develop good practice and strengthen communities.” (CMA, 2012).

² According to Robert Prus “Little attention has been given to the study of the ways in which people engage the media as sponsors, marketers, media sales representatives, producers, writers, directors, artists, and so forth. As a result, and despite a great deal of discourse and debate about media and its implications for all manner of mind control, social scientists have a great deal to learn (and reconsider) at a very fundamental level, about the ways in which people experience (construct, present, encounter) the media” (Prus, 1999, p. 81).

Furthermore, Hermida & Thurman suggests (in relation to community news), this set of wide-ranging principles means that community media cannot simply be defined by a “rather static core set of news practices,” but should instead be thought of as a set of “journalistic practices at its margins” (Hermida & Thurman, 2007, p. 3). These are communicative practices that use technologies and forms of production that are independent of mass and commercial industries, and are given increased scope by transformations in the technical affordances of things like smartphones (Lewis, 2008).

1.7 Citizens Media

The prevalence of citizen news that is captured on portable media devices by non-professionals is nothing new, whether it is the beating of Rodney King, or the more recent riots in Baltimore following the killing of Freddie Gray.³ What is giving a greater sense of urgency, however, is the expectation that these forms of citizen media are now part of the *information landscape* that people use to “manage their lives.” A landscape that is formed through an opening-out of the type of people who can be “part of those conversations” (Gillmor, 2006, p. 45). As Dan Gillmor suggests,

First, outsiders of all kinds can probe more deeply into newsmakers’ business affairs. They can disseminate what they learn more widely and more quickly. And it’s never been easier to organise like-minded people to support, or denounce, a person or cause. The communications-enabled grassroots is a formidable truth squad (Gillmor, 2006, p. 46).

And while Gillmor would like to see broad agreement maintained on what the standards and values are that citizen-journalists should abide by, he raises the point that while the hazards in departing from the established legal and regulatory systems of traditional media and news publishing are considerable, in the end the “advantages outweigh the risks” (Gillmor, 2006, p. 122). The question of *who* and *how* citizen journalists are responsible for the content that they produce is still largely administered under the legal and regulatory frameworks of the mass-media age, even though, as Gillmor points out, the internet and the “use of camera-equipped mobile devices by just about everyone” means that we must “assume that people are constantly taking pictures in public places” (Gillmor, 2006, p. 48), and so these previously restricted practices are now widespread. Gillmor, moreover, would like to see citizen reporting cover broad features of public life, but accepts that this is not a simple process, and that many questions remain about how endorsements are given and

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/16/baltimore-police-prepare-freddie-gray-trial-verdict-protests>

defamations dealt with? This model sees the reporting of community news, either online or in alternative and independent publications, as a “street corner” in which communities occupy a virtual space to which other members of the community are invited. Thus community reporting takes on a dynamic aspect and “becomes far more communal” (Halavais, 2013, p. 112).

1.8 Access to Resources

Historically the challenge of community media in the UK has been to provide access to the established resources of broadcasting, in both radio and television. Downmunt notes that,

In the UK much of the struggle to satisfy this need has been focused over the last twenty years on ‘access’ television, which seeks to give a voice to sections of society that have been ignored or misrepresented on television (Downmunt, 1993, p. 12).

The access model of community media is generally defined as groups and organisations that are run on a not-for-profit basis, and who provide community members with opportunities to participate in the process of producing and disseminating broadcast media content (Everitt, 2003; Ofcom, 2009). These access projects are wide and varied and have many different governance and management approaches, in addition to many different ways to identify and respond to their audiences (Ofcom, 2013, 2016; Scifo, 2012). This presents problems for policy makers who generally look for normative criteria for comparing and assessing the impact of different elements of cultural and communications policy. Generally regulators and funders look to measure the *effect* that different community media groups have on different social policy issues (Beresford, 2002). But because community media, as was noted earlier, is so often disruptive, it means that any fixed criteria are difficult to establish, as the “boundaries get challenged all the time” (Rennie, 2006, p. 3). As Rennie explains,

The issue that community media practitioners and policy makers face is whether or not structures exist that can steer community media in positive directions and whether that is necessary at all (Rennie, 2006, p. 24).

This is clearly a recipe for confusion, as policy objectives often start from the principle that communities lack skills and capabilities for ‘successful’ communication, and that these communities need expert guidance from external social policy advocates, in the form of education and training (Johnson, 2007). And it is these same professional experts who are brought in to help guide these groups to strategically develop services and objectives that operate in alignment with wider governmental social policy initiatives. Tension is found, however, in the relationship between these competing models of development (Foxwell, Ewart, Forde, & Meadows, 2008; Ocwich, 2006). One model sees communities as in need of support and guidance, and the other, alternative model, posits that people operating in these communities are more than “capable of participating in, and defining,

their society in a meaningful way through their shared collective interests” (Rennie, 2006, p. 25).

