

Lecture Week Ten: DIY Participation

**1 Introduction - Concepts**

- The concept of Hegemony.
- The Public Sphere and critiques of Habermas.
- Examples from DIY and Alternative Media.
- Relevance of Community Media.

“What people collectively and individually decide to do with [new media] technologies as professionals and as audiences, and what kinds of culture people produce and spread in and around these tools, is still being determined” (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. xiii).

“Community media represent a unique site to interrogate the process of identity formation through communication technologies, and to examine the dramatic impact of social and technological change on the everyday lived experience of disparate groups within a geographically based community. Put another way, attending to the institutions, forms, and practices associated with community media provides enormous insight into the relationship between people, places, and communication technologies” (Howley, 2005, p. 38).

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**1.1 Corporate Hegemony**

“Armed with inexpensive tools for capturing, editing, and organising, people tap into a vast ocean of real-time data and multimedia content to promote personal and political interests. Functions once monopolised by a handful of hierarchical institutions (e.g. newspapers, television stations, and universities) have been usurped by independent publishers, video-sharing sites, collaboratively sustained knowledge banks, and fan-generated entertainment” (Delwiche & Henderson, 2013, p. 3).

[http://youtu.be/MyPi0FYihjE?list=PLa\\_1MA\\_DEorGmrpbXHAhjLQiqsySzNsMi](http://youtu.be/MyPi0FYihjE?list=PLa_1MA_DEorGmrpbXHAhjLQiqsySzNsMi)

“Hacker’s emphasis on ‘social-political policies’ is instructive insofar as it highlights the constructed and contested character of media systems. In other words, rather than view these systems as the natural or inevitable outgrowth of any given technology, this perspective illuminates the social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics involved in creating a media system” (Howley, 2010, p. 280).

**1.2 Hierarchical Media**

“For instance, radio broadcasting operates in terms of a hierarchical, one-way flow of information between media producers and media audiences. This centralised form of message production and distribution positions audiences as relatively passive consumers of media messages. And yet, there is nothing inherent in broadcast technology that precludes decentralised communication between message producers and received. Indeed, in its early days, radio was a vibrant, participatory, and decidedly two-way medium of popular communication” (Howley, 2010, p. 280).

“Terrestrial radio broadcasting, as we know it today, developed as a result of explicit policies – rules and regulations covering every aspect of broadcasting, from technical specifications governing spectrum allocation and transmission power, to the conditions for licensing, ownership, and financial support mechanisms – that favoured well-financed private ownership or some form of state sponsorship and control” (Howley, 2010, p. 280).

“As media and cultural historians remind us, the policies and structures that set the terms of broadcasting in the first half of the past century were the result of a series of negotiations and bitter disputes over how broadcasting would be organised, regulated, and paid for. Critically, the level of public participation was constrained by a number of social, economic, and political conditions. As a result, powerful economic and political forces, representing a narrow range of interests, prevailed and established the foundation for present-day broadcast structures and regulations” (Howley, 2010, p. 280).

“Indeed, community media provide a unique site to illuminate hegemonic processes: community media demonstrate not only signs of resistance and subversion but evidence of complicity and submission as well” (Howley, 2005, p. 35).

“Social media breaks down the control and the hierarchy between the mainstream media and the population” (Hill, 2013, p. 53).

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- Control of corporate media excludes people.
- Hierarchies encourage a one-way flow of information.
- Distinctions between producers and consumers are absolute.
- State mechanisms hold policies in place.
- We can see this process working if we look at alternative and community media.

## 2 Habermas and the Public Sphere

“The concept of the public sphere, as described by Jürgen Habermas, provides a robust theoretical framework to examine the crucial link between democratic self-governance and communication. Habermas (1993) argues that the public sphere is the foundation for civil society; it is a forum for the citizenry to reach consensus on the issues and policy decisions that affect public life. In Habermas’ formulation, the public sphere is a realm, insulated from the deleterious influence of state and commercial interests, in which citizens openly and rationally discuss, debate, and deliberate upon matters of mutual and general concern to a self-governing community. Isolated or ‘bracketed’ from both state and market forces, this public sphere is the space in which a public comes to understand and define itself, articulate its needs and common concerns, and act in the collective self-interest. In short, it is a space in which a social aggregate become a public” (Howley, 2005, p. 19).

“The concept of the public sphere in a very general and common-sense manner, as, for example, a synonym for the processes of public opinion or for the news media themselves. In its more ambitious guise, however, as it was developed by Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere should be understood as an *analytic category*, a conceptual device which, while pointing to a specific social phenomenon can also aid us in analysing and researching the phenomenon” (Peter Dahlgren in Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991, p. 2).

