

## TECH1502-18 Introduction to Community Media

### Lecture Five: What is Community Media?

#### 1 Introduction – What is Community Media?

##### ADP Riot Tour Arriving at Merthyr Rising 2016

<https://youtu.be/7xzoMv7BYaQ>

##### 1.1 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.

##### 1.2 Social Practices

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).

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.

##### 1.3 Participation

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.

##### 1.4 Alternative Voices

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).

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).

##### 1.5 Independent Practices

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).

#### 2 Three Views

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).

## 2.1 Range of Terms

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).

## 2.2 Value of Citizenship

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).

## 2.3 Open Access

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).

## 2.4 Community Development

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).

### The Power of Talk: How media can help people hold their leaders to account (with impact statistics)

<https://youtu.be/7514pKCyja0>

## 2.5 Creative Expression

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).

## 3 Five Themes

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).

### 3.1 Wider Issues

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).

### 3.2 Aspirations & Motivations

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 produced 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.

## 4 Generative Vs Oppositional Media

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 judgements 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).

### 4.1 Accommodating the Mainstream

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.

### 4.2 Disputed Competences

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.

### 4.3 Alternative Public Interest

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).

## Lessons From Elsewhere: Jaqui Devereux

<https://youtu.be/vXGsEadItFs>

## **5 Overlooked Media Culture**

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.

### **5.1 Insights**

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).

### **5.2 Marginality**

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).

### **5.3 Disruptive Debates**

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?

## **6 Ad Hoc & Makeshift Media**

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).

### **6.1 Emergent Media**

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).

### **6.2 Diversity of Opinion**

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).

## **7 Broadcast to Network**

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.

## 7.1 Public Sphere

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).

## 7.2 Lived Experiences

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?

### The Power of Community Media: Rob Heydari at TEDxRyersonU

<https://youtu.be/nPXVVvTPtM4>

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