CONCEPTUALISING THE SMALL-SCALE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

Community media presuppose not only the existence of larger, dominant media systems, but of multiple smaller, local publics as well. Small-scale public spheres are distinct from the larger public spheres of media not only in size and scope, but also in their character and function. Small-scale public spheres are distinct from the larger public spheres of media not only in size and scope, but also in their character and function. The article explores the work of Nicholas Garnham, Charles H. Cooley and Benjamin Barber as a way to answer the questions of what does such a small-scale public sphere look like, and how might broadcasting operate within it? Media systems based in a small-scale public sphere provide greater opportunities for participation and access than do mass media, but the benefits of community media do not come easily. Three main limitations present barriers to media of the small-scale public sphere: capital investment, restricted access, and apathy.

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In the context of a mass society saturated by commercial media, the political and economic structures of communication severely limit the possibility of a forum for truly open public debate. Rather, the public sphere becomes largely symbolic: a phantom, in Walter Lippmann's famous metaphor. However, the restrictive nature of the public sphere in the age of commercial mass media is as much a consequence of corporate dominance as of the sheer scale of mass society. On national and global scales, we only have the ability to assemble symbolically.

In his now classic text, Jürgen Habermas outlines his conception of the bourgeois public sphere, where private people assemble as a public. Here, citizens engage in rational-critical debate regarding topics of general interest, leading to the formation of public opinion (Habermas 1991, 27; Habermas 2006, 73). Beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth however, the concentration and privatisation of economic and state power and the concomitant rise of mass media led to what Habermas terms a refeudalisation of the public sphere. Under refeudalisation, the public sphere transformed into a "pseudo-public," where public discussion became a commodity of commercial media systems (Habermas 1991, 160, 163). Habermas' text is not necessarily a lament for the loss of the bourgeois public sphere, but of its failure to realise the ideals that it embodied (Warner 2002, 46).

Is the public sphere lost? It seems to be, as national mass media are unable to provide audiences with a meaningful forum for openly democratic discussion and debate. At the local level however, community media provide the means for the actualisation of this public sphere ideal. Yet for community media to thrive, social, political and economic structures must exist to foster community media's existence. These structures can contribute to the construction of what I call small-scale public spheres, building off Habermas' concept. Heeding Jankowski's call for scholars of community media to "take seriously their mandate as social scientists to contribute to our collective theoretical understanding of small-scale media," this essay conceptualises the small-scale public sphere as it exists in community media, with particular attention to low power community radio (Jankowski 2003, 12).

Throughout, I focus on community as a geographic construct. Geographic communities are not the only, nor even necessarily the dominant form of community. Communication media bind far-reaching individuals into imagined or virtual communities of shared interests and identities. Particularly with the rise of broadcasting and the Internet, we see a shift from a spatial or presence-based conception of community to a social one (Hampton & Wellman 2003; Hebdige 1989; Jankowski 1995; A. G. Stavitsky 1994; Wellman & Guilia 1999). Even prior to the rise of electronic media forms, cultural institutions such as language, nationalism and religion served similar purposes (Anderson 2006). However, as John Durham Peters reminds us, "scale imposes constraints on kinds and structures of communication" (Peters 1995, 44). The contrast between local geographic communities and borderless virtual communities demonstrates this principle, for while virtual communities such as those created by the Internet may provide opportunities for democratic expression, there remain in geographically based communities unique local issues, needs and concerns generally unmet by mass media systems. This being the case, small-scale media such as public access television, community press and low power radio are effective means to address those local needs. In fact, community media frequently highlight the overlap of our memberships in geographic

and imagined communities. For example, a number of LPFM stations address ethnic and linguistic communities ill served by full power broadcasting.[1] While such stations point to our overlapping memberships in local and diasporic populations, geographic and virtual communities serve different yet related purposes. Our citizenships, ethnicities, professions, partisanship and religions automatically bind us to dispersed, unseen others sharing our affiliations. Memberships in virtual communities are part of what constitutes our individual identities, as are our memberships in geographic communities. Both are essential and valuable components of contemporary life, and ideally complement one another. Thus, even at a time when virtual communities proliferate, local geographic communities retain their importance in our daily lives as sites of media consumption and production within small-scale public spheres.

