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Introduction

> I was having this discussion in a taxi headed downtown.
> Paul Simon, *Gumboots*

My first night in Bloomington, Indiana – the small mid-western city I would call home for the next four years – I took a taxi downtown. When I visit a city I'm not familiar with, I'll take a long walk or maybe hop in a cab to get a sense of the place. Perhaps I'll ask the driver for a restaurant recommendation, or inquire about the local sports team, or absent-mindedly comment on the weather. But on that balmy June evening I had to find out what station my driver had tuned in; the music coming from the dashboard radio was a rather obscure country blues number. "Oh," he said with a distinct sense of pride, "that's our community radio station, WFHB." He went on to give me an abridged version of the station's turbulent history: the early fundraising and organizing difficulties; the fierce competition for available frequencies; the protracted licensing procedure; and the search for a permanent downtown location.

As luck or fate would have it, my destination – a newly opened restaurant called Positively Fourth Street – was located directly across the street from the radio station's future home: the old city firehouse. As I emerged from the cab, the driver, perhaps sensing my growing curiosity, encouraged me to join the station once I'd completed my move from New York City. In early September, I took up the driver's advice and introduced myself to the station's program director. Within a matter of months, I landed an air-shift during WFHB's Monday afternoon music mix.

Over the course of the next three and a half years, I became involved in a variety of the station's daily operations. In addition to attending monthly general membership meetings, I participated in various station functions, including a number of street festivals and other fundraising activities, served as a member of the program selection and development committee, and played left field for the station's softball team, the WFHB Junkyard Dogs. Like others whose work or studies have taken them to Bloomington in recent years, WFHB became a home away from home.

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More information

Equally important, I had serendipitously stumbled upon an intriguing site of analysis for my doctoral studies in the Department of Telecommunications at Indiana University. All thanks to a tip I got from a local cab driver.

That cabby's name is John Westhues, and on Friday nights in Bloomington, he doesn't drive fares around town. He produces a show on WFHB featuring the music of Finland, Sweden, and the North Countries: a program he calls "Scenes from the Northern Lights." Although John Westhues' show is unique in many respects – after all, there are few (if any) programs on US commercial, public, or community radio, for that matter, that feature such a lively mix of jazz, pop, rock, and traditional folk music from northern Europe – the energy, commitment, and passion John brings to his program is not uncommon. Once a week John and a cadre of long-time residents, and not a few transients, bring Bloomington a vibrant, and decidedly eclectic, noncommercial alternative to the commercial and public service radio stations that serve south central Indiana.

This book is about community media. By community media, I 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. Specifically, the book examines the motivations behind and the ways in which local populations come to make use of various technologies – radio, television, print, and computer networks – for purposes of community communication.

In the pages that follow, I argue that community media are popular and strategic interventions into contemporary media culture committed to the democratization of media structures, forms, and practices. Popular in that these initiatives are responses to the *felt need* of local populations to create media systems that are relevant to their everyday lives; strategic in that these efforts are purposeful assertions of collective identity and local autonomy in the era marked by the unprecedented concentration of media ownership on the local and national levels and by the attendant proliferation of transnational media flows. All of which is to suggest that community media are part of a wider movement encompassing direct action campaigns, trade union and media work reform efforts, culture jamming, and communication scholarship, among other *critical interventions*, committed to the struggle for "communicative democracy" (Hackett 2000).

Significantly, this book appears at a time when the centrality of communication to the health and well being of democratic society has received

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More information

considerable attention in both the academic and popular press. Among the many concerns voiced in recent years has been a persistent unease over the consequences of media privatization and consolidation on democratic processes. Critics contend that participatory democracy is undermined by inequitable access to communication channels and by the narrow range of voices and interests presented through the mass media. If, as communication scholar Robert McChesney (1999) suggests, the level of public participation in communication policy-making processes is indicative of any given society's level of participatory democracy, then the current state of democracy in the United States is poor. When this same formula is applied globally, McChesney's critique takes on even greater urgency in light of an "information revolution" that arguably has been left to the devices of a handful of nation-states and transnational corporations. And yet, despite the proliferation of academic tomes that denounce the threat to democratic societies posed by deregulation – or what Ken Robins (1995) more accurately describes as a process of re-regulation – and the subsequent spate of industry mergers and acquisitions, relatively few political economists have offered sustained analyses of locally oriented, participatory media of the sort discussed in these pages.

