COMMUNITY MEDIA RESEARCH: A QUEST FOR THEORETICALLY-GROUNDED MODELS

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Abstract

This article provides a panoramic sketch of the characteristics of community media and focuses on three forms: community television, community radio and community networks. The author contends, after a review of research conducted around these media, that much of this work has contributed little to the development of theoretical perspectives and theoretical model building suitable for guiding further empirical investigations. An illustration, taken from one theoretical perspective, is provided of the kind of model building that can be achieved. In conclusion, community media researchers are encouraged to take up the challenge associated with the general mandate for social scientists to contribute to theory, in this case through construction of theoretically-grounded models for understanding the place of community media in society.

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Introduction

It appears as if community media are experiencing a renaissance of interest among scholars. In the past three decades interest has never been so high, as demonstrated at the conference of the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) held in Barcelona in July 2002. There, nearly 50 papers were presented by academics from around the world in sessions with "standing room only" conditions. Prior to these sessions, a daylong preconference, hosted by the Community Communication Section of the IAMCR, drew another capacity-space audience for a score of presentations and papers.

Two of the organisers of the IAMCR Community Communication Section events, Per Jauert and I, decided to compile this theme issue of *Javnost—The Public*, based on a selection of those papers. The work presented in this issue reflects no more than a "tip of the iceberg" of contemporary scholarship related to community media. At the same time, this tip reflects some of the best work, theoretical and empirical, now being conducted on these media.

The issue leads off with an essay on counter public spheres situated in relation to what the authors, Natalie Fenton and John Downey, term global modernity. This contribution is followed by an analysis of the communication strategies employed by different groups protesting the World Trade Organisation Seattle meeting in 1999. Here, Melissa Wall makes use of social movement theory, particularly the concepts of framing and resource mobilisation in her analysis. The third contribution, from Elinor Rennie, considers changes in the concept of media access with regard to communications policy related to community television in Australia. She suggests that the age of digital media brings with it opportunity to envision community media in a different perspective than during the era of analogue media. The fourth article in this collection draws from a government mandated assessment of the local radio and television programming in Denmark. The authors, Per Jauert and Ole Prehn, present both the methodology of the study and an overall summary of the findings. In the fifth article, Effendi Gazali provides a portrayal of the place occupied by community media during the current transformation of the media landscape in Indonesia. Finally, Sorin Matei contributes a piece that is not oriented towards community media, but explores the nature of social ties in martial relations, essentially a form of communities of interest maintained through computer-mediated communication.

Each of these articles stands on its own merits and, in that respect, they do not require a collective, extended introduction. The overall phenomena of community media, however, may deserve elaboration, particularly for readers less familiar with this niche area of study. In this contribution, then, I sketch what is meant by community media. I also consider some of the main foci of empirical investigation during the past two decades for this field. Finally, I discuss the main limitation of much of this work – its largely atheoretical grounding – and suggest a model that may help alleviate this deficiency in future studies. This model leads, as a consequence, to formulation of a central research question and ideas for an overall research design for studies concerned with this focus.

What Are Community Media?

Before proceeding further, a degree of clarity regarding community media should be provided. The term, admittedly, is very broad. It refers, in the first place, to a diverse range of mediated forms of communication: electronic media such as radio and television, print media such as newspapers and magazines, and electronic network initiatives which embrace characteristics of both traditional print and electronic media. Three of these forms are singled out for consideration: community television, community radio and community networks.

The defining feature of community television is that the programming is "made by local people as distinct from professional broadcasters" (Lewis 1976, 61). Members of the community, often in alliance with professional station staff, are responsible for the ideas behind and production of the resulting programming. Community members become involved in all facets of station activities and exercise control over day-to-day and long-range policy matters. Unlike public access stations, community television stations generally strive to produce a coherent and coordinated overall programming package that reflects, represents, and involves members of the community.

Community radio has a similar overriding character and goes by many names, depending on the region. In Latin America it is known as popular or educational radio; in Africa it is known as rural or bush radio, in parts of Europe it is known as free or association radio. In a phrase, community radio is meant to serve a local population, to encourage expression and participation, to "give a voice to those without voices" (Girard 1992, 13). Because of the substantially less financial investment and operating costs as compared to community television, community radio finds extensive application in development projects and among groups of resistance.

