# Communication, Culture and Community: Towards A Cultural Analysis of Community Media

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## Abstract

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## Keywords

Community Media, Cultural Studies, Political Economy, Qualitative Methods

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## Introduction

The contemporary practice of cultural studies--broadly construed as an emerging academic discipline, a recuperative cultural intervention, and an oppositional political practice--is an exceedingly ambitious if somewhat contradictory enterprise. An intellectual project that vehemently rejects the orthodoxies associated with traditional academic disciplines, cultural studies has in recent years grown increasingly preoccupied with its own disciplinary status (Morris, 1997; Nelson & Goankar, 1996). More critically, cultural studies' theoretical excesses and increasingly Byzantine analyses of popular culture have diminished its relevance for wider publics outside of the academy (Jensen & Pauly, 1997; Stabile, 1995). Furthermore, as cultural studies becomes more marketable and the institutionalization of the field continues apace, cultural studies' efficacy as a vehicle of progressive social change grows more uncertain (Carey, 1997; Gitlin, 1997). As a result, practitioners and critics alike reassess cultural studies' traditions, assumptions and practices, and debate the implications of these developments on the field. Nowhere is this tendency more evident than in the recent spate of academic conferences, scholarly articles and edited volumes devoted to reorienting, refashioning, or otherwise revising the cultural studies project (Ferguson & Golding, 1997; McRobbie, 1997).

Although I have related concerns, I neither intend to refute nor revisit these arguments as such. Instead, I will draw upon this dialogue to advance a simple proposition. Indeed, rather than proffer yet another treatise on cultural studies' genealogy or ruminate on the discipline's future, my more modest aim is to advance a research agenda that I believe is long overdue: a sustained, multiperpectival, (Kellner, 1997) cultural analysis of community-based media. In saying this, I am not denying the importance of cultural analyses of dominant media institutions and artifacts; work of this sort is essential for tracing the contours of social, economic and political power in the production of popular culture. Nor am I dismissing the quality or value of contemporary analyses of community media; these studies provide exemplars for the research agenda that I advocate. Rather, I am suggesting that relative to the wealth of institutional, textual, and audience analyses of dominant media, analogous studies of community-based media have been rather sporadic and largely unsuccessful in conveying community media's significance as a locus of social communication within and between local communities.

By way of advancing this research program, this paper takes up two interrelated arguments. First, I contend that community media represent a conspicuous blind spot in cultural approaches to communication studies. Put less diplomatically, as a site of cultural analysis, community media lies dormant amid the proliferation of theoretical pyrotechnics, disciplinary navel gazing, and erudite readings of popular culture that have come to dominate the cultural studies literature. This situation is not only surprising; it is untenable. Surprising in that this indifference toward community media is at odds with the hallmarks of cultural studies scholarship, especially its affirmation of popular forms of resistance and its celebration of, and keen appreciation for, local cultural production. Moreover, this situation is untenable in light of two distinct, yet related conditions: the unprecedented consolidation of corporate-controlled media and the attendant diminution of public service broadcasting (Hoynes, 1990, 1999). Second, I maintain that as a site of intense struggle over cultural production, distribution, and consumption within and through communication and information technologies, community media demand the rigorous, interdisciplinary approaches and interventionist strategies associated with the finest traditions of cultural studies scholarship. In short, the often-neglected phenomenon of community media deserves not only intellectual scrutiny, but political commitment as well (O'Connor, 1989; Schulman, 1992). Before proceeding further, let us briefly consider what we mean by cultural studies.

## Cultural Studies: A Brief Introduction

Less a coherent field of study than a constellation of questions and concerns regarding the nature of social experience and the character of cultural phenomena, cultural studies embraces a variety of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches gleaned from the humanities and social sciences. Literary studies, for example, informs a major stream of cultural studies as it emerged in Britain during the 1950s and achieved a sort of disciplinary status at the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. In distinctive and influential ways, three early proponents of cultural studies, Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thomson and Raymond Williams, challenged hierarchical notions of culture, like those associated with Mathew Arnold, which understood culture as a privileged domain consisting of only "the best that has been thought and said in the world." Instead, members of the Birmingham School conceived of culture in a far more comprehensive fashion: one which not only acknowledges the significance of popular

culture forms (e.g., dance music, cinema, television, and magazines) but also recognized the importance of the meanings and pleasures audiences derive from their interaction with the products of the culture industries. This approach rejects elitist categories that serve to define (and defend) cultural hierarchies and other social, economic and political systems of domination. Thus, cultural studies' emphasis on the popular in popular culture indicates an analytical focus-more anthropological than literary, more sociological than aesthetic-on the routine, the everyday, and the ordinary.

Herein we can detect the political underpinnings of the cultural studies project. By interrogating the routine and everyday practices that constitute daily life, cultural studies seek to understand "those aspects of our lives that exert so powerful and unquestioned an influence on our existence that we take them for granted. The processes that make us-as individuals, as citizens, as members of a particular class, race or gender-are cultural processes that work precisely because they seem so natural, so unexceptional, so irresistible" (Turner, 1996, p. 2). Cultural studies, therefore, is an *interpretive* social science uninterested in prediction and control, as is positivist social science, but rather concerned with understanding the nature of social experience and the meanings people invest in and create out of this experience. Mapping out the meanings of cultural texts and practices that appear as natural or inevitable is a complex and politically charged task. This analytical focus draws on a host of theoretical orientations-semiotics, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, structuralism and postmodernism-concerned with what Stuart Hall (1983) calls the "politics of signification." That is, the struggle over representations of reality and the promotion of particular ways of seeing the world. Thus, language, discourse and the mass media figure prominently in cultural studies scholarship.

