

Community Media

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November 19, 2022

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Community Media*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=39443>

Community media is any form of media that is created and controlled by a community, either a geographic community or a community of identity or interest. Community media is separate from commercial media, state run media, or public broadcasting. The fundamental premise is to engage those groups that are categorically excluded and marginalized from the media making process. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), The World Bank, and The European Commission recognize community media as a crucial element in a vibrant and democratic media system.

Definition

Community media is, in a broad sense as described by Rennie, "community communication" (p. 7). Fundamentally, it is elusive to define the term in an absolute manner because it can take so many forms, be applied by so many different groups of people, and be directed at such a wide range of issues. The premise, however, that community media is a facilitative tool for discussion and engagement of the ordinary citizenry has some inherent implications. A major implication is that community media is for the most part independent of the market-driven commercial and mainstream media outlets. This, in turn, allows for different models of community media to offer either a wide open editorial policy or a more fine-tuned approach that is still loyal to the encouragement of community participation.

Key characteristics

Community media is without market influences. Different groups of community media makers may follow this philosophy more strictly than others. Rennie points out that although there is a clear aversion to engage with commercial forces in the production of community media for obvious reasons, there may be times when some market interaction is desirable (p. 4). Essentially, this can serve as a means by which to avoid self-marginalization while still adhering to the principles of community interests and social objectives.

Community media is a form in which local news and information is spread directly to affected communities. The consolidation of ownership of media outlets into fewer and fewer hands has translated into a neglect for local reporting of news that impacts communities. Community media can be a remedy to this by allowing citizens to inform themselves about the issues taking place around them.

Community media outlets reflect their communities. They become integral to the communities which they serve. Such integration is achieved not only through ensuring their independence from commercial interests as referred to above, but also through ensuring their accountability to the particular community concerned. Often such accountability goes beyond the provision of opportunities to get involved in the operation and management of the service and takes the form of

community ownership within a legally constituted non-profit distributing structure. When community media accountability works effectively, it ensures that the organisation concerned genuinely reflects the needs and aspirations of its community. Although in practice it may be arguable that no accountability structure can fully reflect such needs and aspirations (not least because some of these might be mutually exclusive) independence and agreed formalized structures for accountability and access can at least form a useful starting point in efforts to create the most appropriate community media vehicle for the community involved.

There is an important distinction between community media as a whole and grassroots media. Community media can be a form of direct local level media; however, it also can be framed around a local issue pertaining to a community whose parameters can be national, international, and even global. Grassroots media on the other hand, as defined by Paul Riisman of Mediageek, is focused more specifically on media making by and for the local community that it serves making the discussion more narrow and precise. There are a variety of other forms of media that may in some cases follow the community media model of access and participation but may have different social, political, and organizational strategies. Some of these forms of non-mass mediated forms of communication include alternative media, radical media, democratic media, participatory media, development media, and citizen media. Citizens' media, in particular, has some interesting characteristics. It is essentially a re-framing of community media by Clemencia Rodriguez that focuses on small scale media projects that look to bring different visions and perspectives to the "codes" that are so easily embedded in the social psyche (Rennie, 2006, p. 23).

All of these variations and different focuses allude to another key characteristic of community media in its broader perspective; geographic scope.

Geographic scope

Geographical parameters can be local, national, global or any combination of the three. Community, as a concept, can be extremely local or broadly global. The essence of community is the existence of a commonality that unites people; therefore, we can also structure community around language, shared interests, culture, religion, social issues, sexual orientation, etc.

Media South Asia

According to Media South Asia, all media, from a strict interpretation, can be argued as being community media because it addresses a particular community at the exclusion of another. What sets community media apart from the more commercial media outlets is the democratic and participatory principles that it adheres to as an organizational framework. Arguably, democracy and participation are the core of community media making. Community media outlets can be owned and controlled by the local community they serve which in turn fosters participation, creativity, and

diversity. With so many affordable and relatively easy to use digital media tools at the disposal of the average citizen, community media can be an important means of acquiring tangible skills which essentially is an empowering component.