Habermas' concept of the public sphere has provoked discussion about the relationship between communication media, citizenship and democracy. However, the majority of literature applying the public sphere concept to media does so to discuss the theory's relevance for large-scale mass media systems (i.e. Croteau & Hoynes 2006; Dahlgren 1995; Price 1995; Scannell, 1989; Staats 2004; Warner 2002). Recent years have also seen a growing interest in small-scale community media, especially in the form of radio broadcasting (Barlow 1988; Brinson 2006; Coopman 1995; Greve et al 2006; Hochheimer 1993; Hollander et al 2002; Klinenberg 2007; Soley 1998). While many of these studies focus on concerns of democratic participation, regulatory issues and media technologies, their treatments often neglect Habermas' formulation of the public sphere. Bridging these two bodies of media scholarship, this reconceptualisation of the public sphere is an intervention in current debates about citizenship, democracy and the political economy of media. In the pages that follow, I outline the characteristics, opportunities and limitations of a small-scale public sphere. I do so to arrive at a contemporary, redemptive model of the public sphere in which media operate as a forum for debate and discussion pertinent to locality, which has largely fallen by the wayside at the hands of commercial and public broadcasting.

The Failure of Mass Broadcasting as a Public Sphere

Central to Habermas' conception of the bourgeois public sphere is citizen access to participation in the fora of democratic discussion and debate. Of course, Habermas notes that even the public sphere of the eighteenth century was not purely inclusive, but limited to the bourgeoisie, refusing admittance to women and people of colour. Habermas inadequately addresses these exclusions in his first take, but sought to rectify them in later works (see Habermas 1992). This exclusionary tendency highlights the failure of the bourgeois public sphere to live up to the ideals upon which it was constructed, instead evincing a class-, gender- and race-based elitism that reinforces social hierarchies.

In light of the elitist exclusivity of the bourgeois public sphere, Hauser convincingly argues for the significance of reticulate public spheres, "in which strangers develop and express public opinions by engaging one another through vernacular rhetoric" noting that "publics cannot form without communication" (Hauser 2008, 12, 14). Hauser's claim acknowledges the existence of the dominant, institutional and official public spheres while recognising that the vernacular discourses of ev-

eryday life are equally significant. The implication here is that to stifle vernacular discourse is to inhibit the formation and expression of public opinion, compromising the integrity of citizens' life in a democratic society. This is the unfortunate state of affairs within the media systems in the United States, especially broadcasting. Full power broadcasters dominate the airwaves, and go to lengths to protect the status quo. The power of broadcast lobbyists and the current regulatory structure of US broadcasting severely limit citizen access to the airwaves, inhibiting opportunities for the generation and expression of vernacular discourse within broadcasting.

At root, this is an effect the refeudalisation of the public sphere, which Habermas observes led to the commercialisation of communication, where information becomes a commodity for citizen consumption. Here the imposition of public opinion generated by corporate mass media precludes citizens' opportunities to generate public opinion on their own terms. Indeed, this is the line of argumentation posited by critics such as Noam Chomsky and Robert McChesney (Barsamian and Chomsky 2001; Chomsky 2002; McChesney 2000; 2004).

Habermas' arguments regarding refeudalisation have only intensified in recent decades with the rise of corporate power in mass media communications. For example, the deregulation of US broadcasting in the last twenty years grants commercial media interests increasing cultural and economic power. This is particularly evident following the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which increased local station ownership caps for broadcast entities, and eliminated national caps entirely. This deregulation fostered a trend beginning in the 1990s and continuing into the 21st century, wherein the top five corporations in radio broadcasting collectively owned 2,039 of the country's stations, with Clear Channel Communications accounting for 1,190 of those stations (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2006). More recently, Clear Channel has divested a number of its radio holdings in smaller, ostensibly less profitable markets. Even so, Clear Channel remains the biggest player in US radio with over 600 stations nationwide (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008). This has inevitably led to a consolidation of resources and increasingly centralised content production. This oligopoly privileges the communication of elites controlling mass media operations, leaving little room for audiences to exercise any sort of democratic agency.