Many of the above principles and features can also be found in community networks, often called "public educational networks" (PENs), public access networks, civic networks, free-nets, and digital cities. These networks, according to one definition, are "locally-based, locally-driven communication and information system designed to enhance community and enrich lives" (Hallman, quoted in Hecht, 1999). Such community networks are rapidly developing across North America and Europe, and community television stations are often forging alliances with these locally-oriented electronic networks.

There are many other terms in vogue: alternative media, citizen's media, radical media, to name a few (see further: Atton 2002; Downing 2001; Rodriguez 2001). Although academically interesting, I will not be comparing these alternatives or attempting to develop a lexicon for small-scale media. For the purposes of this essay, I am concerned mainly with electronic forms of community media oriented towards *geographically* situated audiences. This means I am concerned with those small-scale media described above as community radio and television, and locality-oriented electronic networks. This focus does, I am aware, exclude many community media oriented towards communities of interest, such as Nancy Baym's (1999) study of soap opera fans and other initiatives tailored to specific target groups such as gay media. This limitation is a matter of convenience for my purpose, later in this essay, to provide illustration of a theoretical perspective and research question.

Some of the general characteristics overarching the above-mentioned forms of community media merit mention. Perhaps the most important characteristic is the overall *objectives* of these media: to provide news and information relevant to the needs of the community members, to engage these members in public discussion, and to contribute to their social and political "empowerment". The *ownership and control* of community media is often shared by local residents, municipal government and community-based organisations. The *content* is locally oriented and produced. The *production* of that content involves non-professionals and volunteers, *distribution* of the content may be via the ether, cable television infrastructures or electronic networks like the Internet. The *audience* of such media is predominantly situated within a relatively small, clearly defined geographic region, although some community networks attract large and physically disperse audiences. Finally, the *financing* of these media is essentially non-commercial, although the overall budget may involve corporate sponsorship, advertising and government subsidies.

This list of characteristics is open to discussion. Clearly, community media differ in the degree they share each of these characteristics. Of central importance, however, is that these media are "of, by and for" members of the community, to use a piece of jargon from the 1970s. These media are also concerned with contributing to some form of community action or development – to contributing, in a phrase, to social change.

Researching Community Media

Many of the above concerns have dominated the research agenda of electronic community media during the past two and a half decades, and much of this research has been carried out on behalf of governmental institutions concerned with media policy. The main collection of empirical studies for development of electronic community media in Europe (Jankowski, Prehn and Stappers 1992) is composed of contributions largely based on such studies. Such a development is not necessarily detrimental, but the alliance with policy institutions does place an extra burden on researchers in assuring that the investigations are conceptually driven and, ultimately, contribute to theoretical understanding of the place of community media in society.

Looking again at the collection of studies in which I had a hand in preparing (Jankowski et al. 1992), those chapters based on policy studies generally failed to "rise above" the basic mandate of delivering data deemed functional for assessing the all-too-often restrictive policy parameters: degree of media use and relation of station activities to overall objectives. This work usually reflects some degree of allegiance to a theoretical construct or generally accepted normative value (e.g., contributing to public discourse, group identity and personal empowerment), but it seldom goes beyond alignment with the presented theory or concept. Theory development, let alone contribution to model construction, is limited in the chapters to this collection.

This situation served as stimulus for preparing a sequel to that anthology, recently published (Jankowski and Prehn 2002). In this book, special attention is given to elaboration of the theoretical perspectives that have inspired empirical study of community media. The contributors were requested to explicitly ground their studies in conceptual frameworks. As a result, most of the chapters in this volume,

Community Media in the Information Age, have a more scholarly flavour than those in its precursor, *The People's Voice*.

It is not feasible to present the theoretical perspectives in detail that serve as foundation for each of the 19 chapters in this volume. Employing large brush strokes, the perspectives employed relate to two main theoretical domains: those concerned with democracy and the public sphere, and those concerned with forms of cultural and ethnic identity. Within these domains a large array of concepts pass the review: community development and action, components of public sphere, issues related to the democratic process and forms of democratic engagement, social capital, individual and collective emancipation, and cultural expression.