### 2.1 Quality of Practice and Participation

“According to Habermas, an effective and robust public sphere depends on two conditions: the quality of discursive practices and the quantity of participation within this discourse. The first requirement calls for rational-critical debate based not on the speaker’s identity or social standing, but upon the reasoned and logical merits of an argument. The second requirement entails opening up the debate to the widest public possible and encouraging the inclusion of competing opinions and perspectives” (Howley, 2005, p. 19).

“We call events and occasions ‘public’ when they are open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs” (Habermas, 1994, p. 81).

“The private sphere of civil society was no longer confined to the authorities but was considered by the subjects as one that was properly theirs” (Habermas, 1994, p. 89).

“The threat to the public sphere, as Habermas sees it, is the encroachments of the state and commercial interests into this realm. Habermas observes that as the public sphere shrinks, there is a marked increase in political apathy, a relentless pursuit of economic and material self-interests, and a rising tide of cynicism and social alienation” (Howley, 2005, p. 19).

“The concept of the public sphere has enormous relevance for the ongoing project of building and sustaining a more democratic media culture... As the nature of citizenship changes in an increasingly integrated world, the question of who deliberates has enormous implications... There is relatively scant popular participation in this deliberative process” (Howley, 2005, p. 20).

### 2.2 Publics

“What were called ‘publics’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are being transformed into a society of ‘masses’. Moreover, the structural relevance of publics is declining as men at large become ‘mass men’, each trapped in quite powerless milieux” (Mills, 1959, p. 52).

- The public sphere is a way of understanding the role of the media in civic spaces.

- Participation is at the heart of a healthy public sphere.
- Media participation formulates ‘publics’ that challenge ‘private’ interests.
- The public sphere is not free standing – it is challenged by the state and commercial interests.
- The idea of the ‘citizen’ or ‘agent’ is vital to participation.

### 3 DIY & Alternative Media:

“Politicians whose views and policy recommendations challenge corporate interests are rarely seen or heard in the mainstream media. Conversely, those who are sympathetic to and support corporate policy tend to receive favourable coverage in the press. As a result, alternative positions on public policy and oppositional views on corporate culture are rarely publicised, let alone opened up for broad popular debate” (Howley, 2005, p. 23).

“Creative cultures flourished beneath the surface of the mainstream media; many of these cultures were nurtured and extended by mimeographed zines” (Delwiche, 2013, p. 19).

“Corporate media depoliticises both the public and private spheres. In their efforts to deliver audiences to advertisers, commercial media socialise people to believe that health, happiness and the good life are to be found in the implacable, competitive, pursuit of consumer goods” (Howley, 2005, p. 24).

“Researchers have demonstrated that participatory cultures are characterised by commitment to access, expression, sharing, mentorship, the need to make a difference, and the desire for social connections” (Delwiche, 2013, p. 11).

#### BBC open door. Guttersnipe Punk Fanzine Telford

<http://youtu.be/PFwXk4eK6Jk>

#### Analog: Zines. What is a Zine? Episode 03

<http://youtu.be/HF1DoykPCCo>

“Advertising was instrumental in engineering a shift from a producer ethic to a consumer ethic. In so doing, advertising and consumer culture divert the public’s attention, energy, and resources away from society’s fundamental needs like public education, health care, the environment, economic justice, and racial, ethnic, and gender equality that are essential to the institutions, needs, and values that are not based on capital accumulation or profit generation are all but ignored by commercial media” (Howley, 2005, p. 24).

#### 3.1 The Well

“The WELL was firmly rooted in participatory cultures, with founding principles that included self-governance, community connections, user-driven design, open-endedness, and low barriers to access. Power was deliberately decentralised and the network’s programmers carefully embedded ‘a countercultural conception of community’ into the entire fabric of the system” (Delwiche, 2013, p. 19).

“All told, then, the commodification of public communication belies claims that the information age will free the minds and liberate the spirits of the world’s people” (Howley, 2005, p. 26).

“The growth of networked communication, especially when coupled with the practices of participatory culture, provides a range of groups who have long struggled to have their voices heard” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. xiv).

“New platforms create openings for social, cultural, economic, legal, and political change and opportunities for diversity and democratisation for which it is worth fighting” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. xiv).

“The terms of participation are very much up for grabs, though, and will be shaped by a range of legal and economic struggles unfolding over the next few decades” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. xiv).

- It’s possible to challenge corporate interests through creativity.
- Participation is based on access, expression, sharing and making a difference.
- The producer ethic needs to be nurtured.
- Self-governance, networking and user-generated content drive participation.
- New platforms change our expectations about how, and who, can participate.