Democratic perspective

Ownership and control from a democratic perspective are more in line with community media if they are at the local and independent level. However, to define community media strictly in these terms would be to exclude it needlessly from other potential forums. The fact that in the vast majority of instances community media finds its expression in local, DIY, and independent outlets is a commentary on the lack of democratic participation in the more mainstream media sources that are completely out of the sphere of the average citizen.

It is because of the lack of accessibility and participation in the commercially mediated landscape that community media is a potential countervailing force which can serve the needs of various groups along a wide assortment of issues. Democracy implies the intention to rule in the interests of the people for the common good (Rennie, 2006, p. 6). As a communication platform crucial for the dissemination of social and political information, the media in a truly functioning democratic society should not veer from this fundamental tenet. This poses the question of whether or not media democracy and participation are prerequisites to a civil society. The final key characteristic of community media addresses this important aspect.

Community media in all its various forms is inseparably linked to the enhancement of a civil society and civic participation. The International Association of Media and Communication Research states that community media "originates, circulates, and resonates from the sphere of civil society," (as cited, Rennie, 2006, p 4). Rennie (2006) continues to elaborate on how, as media created by civil society, there is an implied component of civic engagement in the production of community media (p. 4).

The democratic and participatory nature of community media allows a pathway for the exploration of civic duty which is all but lost in so many sectors of social life. Rennie points out that "civil society requires communication platforms," (p. 35)."

Community media, then, can be viewed as a tool readily available for the expression of a collective civic voice.

Historical context

The nascent impetus for community media analysis stemmed from the efforts to "democratize" the media (Rennie, 2006, p. 17). The corporate controlled media and its adjacent interests were as

much of an issue in the late 60s and 70s as they are today. The actual realization of community media outlets was hindered by clashes with both private and governmental sectors. The potential empowerment in the hands of local citizens and the possibilities to effect change became embedded in the social fabric and has been fought for ever since. Rennie (2006) describes how the birth of community television and radio in the United States made the concept of community media synonymous with the principle of free speech (p. 48). It is important to frame the historical development of community media around cable TV Public-access television and community radio (although print was certainly a widespread means of community communication) in the United States and Canada. Radio, in fact, has a long and significant history especially in the United States. Community radio, however, has had to strategize differently than Public-access television since radio spectrum is licensed at the federal level by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) rather than through municipal franchise agreements.

The first Public-access television station in the United States considered to be community media was set up in 1968 in Dale City, Virginia. It was managed by the city's Junior Chamber of Commerce and ran programming for two years without advertising. It closed due to lack of financing, equipment, and infrastructure. (p. 5). Another early example of community media is found in the counter-culture video collectives of the 1960s and 1970s.

Videofreex, Video Free America, and Global Village used new technologies to the benefit of community interests. In addition, the Raindance Corporation founded by Michael Shamberg, Paul Ryan, and others became known as "guerrilla television." The premise of guerrilla television was to non-violently blaze a new trail for the creation of media as an alternative to broadcast television. This initial activity was made possible by Sony's introduction of the video Porta-Pak (Olson, 2000, p. 6).

In New York City in 1970 two cable companies agreed to franchises in the borough of Manhattan. The two Public-access television channels were soon cablecasting 200 hours of programming per week to a potential audience of 80,000 subscribers.

Canada also has a central role in the development of community media and is by many considered the birthplace of community broadcasting (Rennie, 2006, p. 48). In the 1960s, the National Film Board of Canada set up a project called Challenge for Change which was a series of documentary films addressing socio-economic issues. Once again Sony's Porta-Pak proved revolutionary in Canada as well. In 1968, filmmakers Bonny Klein and Dorothy He`naut persuaded Challenge for Change to take on more local community issues. During the same year they trained members of the St. Jacques Citizens' Committee in video production. The committee went into the Montreal slums and captured interview footage with poor people and then presented the video in public meetings for discussion (Olson, 2000, p. 4).