Theoretical Model Building and Community Media

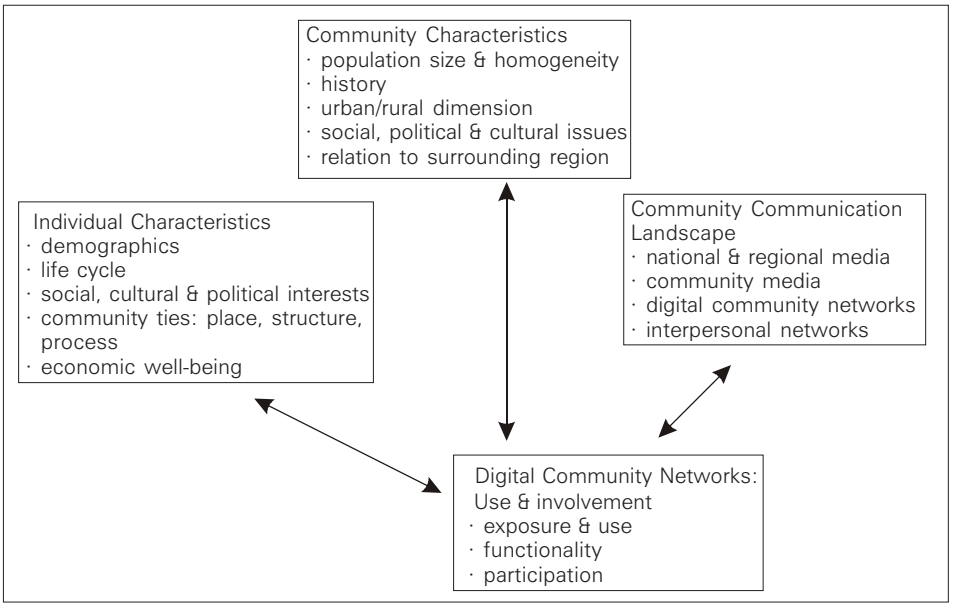
Most valuable, from a theoretical point of view, is the effort by Hollander (2002) to construct a model that integrates many of the frequently noted factors impinging on the nature and degree of citizen use of community media. This model builds on two traditions within sociology: the German concern with local public sphere, *lokale Öffentlichkeit*, and the American-based formulation of community. The marriage of these concepts formed the basis for a new term: community communication, referring to the communication structure within a geographically-bound or space-independent community.

This exercise was combined with examination of a range of empirical studies conducted by Stamm (1985) on the community ties generated by local newspapers. Stamm was concerned about the relation between community structure and communication ties, and his work resulted in a dynamic model suggesting a changing relationship across time. Inspired by this labour, Hollander devised a model relating community characteristics, community media landscape, individual characteristics and community media use. This model, illustrated in Figure 1, has gone through several versions and, most recently, has functioned as the theoretical basis for a proposed study of community networks (Jankowski, Van Selm and Hollander 2001).

There are, however, problems with the model. First, the dimension time is not reflected in the figure, even though the stated intent is to record relationships across that dimension. Second, the suggested causal relations may not be dominant at all moments; from the model it is unclear when the relation may be in one direction and when it may function in the opposite direction. Third, it is unclear what the contribution is of each of the clusters of factors and whether there may be intervening variables at work in the model. Finally, there may be overlap between some of the clusters, particularly between media landscape and community characteristics; neither the model nor the explanatory texts in the publications dealing with the model (Hollander 2002; Jankowski, Van Selm and Hollander 2001; Jankowski 2002a) address this possibility.

There remains, in other words, much that needs to be done before this initiative achieves the status of a robust theoretically-grounded model. Still, I am convinced that the model illustrates the kind of scholarly labour sorely needed in the area of community media research. Similar efforts can and should accompany the other theoretical perspectives prominent in the field. For example, work on the contribution of community media to the public or counter public sphere could

Figure 1: Components of Community Communication and Digital Community Networks (Jankowski 2002a, 44)[1]



similarly benefit from efforts to construct empirical studies that take operationalized versions of this concept as their starting points. Schneider (1996; 1997), for example, has prepared one of the few studies that attempts this, with an operationalisation of what he considers the four central components of Habermas' concept of public sphere. Although not everyone may agree with Schneider's selection of four components or with the operationalisations he devises (e.g., Dahlberg 2000; 2001), his study links empirical investigation to a theoretical concept central to the objectives of community media. Schneider, incidentally, does not reintegrate his empirical findings into a model relating the components as done by Hollander within another theoretical setting; such model building, then, remains an important task for this theoretical domain.