Cultural studies' diverse research interests and theoretical versatility necessitate the application of a range of methods, a *bricolage* of methodologies as Denzin and Lincoln (1998) put it. Thus, cultural studies practitioners strategically employ multiple methodologies including but not limited to ethnography, participant observation, textual analysis, historiography, in-depth interviews, focus groups and other qualitative methods appropriate to the study of disparate cultural texts and cultural practices. As Petri Alasuutari notes, this methodological dexterity has encouraged the increased use and acceptance of qualitative methods. "By being consciously and self-reflexively eclectic in theoretical terms, and pragmatic and strategic in its choice of methods, cultural studies has been important in promoting qualitative research methods" (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 23). Having said this, it is important to note that not all cultural analysts agree on evaluation criteria for assessing their work (Hammersley, 1992). While some see the need to apply positivist evaluation criteria, and others insist that such assessment is antithetical to qualitative research, still others argue for the development of evaluation techniques unique to qualitative approaches (Altheide & Johnson, 1998). Debates over the relative merits of various evaluation criteria reflect the influence of postmodernism and poststructuralism on thinking about qualitative methods within cultural studies circles.

Cultural studies is, therefore, as Thomas Lindlof (1997) aptly puts it a "polyglot tradition" that disrupts and transcends disciplinary boundaries. Whether it is this rejection of disciplinarity that accounts for growing interest in cultural studies around the world is unclear. What is certain is that cultural studies' willingness to challenge academic conventions and to articulate connections between disparate areas of study, theoretical traditions, and methodological approaches has

contributed to the field's vitality and its incredible variation. Despite cultural studies' distinctive manifestations in various institutional settings and national contexts, however, it is the field's explicit commitment to making its work socially and politically relevant to wider publics, especially subordinate and subaltern groups, which informs much of the work carried on under the cultural studies banner. "In virtually all traditions of cultural studies, its practitioners see cultural studies not simply as a chronicle of cultural change but as an *intervention* [italics added] in it, and see themselves not simply as scholars providing an account but as politically engaged participants" (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992, p. 5).

I would argue that in a similar vein, community media organizers and volunteers likewise view their work as critically-informed interventions into contemporary media culture. In terms familiar to cultural studies practitioners, then, community media workers are what political theorist Antonio Gramsci described as "organic intellectuals": individuals who serve the social function of intellectuals for subordinate groups and who help articulate the ideas and aspirations of these groups. In this case, community media workers assist local populations wrest a modest, but significant level of control away from dominant media organizations for purposes of facilitating and enhancing community communication. As Nicholas Jankowski suggests, by deploying qualitative methodologies in support of grassroots media access initiatives cultural analysts might "help communities to understand not only how new communication technologies are being introduced at present, but also how the emancipatory potential of new media may serve community in the future" (1988, p. 174).

And yet, despite common sympathies and concerns, cultural studies has failed to engage with community media in a substantive, thorough, and programmatic fashion. Such a research program would leverage the theoretical and methodological overlap between cultural studies and qualitative mass communication research: a synergy that informs the finest examples of cultural analysis of mainstream media institutions, texts, and audiences (see e.g., Curtin, 1994; Dornfeld, 1998; Radway, 1987; Smulyan, 1994). Drawing inspiration and guidance from extant cultural analysis of mainstream media organizations, institutional analyses of community media organizations delineate the structural factors, organizational contexts, social actors, and modes of production that determine community media form and content. Likewise, textual analysis of the prodigious output of community media organizations provides alternative avenues to explore the relationship between media texts and broader socio-historical conditions. Moreover, textual analysis of community media form and content illuminate the range of possible meanings embedded in "cultural artifacts" produced by "non-professionals" and for purposes other than capital accumulation.

Finally, audience studies informed by reception theory (Eco, 1979) suggest a fruitful line of research into the audience readings, understandings and uses of community media. Indeed, given community media's participatory nature, reception studies might move us toward a greater understanding of media audiences as discursive and institutional constructs, a central concern for qualitative communication researchers and cultural studies scholars alike (Alasuutari, 1999). Taken together, a programmatic research program consisting of institutional, textual, and audience analyses of community media is essential for building not only a theory of community media, but a theory of community. That is, the research program I outline here privileges

community media as a site to examine the fundamental yet enigmatic relationship between communication and community.

In sum, the research program I have sketched out suggests but a few possibilities for cultural analysts interested in tracing the contours of contemporary media culture. Furthermore, as a form of participatory action research, this research agenda encourages cultural analysts to assist community media organizations in their struggle to create a more democratic media culture. The following section maps out the terrain inhabited by community media. In doing so, I seek to demonstrate cultural studies' practical and theoretical utility for interrogating the dynamics of locally oriented, participatory media organizations in an increasingly privatized, global media environment. Equally important, however, I view this research program as part of a larger, ongoing effort to recapture the original impetus of the cultural studies project and, in the process, reinvest the field with a sense of political relevance and efficacy that, to my mind at least, is absent from much of our recent work.

## Locating Community Media

Like the phrase cultural studies, community media is a notoriously vague construction whose usage and meanings vary considerably. In some circles, most notably among journalists, media industry representatives and communication policy analysts, community media is unproblematically associated with commercial media organizations (i.e., publishers, broadcasters, cable television and internet service providers) that serve a particular geographic or demographic market euphemistically described as a community. A more accurate definition of community media refers to grassroots initiatives predicated on a profound sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream media form and content and dedicated to the principles of free speech and participatory democracy (Kellner, 1992; Milam, 1988; Schuler, 1994). Moreover, the community in this formulation can be defined by geography, as well as by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, or more typically, some combination thereof (Browne, 1996; Juhasz, 1995; Lewis, 1984). In other instances, especially in so-called developing countries, community media relates to a far more paternalistic orientation that views mass media as a vehicle for education, economic development and political indoctrination in the service of nation-building. In this way, development communication is equated with community communication even if the original impetus for the project comes from outside agencies, such as the national government or international aid organizations (Berrigan, 1981).