In contrast, Paddy Scannell views broadcasting as "fundamentally democratic" in the sense that it is accessible to all (Scannell 1989, 11; 2005, 131). For Scannell then, access in the public sphere of broadcasting is access to reception and content, not participatory discussion (Scannell 1989, 137). This limits citizens to receptive roles, treating them as consumers of information rather than active participants. Surely, audiences may take an active role in using broadcast content through meaning making and engaging in their own discussions and debates. In these ways, media consumption is a dialogic process (Scannell 2005, 135-136). Although a democracy of receptivity may influence interpersonal dialogue among citizens, our relationship with broadcast mass media is not dialogic in nature, but limits audiences to receptive roles. Radio listeners are restricted from having any substantial participation in on-air discussions, having their opportunities limited to call-in talk shows. Even here, who is able to participate is at the discretion of the host. Hauser explains the limitations of talk radio well, noting that most programs

> *represent a narrow band on the political spectrum. The presecreening of callers and the lag time of several seconds between real-time and air-time conversations permit the unobtrusive editing of crudeness and unwanted opinions. When opposition views are aired, the host often belittles them. The repeated ritual of the vanquished caller undermines the reflective possibilities of deliberation with a perverted form of the epidictic genre based on the spectacle of public humiliation. This ritual betrays an attitude more attuned to commercial ratings than to critical opinion* (Hauser 2008, 24).

National broadcasting does not provide citizens a public space in which to engage openly in debate, discussion and the formation of public opinion. Scannell addresses these limitations, noting that public service broadcasting constitutes a representative democracy, wherein "power accrues to the representatives, not to those whom they represent" (Scannell 1989, 163). In addition to this power imbalance, centralised radio broadcasting can only be representative in the feudal sense, providing representation *before* and *to* rather than *for* or *of* the people (Habermas 1991, 7). Centralised, national broadcast media do not provide a liaison between audiences and broadcast institutions, but re-present content, issues, and views *to* audiences, in effect performing an agenda-setting function. Access to content and reception is not equivalent to access to the participation in discussion and debate so integral to Habermas' conception of the public sphere. I will return to the importance of active participation in the next section.

The failure of full power broadcasting to constitute a participatory public sphere is by no means limited to commercial outlets. Public broadcasting in the US increasingly relies upon syndicated programming and corporate underwriting despite its stated mission of providing an alternative to commercial broadcasting.[2] Although public broadcasting in the United States was designed to serve "the public interest to encourage the growth and development of noncommercial educational radio and television broadcasting, including the use of such media for instructional purposes," public broadcasting in the US has largely failed in this mission (United States Congress 1968 sec. 396(a)(1)). As a public sphere, it is equally as restrictive as its commercial counterparts – the public has no access to the means of production, and their participation is limited, to the extent that such opportunities exist at all.

Contemporary public radio in the US is public only in the sense that it is available for public consumption and funded by the public through direct donations and federal tax dollars. Public broadcasting takes an untrusting view of the public, whom it considers incapable of self-representation. Instead, public broadcasting in the United States acts as one of Lippmann's expert groups that relay "unseen facts" to the public (Lippmann 2004, 17). As Balas notes, public broadcasting as an institution is "framed by the notion that only a rational, educated person [is] right to govern" (Balas 2003, 113). Public broadcasting's authoritative status as teacher and expert distances the institution from its audience, severely limiting access to debate and discussion, even in this supposedly "public" arena, for granting citizen access would diminish public broadcasting's authoritative role (Balas 2003, 127).

As such, public broadcasting in the US takes a defensive position against broadcasting generated in the small-scale public sphere such as the low power Class D license (1948-1978) and the more recent Low Power FM (LPFM) broadcasting

license. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) established the ten-watt Class D license in 1948 to provide educational programming for listeners and to serve as a hands-on classroom for students interested in pursuing broadcast careers. Following the creation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1967 however, the CPB successfully campaigned for the elimination of the Class D license in favor of establishing full power public broadcast systems such as National Public Radio (NPR) (Witherspoon et al 2000, 32; Holt 1969; Federal Communications Commission 1978a and 1978b). Likewise, along with the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), National Public Radio became one of the most vocal opponents to the FCC's Low Power FM service established in 2000. Even in the face of numerous engineering studies to the contrary, the NAB and NPR continued to decry that LPFM would cause substantial amounts of interference to full power public radio stations, FM translators and radio reading services for the blind (see National Association of Broadcasters 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2003; National Public Radio 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2003, 2005b). These continued criticisms of the LPFM service are not at root about technological concerns, however. Rather, tensions between LPFM and full power US radio broadcasting arise because the latter views these forms of community radio as detrimental to the status quo.