Community radio also has a pivotal role historically as a community media outlet. Its history dates

back to amateur radio organizations that formed in 1906 (Rennie, 2006, p. 62). From a historical perspective, the seminal example of community radio is Lewis Hill's Pacifica Radio. KPFA in Berkeley, California began broadcasting in 1949 after acquiring an FCC license for FM spectrum. This first Pacifica station was funded through listener support and philanthropic foundations. Pacifica's mandate, that Hill expressed as "to engage in any activity that shall contribute to the lasting understanding between nations and between the individuals of all nations, races, creeds, and colors," has served to frame the community media movement through its historical and technological development (Rennie, 2006 p. 64).

The historical context of community media which focuses on Public-access television and community radio in the United States and Canada also extends to other models all over the world. England, Ireland, Italy, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, just to name a few, all have particular models community media platforms. The context for the development of community media in Europe, however, is different than North America. Kleinsteuber and Sonnenberg (1990) point out that community television and radio in Europe arose "from criticism of a monopolistic public service system that was considered out of touch (as cited in Rennie, 2006, p. 78). The two main themes that were the driving force of community media in Europe were the breakdown and decentralization of this monopoly structure and the threat of amateur media to the public service monolith. The experimental period of community media expression in Europe began in the 1970s after North American Public-access television was underway. It was therefore seen as a model but also understood that the media environments were structurally different (Rennie, 2006, p. 82).

A powerful community media example external to both North America and Europe is the Bolivian Miners' Radio of the 1940s. The station was established by the local miner's union and became an important tool for communication, resistance, and educational and cultural expression (Rennie, 2006, p. 17).

People are constantly making community media if one broadens the conceptualization of the term.

Community media is particularly evident when individuals face circumstances that test the human capacity to bond and connect. The organizational structures are different but the intent to get an idea out is exactly the same in all cases. Regardless of the issue and politics, citizens want to have an arena to express their ideas to others. This is the essence of a democratic society and the basis for the existence of community media in all its current forms.

Modes of community media

Community media is bound only by the limits of creativity and of course accessibility to resources and spectrum. Probably the first mode that is envisioned is content created for television. Public, educational, and government access (PEG) centers are still a viable option that offer an arena for

citizens to produce, for example, a documentary or Local programming and disseminate it to the community. PEG centers are provided through Cable television franchise fees paid by cable TV (and more recently telco) companies to local municipalities. Although an accessible resource in terms of equipment, training, and spectrum, Public-access television centers are under attack by the telco and cableco companies to set new standards in cable franchise negotiations.

Satellite television has a long history and the technology has advanced to a point where it provides a residential alternative to cable and broadcasting services. While the services are similar, satellite TV opens up another avenue for community media content and productions. In particular, Free Speech TV offers a variety of programming with direct and tangible community media possibilities.

Radio has a long history in allowing communities to rally around various issues and provide a democratic and participatory platform of news information. Like television, radio is also subject to licensing requirements and spectrum availability. Radio is the most widespread electronic communications device in the world and community radio is a practical and cost-effective means of reaching and connecting the world's poorest communities (Rennie, 2006, p. 4). While many low power and microradio stations comply with the rules and regulations, other vibrant and vital stations have operated illegally only to be shut down by the FCC eventually.

Low-power television (LPTV) which was created in 1982 to give spectrum space for local programming is in some instances a form of community media. LPTV stations also often simply supply retransmission signals from the major networks, but they are a potential community media outlet. The introduction of digitized technology has created obstacles for both LPTV as well microradio due to the loss of spectrum availability during periods of conversion. It remains to be seen how the switch from analog to digital will play out regarding community media (Rennie, 2006, p. 69).

The mode of community media that bypasses legal obstacles is print media. No special licensing is required to produce fanzines, newsletters, leaflets, etc. In societies where press freedoms are more repressed, print mediums may face some distributive challenges, but, given their underground nature, DIY projects find ways to reach the particular community often at relatively large scales.