However, as Rennie pertinently asks,

Is community media capable of improving the world in which we live? Does it matter? Should we devote resources to it, and if we do, what will be the long-term consequences? Once it is established, is it capable of serving all interests or should it just cater to those who decide to get involved? (Rennie, 2006, p. 25).

Furthermore, and rather than trying to model community media as embedded in a watertight concept of community, it might be better to ask how notions of community are deployed and used to “reach certain cultural and political ends” (Rennie, 2006, p. 28)? Community is too often presented, according to Rennie, as a “space beyond politics, ‘a kind of natural, extra-political zone of human relations’” (Rennie, 2006, p. 40), but as with all social phenomenon it is possible to examine the traces and the footprints that elucidate the mechanisms and relationships through which the ideals and culture of community media are accomplished (Cammaerts, 2009). Seeing community media *in context* and *in practice*, then, is the priority here, but to what extent does this fit with all other forms of media and communications policy? For as Rennie attests, community media is “the product of social and political choices, not of accident or impersonal economic or technological forces alone” (Rennie, 2006, p. 41).

1.9 Patterns of Representation

What then, are the options that communities have in terms of their representation and their civic status? How might these options be enacted in order to overcome existing patterns of representation, rather than simply follow them? What are the theoretical frameworks that are needed to foster and support discussion about these differences? What happens to audiences when they engage with community media and why is it different from when they engage with commercial and mainstream media? How do audiences identify with communities that they are familiar with? How aware are communities about the way that media in these forms are produced? How central or marginal is community media when it comes to making effective public policy, and to what extent is access and participation encouraged? What are the limits of these policy approaches and to what extent do they need to be “carefully controlled and predetermined [as] cultural objectives?” (Rennie, 2006, p. 114). Furthermore, what is the status of local content and how can its operational and symbolic meaningfulness be evaluated in the production practices that form the basis for these embedded services (Bosch, 2005)? Should it be access and participation that “drives local content as much as

need?" (Rennie, 2006, p. 121). Should access be afforded greater value in public policy, so that it becomes more than a "concession to what is left over rather than a positively defined means to diversity" (Rennie, 2006, p. 129)? Governance of community media, therefore, is of considerable importance, as the licencing and regulation of community media operations, and particularly broadcasting, is compounded by community media's fit within the "third sector," which itself is aligned with charities and other voluntary initiatives (Hallett & Wilson, 2009). In placing community media in this alignment, it is at least possible for issues of access and participation to gain traction within these debates. The question that arises, however, is to what extent this model of media, that encourages direct participation in media production by members of those communities, is able to remain unchallenged by resistant commercial and political forces (Kleinstauber & Sonnenberg, 1990)? How *does* community media, as a result, gain recognition that it is part of a legitimate civic and political process (Carpentier et al., 2003)?

1.10 Access Media

Access, as Rennie describes, has become emblematic of a "new type of politics" (Rennie, 2006, p. 167) that aims to keep discussions about these community platforms open and part of a "guaranteed pathway to the development of new ideas," and is itself, therefore, a vehicle for the "reinvigoration of political life" (Rennie, 2006, p. 168). Moreover, community media has always sought to articulate the existence of "multiple publics" (Rennie, 2006, p. 173) in its rationales, and as such is able to legitimise its approach as one that can "stimulate innovation" through the intra- and extra-cultural representations that it produces. Community media therefore asks to be valued for "what it can achieve, rather than negatively, by what it opposes" (Rennie, 2006, p. 176), and is hence a better fit with models of the public interest that are presently met only through "monopoly or oligopoly public service broadcasters" (Rennie, 2006, p. 177). Community media, moreover, has to innovate in the way that it connects with its audiences and the way that platforms of communication are used. As Henry Jenkins notes,

The spreading of media texts helps us to articulate who we are, bolster our personal and professional relationships, strengthen our relationships with one another, and build community and awareness around the subjects we care about. And the sharing of media across cultural boundaries increases the opportunity to listen to other perspectives and to develop empathy outside our own (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 304).