For purposes of this discussion, I use the term community media in reference to participatory, locally oriented institutions that provide an alternative or supplement to mainstream media form and content. These organizations are distinguished from their commercial and public service counterparts in three fundamental ways. First, community media provide local populations with access to the instruments of media production and distribution. Second, the organizational culture of community media stresses volunteerism over professionalism and promotes participatory management, governance and decision-making. Third, and perhaps most significantly, community media reject market-oriented approaches to communicative practices and are philosophically committed to nurturing mutually supportive, collaborative, and enduring communal relations (Devine, 1991). In sum, community media play a vital, though largely

unacknowledged role in preserving democratic forms of communication, defending local cultural autonomy, and (re)building a sense of community.

Admittedly, there is enormous variance within and between community media organizations *vis-à-vis* the level and quality of access and participation they afford community members (Barlow, 1988; Hochheimer, 1993). This condition is the result of a number of interrelated factors: the specifics of the organization's institutional mission; the particular technology in question; the ability of local communities to create a viable, non-profit media organization considering the formidable economic constraints associated with media production and distribution; and finally, the unique character of the community itself. Despite the complex and contradictory nature of these initiatives generally, and their diverse and multifaceted manifestations in particular, it is my contention that community media are pragmatic responses to inequities in the political economy of the media industries and distinctive assertions of local cultural autonomy in the wake of transnational media flows. Or, to put it more theoretically, community media represent one of many "disjunctures" within the global cultural economy (Appadurai, 1993). As such, community media warrants the attention of cultural analysts interested in interrogating the specific and particular character of translocal processes.

Operating from this perspective, I consider community media along three dimensions that are especially germane to cultural analysis. I begin by placing community media in the context of the wider political economy of the media industries. Following this, I discuss the role community media plays in mediating social, political and cultural differences. Finally, I explore community media's potential for articulating the significance of community relations. In sum, I delineate a research program that uses community media as a lens to investigate the profound yet enigmatic relationship between communication, culture, and community: a task that is, to my understanding, central to the cultural studies project. Despite its programmatic nature, this essay is nonetheless informed by current research on community media as well as my personal experience as a community media advocate and volunteer[1] In this way, I hope to minimize the pitfalls of theoretical abstraction by grounding this discussion in the daily practices and lived experience of community media producers and organizations.

## Political Economy, Cultural Studies, and Community Media

Over the past decade concentration of media ownership and control has proceeded at an unprecedented pace and scale (Bagdikian, 1997). Not surprisingly, industry representatives and deregulatory-minded policy analysts gleefully pronounce a new era of technological innovation and virtually unlimited consumer choice (Noam & Freeman, 1997; Rattner, 1996). Unmoved by the rhetorical flourishes of information age technocrats and free market advocates, critics caution that the dominance of transnational media corporations hastens the already rampant commodification of culture and the steady erosion of the public sphere (McChesney, 1999; Murdock, 1994). Positioning themselves somewhere between these two poles are the vast majority of cultural studies scholars who are at once wary of the utopian flourishes of the culture industries but equally suspect of the gloomy forecasts of political economists.

Working from this middle ground, cultural analysts employ a number of interrelated strategies for interrogating the dynamics of media culture: most notably textual analysis and audience

studies. Drawing on the theoretical precepts and methodological tools of literary studies, textual analysis rests on the assumptions that texts are constructed within and through common codes, that their meanings are neither stable nor fixed and therefore open to interpretation, and that these meanings are contextually dependent and variable according to the reader's subject position, values and beliefs. With his influential essay on the polysemic nature of texts, Stuart Hall (1980) not only provided analysts with a sophisticated theoretical framework for analyzing how audiences decipher or decode texts, but signaled the need for interrogating this process through reception analysis. Since that time, cultural scholars have interrogated the multidimensional processes through which audiences create meaning in contemporary media culture. As a result, cultural studies scholarship has provided a nuanced and provocative understanding of the complex and contradictory relationship between the culture industries, media texts, and popular audiences.

The key finding of this growing body of work is that audiences are not "cultural dupes" unable to resist the force of ideological manipulation at the hands of economic elites who control the media industries. Rather, the active audience is at once selective, endlessly creative, and rather adapt at reading texts against the hegemonic grain. Moreover, this analysis finds that audience pleasures and freedoms are empowering in that they enable people to create their own meanings and ultimately, their own culture, through their interactions with media texts and technologies. This emphasis on reception has had an important and lasting impact on media studies. First and foremost, it refutes the unproblematic equation of mass culture with inferior aesthetic quality and ideological domination by recognizing the pleasures, as well as the resources for resistance, audiences find in consumption practices. In this way, cultural studies revalidates popular culture as an important and meaningful aspect of everyday lived experience. Second, it avoids the reductionism commonly associated with critical theory by suggesting that economics is but one of a host of determining factors in the production of culture. As such, cultural studies locates cultural power outside of and distinctive from the media industries.

Although most contemporary critics agree that the high/low culture divide is a socially-constructed, if hotly contested distinction, the question of economic determination remains a thorny and divisive issue between cultural scholars and political economists. As with most academic squabbles, this discussion generates more heat than light. Indeed, the terms and the tenor of this debate underscore the chasm that has developed between cultural analysts and political economists. For example Garnham (1995) uses the metaphor of divorce to make his case, a device Grossberg (1995) takes up initially but quickly discards. Both Kellner (1997) and Murdock (1995) speak of a divide that is to be crossed or bridged. Rather than enter a fray that is largely the artifact of "an arbitrary academic division of labor" (Kellner, 1997). I will employ the respective positions of both political economists and cultural analysts to advance my position regarding community media.