And despite their keen appreciation for local cultural production and their affirmation of popular forms of resistance, cultural studies scholars likewise and inexplicably overlook community media. Indeed, much has been made of audiences' ability to produce meaning and (re)produce culture through the artifacts of the media industries. Useful as these insights are, however, there has been a tendency to overstate audience autonomy. As media scholar Ien Ang 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" (1990: 247). Influential as Ang's analysis has been, cultural scholars 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 considerable power at precisely the lasting and organizational levels Ang describes. Indeed, community media underscore the creativity, pragmatism, and resourcefulness of local populations in their struggle to control media production and distribution.

Furthermore, given concerns surrounding the role communication technologies play in articulating a "sense of place," it is not only surprising, but somewhat alarming, that communication and cultural studies

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scholarship has consistently overlooked and undervalued community media as a site of analysis. The growing body of literature devoted to the use of media in diasporic cultures is testament to the centrality of communication to the construction of individual, ethnic, and cultural identities across time and space (King and Wood 2001; Morley 2000; Sakr 2002). And yet, locally oriented, participatory media's role in facilitating this process of collective identity construction in geographically defined communities has not received the same attention. An important subtext of this book, therefore, is the contention that community media represents a significant, but largely untapped site of analysis into the dynamics of media culture.

All too often, academics and other observers tend to conflate community media with public service broadcasting as well as so-called "alternative media." Here, I am thinking of Lewis and Booth's (1990) analysis of public service, commercial radio, and community radio; Ralph Engelman's (1996) concise yet incisive discussion of public access television in the context of US public service broadcasting; several case studies from John Dowling's (1984) seminal volume on what he describes as "self-managed" media systems; and Chris Atton's (2002) recent work on alternative media. In the last instance, the phrase "alternative media," which all too often serves as a "catch-all" that embraces a variety of media forms and practices – some participatory in nature, others not, that may or may not have very much relevance to geographically situated communities – confounds the study of participatory communication models like those associated with community media (Protz 1991). To my mind, these varied and influential works nonetheless constitute an ill-defined sub-set of media studies devoted to community-based media.

Scholar and activist Dorothy Kidd (1999) comes closest to explicating a relationship between alternative and community media, which captures the dynamics of locally oriented, participatory media organizations that are my focus in this study. Kidd's elegantly simple definition parses out the phrase "alternative" in a fashion that crystallizes our understanding of community-based media. From Kidd's perspective, alternative media are predicated on altering or changing prevailing media systems and the broader socio-cultural environment. The emphasis on critical intervention and social change is paramount here. Equally important, in Kidd's formulation alternative media is "of, by, and for" people living in a specific place. Kidd concludes,

> Alternative media grow, like native plants, in the communities that they serve, allowing spaces to generate historical memories and analyses, nurture visions for their future, and weed out the representations of dominant media. They do this

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through a wide combination of genres, from news, storytelling, conversation and debate to music in local vernaculars.

(116)

All of which is not to suggest, however, that communication and cultural studies scholars have failed to produce vivid and insightful scholarship on community media. In recent years, a number of scholars have written very excellent case studies of community media organizations. Here I am thinking of Alan O'Connor's (1990) discussion of community radio in Bolivia; Norma Fay Green's (1998) work on Chicago's *Street Wise* publication; and more recently Clemencia Rodriguez's (2001) collection of case studies dedicated to what she describes as "citizens' media." Conversely, other analysts have examined the history and development of a particular technology used for purposes of community communication. Douglas Kellner's (1991) and Kim Goldberg's (1990) work on public access and community television come to mind, as does Howard Rheingold's (1993) popular text on community networks, as well as Jo Tacchi and Eryl-Price Davies' (2001) global overview of community radio.