I do not mean to demonise national media on principle. National media systems do have their place. This is particularly evident in times of crisis, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 providing a pertinent (if increasingly overused) example. National media have the resources and disseminative reach to deliver information to mass audiences economically and relatively efficiently. Still, the nationally oriented structures of commercial and public broadcasting are unable to serve localised community interests meaningfully. The problem is structural in nature, and community media are a means to provide alternate, more democratic frameworks.

Ellie Rennie asserts that "the policy question of how to accommodate community broadcasting – how to provide access – has generally presupposed its subservience, or accommodation, within that system" (Rennie 2006, 167). Regardless of a community medium's social or political position, community media exist as counterpublics – as open, participatory media sites developed as alternatives (though not necessarily oppositional) to the more rigid structures of global and national mass media. These counterpublics rely upon the existence of a larger, dominant public in constituting and defining themselves (Warner 2002, 112-113), a dependence visible within community media.

Although forms of community media existed prior to the rise of print and broadcasting,[3] current community media vividly exhibit this dependency upon larger mass media systems. The proliferation of Independent Media Centres (www.indymedia.org) across all seven continents, 150 countries and 180 cities developed from a dissatisfaction with the bias of mainstream news coverage of the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, Washington. Similarly, community broadcasting and public access television constitute and define themselves in relation to larger media systems not only philosophically, but from a regulatory standpoint as well. Rennie argues that a defining characteristic of contemporary notions of the public interest is that they "admit the existence of multiple publics," rather than focusing on the greater, monolithic social good (Rennie 2006, 173). Community media at once presuppose

not only the existence of larger, dominant media systems, but of multiple smaller, local publics as well. Small-scale public spheres are distinct from the larger public spheres of media not only in size and scope, but also in their character and function. What does such a small-scale public sphere look like, and how might broadcasting operate within it? In each of the following sections, I will explore the work of Nicholas Garnham, Charles Horton Cooley and Benjamin Barber as a way to answer such questions.

Small versus Large Scale Public Spheres

The challenges of my thesis are best stated by Nicholas Garnham, who offers a restrictive notion of the public sphere that favors representation as the most efficient means of democratic organisation (Garnham 1992, 366). While this may be true in a purely political context, I question Garnham's championing of this representative model in relation to communication media. Representation does not equal access. As noted earlier, a representational system creates a public sphere of discussion only for the representatives, confining the represented to a public sphere of receptivity.

Certainly, due to matters of scope, a representational system is the most effective means of structuring a national public sphere, be it in terms of media or politics. However, this should not discount the value and simultaneous existence of smaller public spheres and their media systems. Garnham addresses the notion of multiple public spheres, asserting, "[t]here must be a single [representative] public sphere, even if we might want to conceive of this single public sphere as made up of a series of subsidiary public spheres, each organised around its own political structure, media system, and set of norms and interests" (Garnham 1992, 371). Here, Garnham seems to allow room for small-scale public spheres and related media systems. Yet this conflicts with an earlier passage where Garnham dismisses community and grassroots media:

> *The left has, therefore, tended to fall back either on idealist formulations of free communications with no organizational substance or material support or on technical utopianism that sees the expansion of channels of communication as inherently desirable because pluralistic. Both positions are linked to some version, both political and artistic, of free expression, for example, in Britain, the long debate and campaign around the creation of channel 4, the touching faith in cable access, the support for 'free' or 'community' radio, and so on* (Garnham 1992, 364, emphasis added).

Garnham champions representation as exhibited by public service broadcasting, while criticising localised and participatory forms of media as idealistic and inadequate (Garnham 1992, 364). Garnham's critique raises important questions regarding how the representative model of public service broadcasting is to serve community interests and needs. Unfortunately, Garnham leaves these questions unanswered, suggesting mass broadcasting's inability to serve smaller localities adequately.

Garnham further argues that media systems ought to match "the same social space as that over which economic or political decisions will impact" (Garnham 1992, 371). While accurate in principle, Garnham's claim unintentionally justifies the

existence of national media systems at the same time that it illustrates the need for local and community-oriented media. There are most assuredly economic, political and social decisions enacted at the local and community levels whose effects do not reach beyond localised geographic boundaries. There is consequently a need for media systems to match these smaller scale social spaces, as national and local decisions are not necessarily coincident. By neglecting this in his argumentation, Garnham wrongly implies a national homogeneity of economic, political and social matters, where national concerns necessarily trump those of states, cities and communities.