Similar model building initiatives are strongly needed with the other theoretical perspectives prominent in studies of community media. Media access, for example, is a perspective that is commonly applied to community media studies, but it is a perspective where little has been achieved in terms of theory construction and model building. At best, scholarship has suggested the relation between access and related concepts like participation (e.g., Jankowski 1995; Barlow 2002). Although it is certainly laudable that analysis takes place showing the place of access to community media in policy debates, as done by Rennie in this theme issue, I would argue that such contributions cannot substitute for the theoretical labour I am advocating. Rather, I would argue that policy analysis could be strengthened through provision of grounding in a solid theoretical framework directed at model building.

The same argument applies to concerns for changes in the media landscape, be that in Denmark, as reported by Jauert and Prehn in this issue, or in Indonesia, as sketched by Gazeli later in these pages. Theoretical reflection and model building

are activities admittedly low on the agenda of many scholars engaged in policy research. This situation, I would suggest, is all the more reason to make the effort and to transform what is, in my estimation, an undesirable situation for community media studies.

Towards a Research Agenda

As the beginning of this essay I announced that I would suggest a research agenda relevant to community media. Elsewhere (Jankowski 2002, 360) I have already noted that five general themes dominate much of the research undertaken with regard to community media: democratic processes, cultural identity, the concept community, and an action perspective to communication. In the same text I also provided a schema of the overall areas in which studies are undertaken; see Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Arenas for Community Media Research (Jankowski 2002b, 369)

Organisation
· objectives
- access and participation
- community involvement
· structure
- control and ownership
· activities
- promotion, publicity
- publications, programming
- actions

Product
· preparation
· dissemination
· analysis of products
- codification of meaning
- modes of presentation

Users
· traditional audience measures
· ethnographic reception studies
· attention to 'engaged' audience

Environment
· policy issues
- regulatory framework
- support mechanisms
- media & development programs of emerging nations
· media landscape
- media competition, substitution
- media convergence
· technological innovations
- digital production & transmission
- Internet applications

As helpful as these demarcations may be, they do little in helping us determine where the weight of the studies exists and where there may be gaps in our knowledge. Earlier in this essay, in fact, I argue that the main deficiency in community media research is the paucity of theoretical grounding and model building. The issue, then, is not one of generating interesting questions about whatever gaps in a

typology of themes may be discovered. The issue, rather, is one of relating an overarching research question to the perspective and proposed model.

To illustrate this task, I return to the model on community media use initiated by Hollander (2002). When developing that model he collaborated with colleague Martine van Selm and myself in designing a research project around community networks then under construction in the Netherlands. In the text describing that project (Jankowski et al. 2001) we explore at length how the model was to be applied to the study of two emerging community networks. The central research question, as related to the model and to this specific object of study, was later formulated as follows:

To what degree and in what manner do aspects of community structure, individual characteristics and media landscape relate to the use of an involvement in digital community networks by local residents? *(Jankowski 2002a, 45)*

This question, understandably, is only applicable to the model building illustrated in Figure 1 and does not apply to other perspectives or models. It does, however, illustrate the kind of question that can guide empirical study in order to elaborate and refine a proposed model. We also elaborate in the same text features of the research design – a longitudinal study incorporating multiple data collection methods in the form of a case study – and the basic methodological principles guiding the proposed work – essentially a fusion of interest in contributing to social theory with a normative concern for supporting social change.

Other community media researchers may opt for different principles and for different designs. They undoubtedly will craft different research questions than the one illustrated above. What I hope, however, is that all community media researchers will take seriously their mandate as social scientists to contribute to our collective theoretical understanding of small-scale media. This mandate entails, in my estimation, more than mere alliance with a theoretical perspective; it also necessitates refinement of concepts and generation of models relating these concepts. The articles in journal theme issue, then, should be seen as contributions to this mandate, to this quest for theoretical understanding of community media.

Note:

1. The version of the model reproduced in Figure 1 is taken from Jankowski (2002a). In other versions, such as in Hollander (2002), the lines suggesting relationships show causality in one direction. In unpublished versions of the model, lines are drawn connecting each of the four clusters of factors.

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