The result is an impressive body of literature, which nonetheless suffers from theoretical underdevelopment (Jankowski 2003). That is to say, these engaging and richly detailed case studies often fail to situate community media in the context of contemporary cultural theory, or within the wider contours of our rapidly changing communication environment for that matter. Not one to argue theory for theory's sake, I am nonetheless convinced that in the absence of a more theoretically informed approach to community media, one that can guide further investigation and analysis of locally oriented, participatory media organizations and practices, we fail to fully appreciate one of the more dynamic aspects of contemporary media culture. This project seeks to rectify this situation inasmuch as I attempt to provide a theoretical framework that might inform a more fully sustained cultural analysis of community media.

No doubt, the difficulties associated with adequately defining the term "community" have confounded the study of community media. I disappeared down that particular rabbit hole while writing my doctoral dissertation and have no desire to repeat that academic exercise here. Suffice it to say that I base my analysis upon literature from diverse sources in political science, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies concerned with what might best be summarized as "the symbolic construction of community." For instance, political scientist Benedict Anderson's (1991) influential text, *Imagined Communities*, explicates the decisive role print-capitalism played in the construction of the modern nation-state. Anderson draws our attention to the symbolic space and simultaneity

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Kevin Howley
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of experience created by the production and ritual consumption of the daily newspaper. Incorporating the novel and other aspects of print culture, including record keeping and other governmental and bureaucratic uses of print and related technologies, Anderson's analysis foregrounds the role that communication technologies play in creating and sustaining the "deep, horizontal comradeship" that is the imagined community of nationalism (Anderson: 7).

Working along similar lines, anthropologist Anthony Cohen contends that the borders or boundaries that both "contain" and "differentiate" communities are, in large part, symbolically constructed. Through an array of symbolic practices – language, dress, custom, and ritual – communities come to identify themselves. By participating in these symbolic practices and investing meaning in them, individuals define themselves as members of a particular community. In turn, these symbolic practices help differentiate communities from one another. This, according to Cohen, is "the triumph of community" (1985: 20). That is, communities are *expressions of commonality as well as difference*. All of which underscores the fundamental, yet enigmatic relationship between communication and community. Following on from John Dewey's oft-cited remark (e.g. Carey 1975; Hardt 1975): "There is more than a verbal tie between the words 'communication' and 'community'"; this book foregrounds the role communication plays in *articulating* community.

Here, I am using the phrase articulation in the double sense of the word employed by Stuart Hall (1986). Articulation refers at once to "speaking" or "uttering" as well as to a "connection" or "linkage" between disparate elements, such as the connection between a truck and a trailer that is pulled from behind. In Hall's formulation, the alliance between different social actors or groups, as in political coalitions, is an example of articulation. Significantly, for Hall, this connection is neither necessary nor inevitable; rather these linkages or articulations are contingent and volatile. Under the rubric of cultural studies, the concept of articulation helps to explain the "complex totality" of social formations and provides a method of analysis for examining how unities are forged out of distinct elements that have no inherent sense of "belongingness." Used in both senses, then, articulation offers a way to conceptualize community as a unity of differences; a unity forged through symbol, ritual, language, and discursive practices.

This insight has significant political implications inasmuch as it highlights the role of human agency in shaping or rearticulating social formations. From this perspective, then, articulation serves not only as an analytical tool for theorizing and examining social formations, but also an organizing strategy for progressive social change. As Jennifer Daryl Slack

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Kevin Howley
Excerpt
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suggests, articulation "is crucial for understanding how cultural theorists conceptualize the world, analyze it and participate in shaping it" (1996: 112). With this in mind, articulation provides insights into the ways in which local populations come to acquire and make use of communication technologies for community communication. Equally important, articulation offers cultural analysts a range of methodological approaches, most notably participant observation, from which not only to consider but also to work in tandem with these popular interventions into contemporary media culture.[1]

This book, therefore, examines the complex and dynamic relationship between people, places, and communication technologies. It explores the arrangements between various players and interests – community organizers, NGOs, philanthropic organizations, government agencies, technology manufacturers, artists and other cultural workers, and geographically situated populations – in creating and sustaining locally oriented, participatory media organizations. Furthermore, it investigates the remarkable and multifaceted uses and applications of communication technologies in communicating a sense of place, belonging, fellowship, and solidarity.