Significantly, the focal point of much of this tension resides in the emphasis on media consumption that is central to contemporary cultural studies. Interesting and important as the insights gleaned from audience studies have been, a number of criticisms have surfaced regarding this approach to analyzing media culture (Condit, 1989; McGuigan, 1992, 1997; Morley, 1997). Writing in a similar vein, several influential cultural scholars have cautioned that the proliferation of these studies threatens to limit and undermine the power of cultural critique

(Ang, 1990; Morris, 1990). The banality in cultural studies these critics find so troubling stems from incessant "discoveries" of the active audience compounded by overstatements of the subversive and empowering potential of media consumption. The research program on community media that I advocate offers a robust corrective to the banal pronouncements of audience autonomy and cultural democracy common to reception studies.

To begin with, the sheer number and diversity of community media organizations around the world, coupled with their prodigious-not to mention contextually-specific-output, all but ensures that such studies would become anything but banal. So too, local support for community media in the form of volunteerism, financial contributions, and political advocacy suggests that audiences are responding to the alternative form and content these organizations provide. Consider, for example, the recent outpouring of community support for the embattled staff at KPFA in Berkeley, California: the oldest, listener supported community radio station in the United States. Thousands of people from around the San Francisco Bay area demonstrated against the Pacifica Board's treatment of staff members, its hiring practices, and allegations that the board plans to sell the Pacifica Network's flagship station (Solomon, 1999). In light of this passionate and enthusiastic support, audience analyses might fruitfully examine the relationship between local populations and community media institutions.

For instance, audience studies of this sort provide a unique opportunity to explore community media's efficacy in encouraging civic engagement and enhancing community solidarity. As such, these analyses provide important insight into strategies for mobilizing political action. Equally important, audience studies of community media provide an exceptional vehicle to explore the enigmatic relationship between communication media and the process of community building and maintenance. Finally, but perhaps most critically for purposes of this discussion, because audience members are invited to produce their own material, community media further problematize the already tenuous distinction between cultural production and cultural consumption that so often confounds collaboration between political economists and cultural analysts. In this respect, then, cultural analyses of community media might bring these two camps into a more collaborative relationship. Let me flesh out this assertion by addressing a related criticism of cultural studies' stress on consumptive practices and behaviors.

Although the critique is, at times, overstated, political economists argue persuasively that cultural studies' emphasis on media reception and consumption amounts to a refusal, on the part of some analysts, to acknowledge a key feature of mass-mediated societies. Graham Murdock characterizes the state of contemporary media culture this way:

the most pervasive and central conditions of contemporary cultural practice stem from the dynamics of capitalism as they operate within the sphere of cultural production to organize the making of public meaning, and more generally to form the conditions under which these meanings are encountered or worked out in everyday life. (Murdoch, 1995, p. 90)

To concede this point does not diminish or discount the ability of audiences to produce meaning or (re)produce culture through the artifacts of the media industries. Rather, it judiciously places audience activity in a broader social-political context that acknowledges and affirms audience pleasures and resistance without overstating audience autonomy. This balanced approach to

contemporary cultural practice is both reasonable and realistic. As Ien Ang (1990) notes: "It would be utterly out of perspective to cheerfully equate 'active' with 'powerful', in the sense of taking control at an enduring, structural or institutional level" (p. 247). Yet, as influential as Ang's essay has been, cultural analysts consistently overlook community media: a site that not only indicates considerable audience activity but vividly demonstrates tangible audience power.

That is to say, by collapsing the distinction between media producers and media consumers--a convenient fiction manufactured by the culture industries and legitimated over time by administrative and critical communication scholars alike--community media provide empirical evidence that local populations do indeed exercise a considerable amount of power at precisely the lasting and organizational levels Ang mentions. Indeed, community media underscore the creativity, pragmatism and resourcefulness of local populations in their struggle to control media production and distribution (O'Connor, 1990). Moreover, community media illuminate the possibilities for new modes of cultural production and the creation of novel and challenging cultural forms (Leuthold, 1995; Michaels, 1995). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, community media illustrate the potential for challenging existing power relations and effecting social change (Crabtree, 1990; Goldberg, 1990). All of which suggests that community media would be an interesting and important site of cultural analysis. Indeed, given Lawrence Grossberg's characterization of the cultural studies project, community media seems a "natural" for provocative cultural critique.

For cultural studies, the fact that people do use the limited resources they are given to find better ways of living, to finding ways of increasing the control they have over aspects of their lives is significant, not only in itself, but also in terms of understanding the structures of power and inequality in the contemporary world and the possibilities for challenging them. (Grossberg, 1995, p. 75)

And yet, despite the apparent theoretical and empirical significance locally oriented, participatory media holds for cultural studies--a project that is philosophically committed to locating sites of resistance which challenge the forces of domination and repression in modern society--the field all but turns a blind eye to community media. Unfortunately, cultural studies is not unique in this regard. Communication researchers generally, and political economists of the media in particular, have likewise overlooked community media both as an object of study and a site of policy intervention. This situation seems inconsistent with the tenets of critical political economy:

Developing detailed, empirically grounded critiques of actually existing market relations, prying open the gaps between promise and performance, is one of critical political economy's central contributions. The other is to help formulate feasible projects for intervention and change that move beyond paternalism and state control. (Murdcock, 1997, p. 94)

The research program I advocate seems tailor-made for just such a project. In providing community members with access to the instruments of mass communication and rejecting market-oriented approaches to media production and distribution, community media offer a powerful critique of the prevailing conditions of cultural production in mass-mediated societies. Indeed, community media are precisely one of the gaps in media culture that suggest the

possibility for realizing more democratic media systems. Furthermore, because they embody populist approaches to communication and are generally independent of formal state supervision, community media circumvent the charges of elitism and government control common to public service media[2]. In short, political economists have failed to consider a phenomenon that not only verifies their critical perspectives, but also demands their support.