#### **4 Making Meaningful Media– the Role of Community Media:**

“Martin-Barbero demonstrates how mass media are embedded in the everyday lived experience of local populations and illuminates the distinct role various cultural forms (e.g., theatre, cinema, radio dramas and telenovelas) play in the construction of national and cultural identities. In this way, the concept of mediation encourages the examination of both micro and macro level processes of cultural production from a socio-historical perspective. As such, mediation provides a valuable analytical perspective from which to consider community media” (Howley, 2005, p. 34).

“Akin to the practice of appropriation so often celebrated by cultural analysts, community media form and content is a bricolage of artefacts and routines generally associated with the culture industries. 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).

##### **4.1 De-Professionalisation**

“The culture industry’s dismissive attitude toward the technical abilities of ‘non-professionals’ and the social value of their work underscores the adversarial relationship between dominant and community media. 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 artists, hatemongers, pornographers, and the radical fringe: a perception some community media producers enthusiastically embrace” (Howley, 2005, p. 36).

“Community media also represents strategic alliances between social, cultural, and political groups mounting and organising resistance to the hegemony of dominant media institutions and practices. As a resource for local service agencies, political activists, and others 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. 35).

“These initiatives diminish the debilitating effects of political-economic systems that cater to well-heeled special interests by enhancing the capacity of local communities to organise themselves and participate in political processes” (Howley, 2005, p. 35).

“As a result, producers and audiences alike are complicit in accepting and circulating the notion that community media are aesthetically inferior to mainstream media form and content, and socially and politically irrelevant for popular audiences. Perhaps the reluctance of communication scholars to engage more thoroughly with the phenomenon of community media” (Howley, 2005, p. 36).

##### **4.2 Civic Networking**

“This emphasis on participation, local content, and especially the impulse to revitalise the civic life of place-based communities is the motivation behind yet another strain of the community networking movement, so-called civic networking” (Howley, 2005, p. 78).

“Equally important, civic networks are explicitly designed to encourage and facilitate discussion within and between local residents, thereby promoting participatory democracy at the community level” (Howley, 2005, p. 78).

“Indeed, the creation of new cultural territories and the preservation of existing cultural spaces takes on enormous significance in light of the ease with which people, sounds, imagery, and cultural practice circulate about the globe. Community media therefore contribute to the reterritorialization of culture by establishing new structures and creating new spaces for local cultural production. In this light, community media can be viewed as a dramatic expression of the felt need of local populations to exploit as well as contain these forces in their efforts to make sense of the dramatic, and at times traumatic, upheavals associated with globalisation” (Howley, 2005, p. 38).

#### **5 Participation**

“Those who provide the capacity for participation expect something as well. Participation is now a two-way street. Government now *provide* participatory democracy, citizens are *engaged* by the government or corporations, and publics are constituted, consulted, and used to legitimate decision-making” (Kelty, 2013, p. 23).

“Participation is now expected to have an effect on the structures, institutions, organisations, or technologies, in which one participates. Participation is no longer simply an opening up, and expression, a liberation, it is now also a principle of improvement, and instrument of change, a creative force. It no longer threatens, but has become a resource: participation has been made *valuable*” (Kelty, 2013, p. 24).

- Community media is a useful way to examine how media functions.
- Our own social experience is important in defining how we participate.
- Amateur’s become central to participative media.
- Resisting the dominance of the corporate culture through oppositional messages.
- Community & participation-based media is generally poorly thought.
- Civic-life is invigorated by participation.

## 6 Summary

“Community media are strategic initiatives to counteract a climate of political apathy and social alienation that confounds a sense of belonging in local communities” (Howley, 2005, p. 35).

“The challenge of building a participatory medium hinges upon the extent to which a diverse user population can not only access the system, but also make safe and productive use of it” (Howley, 2005, p. 250).

“Without full consideration of the enormous variations within a given user population, community networks are unlikely to meet the needs, competencies, and preferences of heterogeneous users” (Howley, 2005, p. 250).

“The institutional configurations of the public sphere grasp the phenomenon at the macro-level of structures. However, an understanding of its dynamics requires that we also consider the processes and conditions of sense-making, whereby subjects link experience and reflection to generate meaning (political or otherwise)” (Peter Dahlgren in Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991, p. 16).

“What is participation like today? How has it become newly important with respect to yesterday? Are participatory democracy, audience participation, user-generated content, peer production, participant observation, crowdsourcing all the same phenomena? If they are different, what characterises the difference” (Kelty, 2013, p. 23).

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