Similar to satellite technology, the advancement of the digital environment that puts media production hardware, software, and equipment in the hands of the amateur consumer facilitates a virtual world of community expression. Essentially, the Internet is a space for the digital propagation of the aforementioned modalities of community media. For example, groups, organizations, and individuals can create video, audio, and text and graphics based media, upload it to the Internet, network it, and ultimately spark discussion, interaction, and real-life activities. Some examples are vlogs, blogs, audio and video podcasts, websites, and video and audio streaming. Rennie (2006) points out that the initial discourse around Internet technology

emphasized the important potential for democracy and participation within global and real-time contexts. This "cyberdemocracy" was premised on the direct relationship between technology and the growth of civil society (p. 164). Clearly, in terms of community media, the implications were (and still are) exciting. The initial discourse, however, has been complicated by the market and commercial forces that threaten to alter the democratic and open virtual environment of the Internet into one targeted on consumption and profit. Obviously, this would change the strategies of community media on the Internet and make it even more vital as a countervailing influence.

The role of policy

Historically, communications policy has had direct consequences for community media. The future of the various modes of community media are largely dependent on the path that legislation takes. The main theme of community media in whatever form it is created is access and participation. Policy can be written in ways that are conducive to the strengthening of these democratic principles while also, conversely, be enacted as barriers to the enhancement of civic society as it pertains to media.

Rennie (2006) points out that community radio and television have consistently been in a binary position to the "dominant cultural policy objectives (p. 5)." For example, Public-access television commonly referred to as Public, educational, and government access (PEG) channels in the United States has throughout its history been linked to policy. From its earliest form as community antenna television (CATV), the relationship between the FCC and the cable TV industry, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), and local municipalities and citizens can be likened to a roller coaster ride.

The FCC recognized the public interest implications of Public-access television and in 1969 ordered cable companies to transmit their own programming as well as begin experimenting with community access channels (Rennie, 2006, p. 52). A downside of public-access television developing with a focus on the local is the lack of a national vision in terms of policy which consequently left ambiguity around community media as a whole (Rennie, 2006, p. 52).

In 1972 the FCC issued a Report and Order that sought to guide the role of the cable industry towards the benefit of the public interest. In addition, the new cable rules gave the FCC regulatory powers, set up the franchise agreement negotiations to be worked out by local governments and cable companies, and also via national policy mandated the setting aside of up to three channels for PEG use (Rennie, 2006, p. 53). The Supreme Court reversed this legally in 1979 when suit was brought by the Midwest Video Corporation arguing that their editorial right was being infringed upon. At the congressional and municipal levels, however, access remained mandated (Rennie, 2006, p. 54). The Cable Television Protection and Competition Act of 1992 did indeed restore cable companies' editorial control as it pertains to indecent material. A clause in the act allows "

cable television operators - who by law have no say in access programming decisions - to ban "indecent" or "obscene" material, or " material soliciting or promoting unlawful conduct." Many access providers fear that cable operators - who have often considered access a thorn in their side - could use this clause to meddle with and possibly even shut down access centers. There has been little publicized evidence of what First Amendment freedoms are presently at risk (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-15627401.html>).

From these examples it is clear that policy has a great influence on community media. The Telecommunications Act of 1996, the beaten back proposals of the Chairperson Powell version of the FCC in 2003, and the recent legislation in the House of Representatives that succumbed to a congressional mid-term power shift are other examples of the role policy can play in the community media reality. Currently, the legislative battles are particularly consequential to the community sphere. Some of the key issues that are on the table today that have potentially dire consequences for community media include video franchise reform, community internet, network neutrality, and the continued trend of media consolidation. The shape that policy takes as well as the level of activism and grassroots organizing will be vital to the future of community media in the United States and the rest of the world. The digital era has enormous possibilities for civil society and democracy building. The activist issues are all interconnected and must be safeguarded in terms of access and participation so that the tools of community media are not usurped by the dominant social forces and rendered irrelevant.