The irony in all this is clear; despite a professed desire to critically interrogate and actively engage in the politics of popular culture both political economy and cultural studies tend to overlook community media's social, political, and cultural significance. If it's emphasis on consumption practices leads some critics to conclude that cultural studies is somehow complicit in economic liberalism's equation of citizenship with consumption--political economy's failure to recognize community media as a dynamic source of cultural power likewise supports dominant media institutions and practices. As a result, both camps limit the power and scope of their analysis and undermine their credibility as agents of progressive change and defenders of social justice. Based on the preceding discussion it appears that community media represents precisely the sort of strategic site for policy intervention envisioned by a number of communication scholars (Bennett, 1992; McQuail, 1997; Mueller, 1995). As such, community media not only provides some necessary linkage between cultural studies and political economy, but also serves as a unique vehicle to further interrogate the dynamics of media culture.

## Community Media As Cultural Mediation

In his erudite contribution to critical theory, Jesus Martin-Barbero (1993) recommends a fundamental reorientation in communication studies away from industry critiques and textual analyses to the social, political, and cultural *mediations* that take place within and through communicative forms and practices. Prompted by the inadequacy of imported research traditions from Europe and North America and the specificity of the Latin American media environment, this move not only acknowledges media reception as a site of cultural production, but also highlights the complex and dynamic role communication plays in cultural change.

The problems of communication have become part of the debate not simply from a quantitative and topical view--the enormous economic strength of the communication industries--but in a qualitative sense, namely, that the processes of redefining a culture are the key to comprehending the communicative nature of culture. (p. 211)

This perspective provides enormous insight into the ongoing struggle--processes Martin-Barbero characterizes variously as "confrontation and exchange" or "conflict and dialogue"--over the meanings communicated within and through media technologies and texts. Throughout his discussion, Martin-Barbero weaves theoretical insights with empirical accounts of media usage to demonstrate how mass media are embedded in the everyday lived experience of popular audiences and to illuminate the distinct role various cultural forms (e.g., theater, cinema, radio dramas and telenovelas) play in the construction of national and cultural identities. In this way, the concept of mediation encourages analysts to examine both micro and macro level processes of cultural production from a socio-historical perspective. As I hope to demonstrate here, mediation provides a valuable analytical perspective to consider community media.

For instance, at one level community media can be viewed as a strategic response to the commodification of culture and the attendant homogenization of media form and content. Akin to the practice of appropriation so often celebrated by cultural analysts, community media form and content is a bricolage of artifacts and routines generally associated with the culture industries. Like textual poachers (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 is a distinctive, though often disregarded, cultural activity that builds and nourishes affective relations.

Some of the tactics associated with community media include those of the access television producer recording media events such as press conferences and photo opportunities and subsequently editing this material with news footage in such a way as to make ironic comment on the contemptible practices of sound bite journalism and spin doctoring that frame news stories and set public agendas. They are also the tactics of impoverished rural community radio using barbed wire fencing as raw material for a makeshift transmitter following the seizure of broadcasting facilities by a repressive government. Similarly, these are practices that appropriate mainstream media forms, such as the innocuous television cooking show, to promote healthy eating habits for people who are HIV-positive. In all these cases, tactics are the means by which local populations leverage modest resources to meet their needs: needs that go unmet, and largely ignored, by commercial and public service media alike.

Significantly, community media also represent strategic alliances between social, cultural and political groups mounting and organizing resistance to the hegemony of dominant media institutions and practices. As a resource for local social service agencies, political action groups and others whose missions, methods and objectives are antithetical to existing power structures, community media publicize oppositional messages that are either distorted by or altogether omitted from mainstream media coverage. In this way community media reduce the debilitating effects of political systems that cater to well-heeled special interests by enhancing the capacity of local communities to organize themselves and participate in political processes.

Equally important, as a forum for local arts and cultural organizations, community media support and encourage local cultural production. In the face of the homogenizing influence of national media industries and the encroachment of cultural forms produced and distributed by transnational corporations, community media provide a measure of local cultural autonomy in an increasingly privatized, global media environment. Furthermore, as a physical as well as a virtual space (i.e., electronic commons), community media organizations are one of the few remaining public spaces where community members can gather to debate political issues, to celebrate local cultural heritage, and to join together as a community. In this respect, then, community media are strategic initiatives to counteract a climate of political apathy and social alienation that confounds a sense of belonging in local communities.

These tactical responses and strategic interventions constitute but several (largely overlooked) facets of the "broad range of creative and contradictory practices which peoples in different parts of the world are inventing today in their everyday dealings with the changing media environment that surrounds them" (Ang, 1990, p. 257). From this perspective, then, community media might

usefully be seen as a form of mediation between those relative few who control transnational media industries and the vast majority of people who are essentially voiceless in mass-mediated societies. In Martin-Barbero's formulation, community media constitute an important site of confrontation and exchange between the culture industries and popular audiences. In saying this, I want to underscore not only the glaring power differentials at work here but the inherent contradictions of this process. As Martin-Barbero observes: "Not every assumption of hegemonic power by the underclass is a sign of submission and not every rejection is resistance. Not everything that comes from above represents the values of the dominant class. Some aspects of popular culture respond to logics other than the logic of domination" (1993, p. 76). 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.

Perhaps the most forceful illustration of this contradictory process is the appropriation of leisure-time and work-related technologies such as audio cassette players, video cameras, and personal computers for purposes of community communication. Manufactured and marketed as consumer goods, these products enable local populations to subvert the dominance of the culture industries and resist the seduction of consumer ideology. In the hands of community media producers, these goods are technologies of freedom: instruments to mobilize political resistance, articulate cultural identities, preserve popular memory, and sustain democratic movements. And yet, the logic of the culture industries persists in these oppositional forms and practices. The reluctance of community media producers to deviate from established norms of production and distribution--as suggested by an overriding concern with Hollywood production values and audience size, the emphasis on individual achievement versus collaborative effort, and the uncritical mimicry of familiar styles and genres--indicates how difficult it is for community media producers and audiences alike to move beyond expectations forged by daily interactions with mainstream media form and content (Higgins, 1991).