Specifically, the book considers four institutions: WFHB, community radio in Bloomington, Indiana; Downtown Community Television in New York City; *Street Feat*, a "street newspaper" in Halifax, Nova Scotia; and VICNET, a community computer network sponsored by the state library of Victoria, Australia. Taken in turn, each of these four cases highlight the complex, contested, and contradictory process of building and sustaining a community media organization in an increasingly privatized global media environment; together, they suggest an implicit, cross-cultural, and timeless understanding of the profound linkages between community cohesion, social integration, and communicative forms and practices.

Each site was selected for its unique setting and characteristics. Thus, the case studies are properly seen as purposive samples of community media initiatives. For example, WFHB is notable for several reasons, not least of which because WFHB's experience is a telling illustration of community media's significance in correcting dramatic imbalances in the political economy of the media industries. On the other hand, Downtown Community Television (DCTV) illuminates community media's role in promoting and facilitating local cultural production, especially among those groups and individuals who have been economically or culturally marginalized by mainstream media. DCTV's long history of community outreach illuminates the relationship between cultural politics and technological form.

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Kevin Howley
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For its part, *Street Feat* represents an extraordinary new trend in newspaper publication. Like other so-called "street newspapers," *Street Feat* constitutes an alternative public sphere (Fraser 1992) among Halifax's homeless, unemployed, and working poor by publishing the opinions, perspectives, and experience of the city's growing indigent population. In the hopes of fostering a critical consciousness of economic and social justice issues, *Street Feat* attempts to communicate the experience of impoverished peoples to wider publics through the sale of a monthly newspaper. Lastly, VICNET uses the latest in communication and information technology (CIT) to promote the state government's new vision of Victoria as a sophisticated, multicultural player in the emerging post-industrial economy of the Pacific Rim. As cultural historian Carolyn Marvin (1988) reminds us, the introduction of new technologies challenges, upsets and alters the character and conduct of social intercourse within and between communities. Viewed in this light, then, VICNET demonstrates community media's role in (re) imagining community.

The book is organized as follows. Chapter 1 attempts to "locate" community media in a broader social, cultural, and political context. To that end, this discussion examines the consequences associated with media consolidation and the proliferation of transnational media flows. In the first section of this chapter, I examine the threat media privatization represents to participatory democracy on local, national, regional, and international levels. The discussion situates the study of community media in relation to media studies scholarship informed by political economy and cultural studies, among other theoretical orientations. Next, I revisit debates over cultural imperialism with particular attention to the impact of transnational media flows on local cultural autonomy. Throughout, I lay out insights and perspectives that help to situate community media in relation to contemporary critical and cultural theory.

Chapter 2 provides a global perspective on local uses of specific technologies. What is distinctive and unique about each of the book's substantive case studies becomes more apparent against the backdrop of historical developments in community communication and a contemporary overview of the present state of community media. This concise, but by no means comprehensive look at community media around the world provides this context. By incorporating an overview of community media initiatives around the world, the book is designed not only to underscore that which is distinctive about the four case studies, but also to highlight the patterns, trends, and tendencies that are common to community media initiatives generally.

Significantly, this chapter draws upon the work of a number of national and international NGOs interested in community communication.

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Excerpt
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Organizations such as the World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC); the European Alliance for Community Networking (EACN); the North American Street Newspaper Association (NASNA); and the Alliance for Community Media (ACM), to name a few, provide technical, legal, and logistical support for community media initiatives around the world. Incorporating information and insights gleaned from these organizations provides this study with a broader, global perspective on community media that the discrete case studies cannot provide in isolation.