The challenge for observers of community and collaborative media, subsequently, is to examine the “motivations behind and the ways in which local populations come to make use of various technologies – radio, television, print, and computer networks – for purposes of community communication” (Howley, 2005, p. 2). Forms of community communication that are autonomous, and which operate on the basis of promoting widespread participation in civic activities, and which maintain and promote relations within a community and between different communities (Ewart, 2000). Community media has the potential to be regarded as a rich field of study that enables observers and participants to recognise how democratic practices can be undertaken on a widely held basis, and from within local communities, rather than being imposed from the outside by non-aligned commercial or political interests. As Kevin Howley describes,

Community media are popular and strategic interventions into contemporary media culture committed to the democratisation of media structures, forms and practices. Popular in that these initiatives are responses to the felt need of local populations to create systems that are relevant to their everyday lives; strategic in that these efforts are purposeful assertions of collective identity and local autonomy in the era marked by the unprecedented concentration of media ownership on the local and national levels and by the attendant proliferation of transnational media flows (Howley, 2005, p. 2).

The challenge of building and sustaining communities in a world of increased globalisation, community fragmentation and restrictions in market diversity are considerable, and there are many ways that community media might be seen as a contradictory response to these issues, but as Howley suggests, community media might also serve as “an implicit, cross cultural, and timeless understanding of the profound linkages between community cohesion, social integration, and communicative forms and practice” (Howley, 2005, p. 7). Therefore, thinking about community media as part of a wider movement of social action and “struggle for ‘communicative democracy’” (Howley, 2005, p. 2) means that it’s possible to reflect on how

Community-oriented media provide an exceptional vehicle to move beyond cultural imperialism without losing sight of the asymmetrical relationship between transnational media corporations and local populations, and to interrogate the contradictory tendencies and countervailing trajectories associated with globalisation (Howley, 2005, p. 33).

The principle of access in these circumstances, therefore, is an uninhibited way of challenging established forms of exclusivity and otherwise alienating forms of media communication. By promoting practice and participation, different conceptions of community life are themselves being promoted (Cammaerts, 2009). Therefore, recognising the *dynamic of exclusion* that structures many aspects of community life is a useful starting point in forging alternative orientations and articulations of the

lived experience of many. These articulations may even help to suggest and work out other, alternative ways of life that might be possible?⁴ This is not a question, however, as Rennie suggest, of community media's innate "ambitions to change wider patterns of ownership and control," but rather because community media is "made to exist within overall policy arrangements that are antithetical to its design" (Rennie, 2006, p. 167).

For community media still serves a significant purpose, which is to overcome and counteract a "climate of political apathy and social alienation that confounds a sense of belonging in local communities" (Howley, 2005, p. 35). In this respect, then, attention should not solely be given to the messages that are carried, but instead attention should be paid to the thoughts, feelings and expressions of the people who are articulating, making, sharing and accomplishing them (Ke, 2000). Besides, what are the forms of cultural appropriation that community media producers undertake that allow them to work in parallel, and apart from the dominant and mainstream conventions of commercial or public service media? What are the routines of *bricolage* that community media participants articulate and accomplish as they invest in narrative and representational forms of identity and self-expression (Shi, 2005)? As Kevin Howley suggests:

Like textual poachers (e.g. Jenkins, 1992), community media producers glean bits and pieces of media culture and invest this material with their own social experience in attempts to make sense of their lives. And, like the fan culture commonly associated with textual poaching, community media represents distinctive cultural practices that create and nourish affective relations (Howley, 2005, p. 34).

Community media, therefore, is embedded in lived experience in very different ways to mass media. Community media plays a different role and demonstrates some very distinctive cultural ideas that are separate from the dominant conceptions of traditional cultural identities. The histories that accompany community media are very different, and the perspectives that are gained from the production processes, as they are driven by lived-experiences in embedded and situated life-worlds, are also very different. By adopting a view that community media groups and associations are them-

⁴ "Articulation, as I am using it here, is associated primarily with the work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1986). By way of explaining the concept of articulation, Hall notes two distinct but related definitions of the world. In the first instance, articulation refers to speaking or enunciating. The second meaning, common in the United Kingdom but less so in the United States, refers to the act of joining or combining separate elements" (Howley, 2010, p. 64).

selves “important sites of confrontation and exchange between the culture industries and local audiences” (Howley, 2005, p. 35), and also between agents and participants in these lifeworlds, it is possible to build-up an complementary picture of the role and function of community media. A view that pushes aside the dismissive attitude of technical superiority, or professional competence, or economic dynamism, that is often presumed to be the norm by insiders of mainstream media. As Kevin Howley explains,

All too often, the work of ‘amateurs’ is marked as esoteric, frivolous, and apolitical. Rarely do commercial or public service broadcasters even acknowledge the existence of community media organisations. More often than not, when community media is acknowledged, it is invariably depicted as a refuge for outsider artist, hatemongers, pornographers, and the radical fringe: a perception some community media producers enthusiastically embrace (Howley, 2005, p. 36).