Furthermore, 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[3]. Rarely do commercial or public service broadcasters even acknowledge the existence of community media organizations. When community media is recognized, it is invariably depicted as a refuge for outsider artists, hate mongers, pornographers, and the radical fringe: a perception some community media producers enthusiastically embrace. 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 prevalence of these biases and misconceptions accounts for the reluctance of communication scholars to engage with the phenomenon of community media.

Despite the antagonistic relationship between mainstream and community media, however, there are multifaceted levels of exchange. Indeed, one can detect a symbiotic relationship between these two modes of communication that illuminate the dynamics of cultural change in subtle, but profound ways. Take for example the case of community access television in the United States. During the cable industry's formative years, community television advocates and cable television

representatives enjoyed a congenial relationship and successfully lobbied federal, state, and local governments to award cable companies' lucrative franchise agreements (Engleman, 1990, 1996). Once their operations were secured, however, the cable industry quickly and ruthlessly discarded community television advocates and reneged on most of their promises for long-term financial, technical and logistical support of participatory television for local communities. Despite the enormity of this setback for community communication, community television advocates were instrumental in legitimating the cable television industry. Without this support the explosive growth of cable television in the United States would surely have been constrained by protracted regulatory processes and the objections of a powerful broadcast industry. As has been well documented, cable television significantly altered America's electronic environment and produced considerable cultural change.

Less well known and rarely acknowledged is the influence community television has had on mainstream television form and content. Champions of lightweight portable video recording systems, community television producers reveled in their ability to document everyday life with a force and clarity heretofore unknown on commercial television. For example, the work of independent journalists Keiko Tsungo and Jon Alpert, founders of Downtown Community Television in New York City, shattered many of the conventions of television journalism through the use of hand-held camera and other "guerrilla video" techniques (Barnow, 1983). The verite sensibility that was once the sole purview of community television producers is now commonplace on network, cable, and public service television. A more infamous example of this symbiotic relationship is the television skit and subsequent feature film *Wayne's World*--a self-serving caricature of community access television's most excessive, base and demeaning tendencies. *Wayne's World* went on to become an enormous financial success and something of a global cultural phenomenon largely at the expense of community access television.

While these instances vividly demonstrate the (uneven) exchange between community media and the culture industries, community media also serve as an important, but largely overlooked form of cultural mediation within and between disparate social groups. Nowhere is this tendency more evident than in the construction of personal and collective identity within and through communicative forms and practices. Again, quite unlike commercial and public service media, community media encourage various groups within the community to produce material that is at once relevant to their interests and reflective of their experience. Community media therefore enable disparate social groups to speak for themselves, in their distinctive idiom, and as an expression of their particular point of view. For purposes of this discussion, then, community media provide cultural analysts with a unique vehicle to explore these representational practices and interrogate the process of identity formation through media texts and technologies.

In recent years, issues of representation generally, and identity politics in particular have intensified due in large part to developments in transportation and communication technologies. The ease with which people, sounds, imagery, and cultural practices move about the globe creates tensions within and between nations and peoples. Cultural analysts are particularly interested in examining how ethnic, racial, and cultural groups negotiate the dramatic disruptions to social relations associated with migration, urbanization, and technological innovation.

Work of this sort examines two related trajectories of contemporary media culture. The first focuses on the multifaceted uses of media in preserving and maintaining cultural identities across space and over time; the second explores media's role in creating new cultural territories between geographically distant and culturally distinct groups (Gillespie, 1975, 1989; Lull & Wallis, 1992). This line of research illuminates the central paradox of technological innovation. On one hand, developments in transportation and communication decentralize cultural production and expand the range of cultural invention at the local level. On the other hand, these same technologies are essential components in the standardization of cultural production and the reconstitution of centralized control on a global scale (Abu-Lughod, 1992). Viewed in this light, community media might be understood as an expression of the felt need of local populations to exploit as well as contain these forces in an effort to make sense of the dramatic, and at times traumatic, upheavals associated with the dynamics of globalization.

This is not to suggest, however, that community media provide an unproblematic solution to the deep-seated anxieties and very real antagonisms associated with increasingly pluralistic societies. To the contrary, community media are often used to disseminate hurtful and at times inflammatory messages that promote intolerance, injustice, and violence (Zoglin, 1993). In their efforts to realize the principles of free speech and deliberative democracy, community media organizations are obliged to distribute material that exacerbates tensions within the community. As unsettling and repugnant as this first appears, there is some value in this; not least of which is an unequivocal repudiation of any notions of happy pluralism. With an intensity, depth, and clarity far superior to anything found in their commercial or public service counterparts, community media illuminate the process of conflict and dialogue that is fundamental to community building and maintenance. In this way, community media underscore the enormous challenge confronting democratic societies struggling to reconcile the high-minded ideals of civil rights and equal opportunity with the harsh realities of structural inequalities, institutionalized racism, gender inequity, and ethnocentrism.

That is to say, by giving voice to various social groups, community media graphically demonstrate the profound differences of class, gender, race and ethnicity within the community. Moreover, community media undermine essentialist notions of race, gender, and ethnicity by illuminating differences within monolithic categories such as Black, Hispanic, Asian, Gay, and Lesbian. Therefore, unlike either commercial or public service media--which rarely allow people to speak for themselves--community media underscore the constructed and contested quality of individual and collective identity. In terms of this discussion, then, community media not only enable cultural analysts to interrogate the process of identity formation through communication technologies, but also invite analysts to examine the impact of dramatic social and technological change on the everyday lived experience of various groups within a particular locality.