Chapter 3 presents the first of four in-depth case studies. It relates the long struggle to establish community radio in Bloomington, Indiana, from its origins at the National Alternative Radio Konference (NARK) in 1975 to the present day. Through the recollections of WFHB's founding members, popular press accounts, and participant observation, this discussion examines the legal, technical, and economic obstacles that faced Bloomington's community radio movement. It links WFHB's institutional philosophy and programming style to various alternative radio practices that proliferated in Bloomington throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as well as to the broader tradition of community radio in the United States. Throughout, I discuss WFHB's attempts to negotiate the tensions between noncommercial, locally oriented radio and the economic realities of broadcasting, especially as they relate to the arena of news and public affairs programming.

Downtown Community Television is the subject of Chapter 4. Operating for well over a quarter century, Downtown Community Television has had a dramatic impact on the lives of people who live and work in Lower Manhattan. This chapter relates DCTV's extraordinary history with special emphasis on the role community outreach has played in creating a viable community television organization. Participant observation, historical research, and in-depth interviews with DCTV staff and producers illuminate community television's role in identity politics, community organizing, and cultural expression. Throughout, I emphasize DCTV's commitment to media education, cross-cultural communication, and independent journalism.

Chapter 5 turns to a consideration of Halifax, Nova Scotia's street paper, *Street Feat*. Founded in 1997, in response to the growing problem of homelessness throughout Atlantic Canada, *Street Feat* has struggled to become a "voice of the poor" as well as a viable business concern. Written and distributed by people who are homeless or otherwise economically disadvantaged, *Street Feat* is committed to empowering marginalized people, effectively communicating their plight to the wider community, and ultimately ending homelessness. Text-based analysis of the newspaper in addition to in-depth interviews with the paper's staff and readership

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Kevin Howley
Excerpt
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provide insight into *Street Feat*'s efficacy as a tool for progressive social change and as the locus for the construction of "an alternative public sphere" for the poor and those who work on their behalf.

The last of the case studies, Chapter 6, explores the use of computer-mediated communication in building and maintaining a sense of community in the state of Victoria, Australia throughout the late 1990s – the dawn of the information age. Here, I examine the varied motivations behind the Victorian state government's large-scale capital investment in computer-based and information technologies. In describing the network's disparate services, this discussion illuminates Victoria's transition from an industrial to an information-based economy. It also discusses how VICNET's design philosophy may confound popular participation in community networking and probes the contradictory impulses behind this information age community development scheme.

Mindful of the similarities between all of these efforts to reclaim the media, the final chapter surveys the particular and distinctive articulations of community media in each of the communities profiled throughout. Conversely, I hope to illuminate the more universal and general impulses that fuel community media initiatives across the globe. In doing so, I underscore community media's role in promoting civic participation, enhancing community relations, and supporting local cultural autonomy. Finally, I suggest the study of community media provides a useful site of analysis, and an equally fruitful site of intervention for scholars of communication, political economy, and cultural studies. Throughout, I argue that interrogating the social, cultural, and political dynamics of community media provides a convenient, but curiously overlooked lens to examine the fundamental but paradoxical relationship between communicative forms and practices and popular conceptions and articulations of community.

Much has been made of the potentially liberating effect of communication and information technologies (CIT). The proliferation of small format video cameras, for instance, is hailed as a boon for individual self-expression. Likewise, the diffusion of relatively inexpensive radio transmission gear, computers, high-quality printers, and web-related technologies is viewed by some as the beginning of a great reawakening of the democratic spirit. The emergence of Independent Media Centers (IMCs) helps fuel these notions. Cropping up in tandem with organized protests surrounding international trade meetings, global economic summits, environmental debates, and, more recently, anti-war protests, IMCs make shrewd and rather sophisticated use of digital production and distribution equipment to circumvent the gatekeeping function of corporate

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