The concentration of media ownership, and the undermining of civic routines of autonomous responsibility, that accompany many forms of globalised commercial communication, therefore, are challenged by ideas of self-governance and democratic accountability. Community media is often celebrated for its “‘emancipatory potential’ (Enzensberger, 2000; Howley, 2010, p. 4), and for its potential to signify a fundamental reorientation of the “social, political, and cultural mediations that take place within and through communicative forms and practices.” But this reorientation is only possible because community media represents a “strategic alliances between social, cultural, and political groups mounting and organising resistances to the hegemony of dominant media institutions and practices” (Howley, 2005, p. 33).

1.11 Enacted Identities

This *dominant ideology* or *hegemonic* account of community media emphasises the strategic purpose of community life, but it does not easily explain the *interpersonal* and *intersubjective* operations of lived and community experience. Community media advocates, on the whole, therefore, seek to develop

Resource for local social service agencies, political activists, and other whose missions, methods, and objectives are antithetical to existing power structures, community media publicise oppositional messages that are either distorted by or altogether omitted from mainstream media coverage (Howley, 2005, p. 34).

In this way, attention should also be given to the way that people use these resources to build and maintain their community relationships and enact their identities within their lifeworlds. For it’s always possible to propose an *instead*, as Kevin Howley suggests, and in a twist to the well-known and

earlier cited McLuhanite adage, we should perhaps consider that *instead* “the mediators are the message” (Howley, 2005, p. 12). Hence, giving community media volunteers and participants their due prominence in academic and policy discussions. This prominence can be achieved on the basis that the enactments, thoughts and feeling of what they actually *do* when they are producing community media content, volunteering in community media services, and forming community media-based relationships, is meaningful, vital and matters.

1.12 Summary – Community Media Issues

To summarise then, community media is considered a “significant intervention into the structural inequalities and power imbalances of contemporary media systems,” (Howley, 2010, p. 4), and as such, community media can be seen to enable local groups of people that want to attempt to correct these imbalances through their own access to the systems of communication (Hallett & Hintz, 2010). Community media therefore

Encompasses a range of community-based activities intended to supplement, challenge, or change the operating principles, structures, financing, and cultural forms and practices associated with dominant media (Howley, 2010, p. 2).

Community media, however, has to be considered within the context that it operates, and the interplays and negotiations that are made by agents acting in real-life community media groups, as they seek to shape and inform their “disparate efforts” (Howley, 2010, p. 2). As observers of community media the challenge is to consider and evaluate the “value and importance of community media in an era of global communication” (Howley, 2010, p. 3), while providing rich and context-bound information about what it means to be a *participant*, an *activist*, a *citizen* and a *producer* of alternative and community content. This means that studies of community media have to

Capture the multidimensional character of community media through an examination of a geographically diverse field of countervailing structures, practices, and orientations to dominant media (Howley, 2010, p. 3).

Notably, this means considering in what way it is possible to interrogate how the repertoires and the forms of communicative practice that are undertaken using these technologies are exchanged, accomplished and are understood by the people involved? This means more than simply hypothesising community media as an *outcome* or *effect* of “community structures, social and economic relations, and political processes” (Howley, 2010, p. 3). Instead, the need is for a procedure that can raise

questions about the *collective organisation* of community media groups, the types of *localised structures* that they are based around, and the types of *behaviours* and *performances* that participants and volunteers undertake. As Howley explains,

As an object of study, then, community media serve as an exceptional vehicle to explore the way local populations create media texts, practices, and institutions to serve their distinctive needs and interests (Howley, 2010, p. 3).

As an *exceptional vehicle*, then, community media throws-up a number of elucidating and contrasting views of the way that mainstream, corporate and professionalised media operates, particularly with their hierarchical and executive management structures, their consumerist conceptions of audiences, and an antithetical disregard for voluntary association, participation, democratic decision making, and selective regard for the rights and role of citizens who wish to otherwise maintain a *deliberative* and *contemplative* presence within the pluralist mass communication and civic systems of modern societies. Community media, therefore, offers the opportunity for reinvigorated democratic and civic conversations about issues of concern to local communities themselves. These opportunities can be studied either by looking at texts, their content, and the way that these texts are received (i.e. the traditional media studies methodology); or, attention can instead be given to the *lived experience* and *accomplishments* of people living in communities and networks, as practitioners, and as self-identified community members. The outcome of these studies, furthermore, will add to otherwise “underdeveloped areas of media history” (Howley, 2010, p. 6), and therefore provide an opportunity for further study and evaluation of the potential developments of media and communication technology at a time of significant change and social reorientation, particularly as this focuses on ideas of access, participation and agency.

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