## Knowable Communities: Articulating the Local And the Global

I close this essay with a reference to the late Raymond Williams: a presence that, in his words, persists and connects with the arguments I have been advancing. Throughout much of his writing, either as a central theme or a more general subtext, Williams illuminates a structure of feeling that permeates modern society--a profound sense of loss of and an equally profound yearning for community--and links this condition directly to a problem of communication[4].

Using Williams' conceptual frameworks and analytical insights I want to underscore the theoretical and practical importance of the cultural analysis of community media I advocate. Equally important, by invoking Williams' passionate commitment to mutual recognition and common understanding, I hope to emphasize the political urgency of this line of inquiry.

In an essay on the nineteenth-century English country novel Williams coins the phrase "knowable communities" to describe the distinctive approach of the novel, as a cultural form, in dramatically and forcefully revealing the character and quality of people and their relationships. Tracing the historical development of the novel, Williams observes the increasing difficulty of this task--a challenge confronting not only the novelist but also the whole of society--in the wake of the profound social, economic, and political transformations associated with the Industrial Revolution. Williams notes

identity and community became more problematic, as a matter of perception and as a matter of valuation, as the scale and complexity of the characteristic social organization increased. ... The growth of towns and especially cities and a metropolis: the increasing division and complexity of labour; the altered and critical relations between and within social classes: in changes like these any assumption of a knowable community--a whole community, wholly knowable--became harder and harder to sustain. (1973, p. 165)

At the dawn of the 21st century, the scale and complexity of social organization grows ever more unwieldy. Indeed, the developments in transportation and communication technologies that once engendered the formation of the "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991) of modern nationalism challenge the nation-state's ability to contain and control the movement of people, goods and services thereby fundamentally altering social relations within and between nations and making the possibility of realizing a knowable community ever more remote. Not surprisingly, then, the crisis of community and identity that Williams observes in English literature of the 18th and 19th centuries is apparent in a number of contemporary social movements and cultural formations: religious fundamentalism, ethnic nationalism, and, I would argue, a growing global interest in community communication.

Then as now, the solution to this crisis of community and identity in an increasingly complex and interdependent world is not simply a matter of transmitting information; rather, the significance of relations between people and their shared environment must, according to Williams, "be forced into consciousness" (1973, p. 165). Here then, in a discussion of the English novel, Williams develops a theoretical perspective that views modern communication as an important and necessary cultural response to the increased complexity of social organization and the attendant problems of individual and collective identity. And yet, in his analysis of mass communication systems proper, Williams finds the content of modern communications a poor substitute for direct observation and interaction.

Significantly, this inadequacy is not simply nostalgia for some lost ideal of face-to-face community, nor is it merely a problem of technology or technique; rather, it stems from a mode of production: the minority ownership of communication systems. For Williams, this mode of production is a perversion of communicative practices in that it encourages exclusive access to the instruments of mass communication and the one-way transmission of information:

information that promotes a shared, though limited and uneven consciousness in the support of systems of domination (1983). Williams concludes that by serving the narrow and particular interests of a relative few, this prevailing--but by no means inevitable nor unalterable--condition ultimately corrupts a necessary and vital resource for a vibrant culture and a democratic society.

Throughout this essay, I have argued that community media represent an important, if imperfect, corrective to this condition. Furthermore, drawing on Williams' formulation, I suggest that community media serve to create knowable communities in much the same way as the novel. Like the fiction of Charles Dickens, whom Williams singles out for his genius in revealing the "unknown and unacknowledged relationships, [and] profound and decisive connections" (1973, p. 155) between people of the city, community media articulate the significant and decisive relationships within and between community members. That is to say, by providing a venue for individual and collective self-expression, community media make knowable not only the enormous variation of people, interests, and relationships within a locality, but also, critically, the commonalty and interrelatedness of these individuals, groups and concerns. In this way, community media engender a two-fold recognition of difference and significance: a new awareness of belonging to and responsibility toward the community.

Equally important to Williams' notion of the knowable community are the varied and multifaceted subjective impressions of community life. "For what is knowable is not only a function of objects--of what is there to be known. It is also the function of subjects, of observers--of what is desired and what needs to be known. ... it is the observer's position in and towards it; a position which is part of the community being known" (Williams, 1973, p. 165). Here, I would argue, community media are superior to the knowable community of the novel in one important and decisive way. For while the novelist may take great pains to capture and convey the attitudes and perspectives of disparate community members, the writer can never faithfully inhabit a subject position other than his or her own. Despite the considerable talents of novelist, then, as a cultural form, the novel has serious shortcomings in this respect. On the other hand, by giving voice to individuals of different social classes, racial and ethnic affiliations, lifestyles, and generations, community media make available the unique interpretations and subjective impressions of community life from a multiplicity of alternative perspectives. Community media therefore create a shared consciousness within and among community members, who voice their concerns, express their hopes, communicate their needs, and share their experiences.

With this in mind, I maintain that community media recover an ancient, but enduring quality of communication that has been historically, but not irrevocably displaced by market-oriented approaches to communicative forms and practices. Community media do this by embracing a perspective that vehemently rejects minority ownership of communication systems and adopts

a different attitude to transmission, one which will ensure that its origins are genuinely multiple, that all the sources have access to common channels. This is not possible until it is realized that a transmission is always an offering, and that this fact must determine its mood: it is not an attempt to dominate, but to communicate, to achieve reception and response. (1983, p. 316)

Not only is this approach vital for creating and sustaining knowable communities on a local level, it suggests new configurations for appreciating the cultural dynamics of globalization.

Indeed, community media rather forcefully undermine the binary opposition of the categories of "local" and "global" in two discrete, but interrelated ways. First, by historicizing and particularizing the penetration of global forces into local contexts, community media undermine normative or nostalgic ideals of local communities as insular or discrete formations that until recently were uninfluenced by extralocal factors and conditions. Rather, by preserving popular memories, celebrating local cultural traditions, and tracing the movement of various groups into local neighborhoods, community media vividly demonstrate the influence extralocal forces have had, and continue to exert, on the formation of local identities and cultures. Moreover, by appropriating and indigenizing disparate cultural forms and practices, community media deflect fears of an emerging, homogeneous global culture. In this way, community media are an important aspect of the process of local adaptation to foreign cultural traditions, practices and artifacts.

Second, by embracing the notion that communication is an offering, an effort to share and celebrate, rather than an attempt to command and dominate, community media contribute local cultural forms and expressions to the matrix of translocal interactions that characterize the present era. In other words, community media make a substantial, but often overlooked contribution to the endless stream of variation and diversity of cultural forms and practices around the world. All of which suggests that community media represent an important site to illuminate the interpenetrations of local, regional, and national cultures within and through communication technologies. Hence, the sustained, multiperpectival cultural analysis of community media of the sort I advocate engenders a more nuanced understanding of the dialectical relationship between the local and the global. Indeed, in light of the universalizing discourses of globalization and the perceived threat of cultural homogenization, community media dramatically demonstrate the particular and multidimensional nature of collective identity in the modern world. In this respect, then, the study of community media can make significant contributions to social and cultural theory.

Furthermore, by treating community members as citizens, not as consumers, community media foster a greater awareness of the interdependent nature of social relations and shared environments both locally and globally. For instance, community media provide a resource for a host of social, political and environmental movements to increase local awareness of these pressing issues and, significantly, a vehicle to link these local issues with global concerns (Downing, 1991). In this way, community media engender a global consciousness of sorts. Clearly, this is not the monolithic nor totalizing consciousness popularized by Marshall McLuhan--an attitude embraced by transnational corporations in their desire to conflate consumer ideology with the principles of social justice and political democracy. Rather, it is an emerging, critical awareness of the profound and decisive connections between peoples and localities in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world: what Doreen Massey (1993) has described as "a global sense of the local." In this light, community media can be understood as contributing to the creation of global villages: communities of significance and solidarity that recognize difference and acknowledge mutual responsibility on a local, national, regional, and global level.

Lest these remarks be taken as so much wishful thinking, I would suggest that they are no more romantic than the plethora of studies that suggest the emancipatory potential of resistant readings

of popular television texts or the liberating possibilities of a trip to the shopping mall. Rather, I have argued that community media initiatives around the world are making a modest, but vitally important difference in the lives of local populations by enthusiastically affirming our individual and collective agency as cultural producers and engaged citizens. Similarly, by acknowledging the value of diverse cultural expression, encouraging local forms of cultural production, and rejecting the rather staid and sterile form and content of mainstream media, community media contribute to a vibrant and challenging local cultural environment. Moreover, in confirming the ability of local populations to effectively utilize the instruments of mass communication, community media belie the notion that use of communication and information technologies are best left to a handful of economic and technical elites. Most important, however, by recognizing and affirming local populations as citizens first and foremost, community media encourage political participation and civic engagement in the life of local communities. As dramatic evidence of the negotiated quality of contemporary media culture, then, community media give cultural analysts something to really celebrate!

And yet, as noted throughout this discussion, community media initiatives are imperfect; these institutions and practices are replete with contradictory impulses and tendencies. For the cultural analyst, then, community media represent a host of theoretical problems concerning democratic processes and cultural politics. But community media invite much more than critical investigation. As one of the few remaining vestiges of participatory democracy, community media demand the active engagement of media intellectuals whose expertise can inform and enhance the vital work of these organizations and help maintain and secure a dynamic resource for cultural production and democratic processes (see e.g., Rosen, 1994). In this way, community media represent both a unique opportunity and a formidable challenge. On the one hand, community media permit analysts to interrogate the dynamics of global media culture in a local context. Or, to employ Ien Ang's useful phrase, community media provide an elegant means to "trace the global in the local and the local in the global" (1990, p. 225). On the other hand, community media require cultural analysts to reconsider their celebratory tone and commit themselves, as intellectuals and as community members, to creating viable alternatives to the culture industries and promoting a more democratic media culture. If cultural studies are to recapture its social and political relevancy, scholars must resist the temptation to equate semiotic democracy with political democracy and temper theoretical excess with practical interventionism. Community media initiatives invite cultural scholars not only to test their theoretical propositions in particular and distinctive contexts but also to contribute their analytical insights to the everyday lived experience of their local communities.

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## Footnotes

[1] From 1984-1994 I worked in various capacities as a community access television producer and trainer. More recently, I was a community radio volunteer at WFHB in Bloomington, Indiana between 1995-1997.

[2] Because local conditions vary considerably, this statement is something of a generalization. Still, community media generally enjoy greater autonomy than do public service media. Community media organizations receive funding, technical and logistical support from a variety of sources including libraries, universities, city, state and federal governments. Community computer networks are a good illustration of this. See for example Cisler (1993).

[3] Programs such as *America's Funniest Home Videos* exemplify this condition. The implicit assumption behind such treatment is that "nonprofessionals" can't make legitimate television. Indeed, community access television is a favorite target of this sort of derision. For example, a recent installment of the daytime talk show *Jenny Jones* (Air date: January 21, 1999) entitled "World's Worst Cable Access Shows" featured audience members belittling the work of community producers.

[4] Significantly, James Carey, a leading exponent of the North American variant of Cultural Studies has likewise made this a central theme in his work. Carey traces this problematic from the work of a number of influential thinkers associated with the Chicago School of Sociology, including, among others, the American pragmatist John Dewey and Canadian political economist Harold Innis.

## Author Note

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