Further, geographic boundaries do not necessarily constitute an impenetrable barrier between large and small-scale public spheres. Information traverses geographic borders, flowing both ways between large- and small-scale public spheres. Thus, I do not wish to suggest that small-scale public spheres should not concern themselves with matters of national or global scope. Matters of local concern should clearly be the focus of the small-scale public sphere, as these matters receive little, if any attention in the larger public sphere of representation. Still, matters of national importance such as national politics surely have effects at the local level that likely differ across various locales, pointing to their topical relevance within the small-scale public sphere. In the contemporary context however, modern technologies complicate the structures of these public spheres, as well as the flow of information between them, blurring the borders between large- and small-scale public spheres.

Charles Horton Cooley in the Age of the Internet

Larger national media systems constitute what Paddy Scannell terms for-anyone-as-someone structures. Broadly conceived, Scannell explains that such a structure "in its organisation and design, presents itself as useable and useful for anyone" in the nation (Scannell 2000, 6). Appropriating Scannell's point, we might describe media systems of small-scale public spheres as for-anyone-as-us structures, organised and designed to make themselves available to and useful for all members within the community they address. In this regard, the small-scale public sphere and its media systems raise questions of borders, particularly of geography.

The extent to which geography serves as a boundary for the small scale-public sphere is a complex matter in the age of the Internet. Some may argue that there is not even a need for a community-based Low Power FM service when the Internet permits seemingly unrestricted communication between users. However, Internet access is not universal, and is in fact available only to 21.1% of the world's population (Miniwatts Marketing Group 2008b). For example, 28.6% of the US Americans still lack Internet access (Miniwatts Marketing Group 2008a). Still, for those who overcome barriers of access, the Internet provides a seemingly unhindered forum for communicative interaction.

Contemporaneously with the rise of mass media in the early twentieth century, Charles Horton Cooley noted the effects of such free flowing communication on individuality:

> *The key to this matter, in my judgment, is to perceive that there are two kinds of individuality, one of isolation and one of choice, and that modern conditions foster the latter while they efface the former. They tend to make life rational and*

> *free instead of local and accidental. They enlarge indefinitely the competition of ideas, and whatever has owed its persistence merely to lack of comparison is likely to go, while that which is really congenial to the choosing mind will be all the more cherished and increased* (Cooley 2003, 93).

Cooley illustrates this dichotomy through the examples of town (representing choice) and country (representing isolation). He notes that rural communities offer more control over the immediate environment and economic security, while urban life is more functional, allowing "more facility for the formation of specialized groups, and so for the fostering of special capacities" (Cooley 2003, 94). Although choice and isolation are not necessarily oppositional, Cooley implies an evolutionary tendency in which, synchronous with the development of mass society, we shift from isolation to choice. Cooley does not discount a coexistence of the two forms however, and this point is key in relation to the Internet.

The communicative structure of the Internet demonstrates the coexistence of small and large-scale public spheres, of both choice and isolation. Although commonly characterised as the epitome of global communication, the Internet is also capable of augmenting local and small-scale public spheres. In addition to providing the capacity for an electronic forum for locally oriented discussion and debate online, websites of community organisations act as information hubs for their members. The websites of churches and community groups are the clearest examples of this capability, providing event schedules, community programs and relevant news items.

More directly exhibiting the global Internet's ability to function locally are community networks and local news aggregators. Community networks limit themselves to localised neighborhoods, wiring residents together to facilitate community building and social organisation at the hyperlocal level (see Carroll and Rosson 2003; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Harrison et al 2001; Horrigan 2001). Such networks and websites explicitly cater to the for-anyone-as-us structures characteristic of small-scale public spheres. However, the framework of the Internet adds an interesting twist to this structure. While community networks may restrict access through password protection or to certain IP addresses, any interested party surfing the Internet can foreseeably access the websites of small-scale public sphere groups.

In similar fashion, the Internet has increasingly become a resource for local news and information while newspapers in the US and abroad struggle to survive and adapt to the contemporary media environment. The decline of newspapers in recent years has seen many local dailies cutting back resources and staffing, with some papers ceasing operation entirely. Meanwhile, the Internet has increasingly become a resource for locally based news and information. Sites such as EveryBlock (http://www.everyblock.com), Outside.in (http://outside.in) and Placeblogger (http://placeblogger.com) aggregate blogs posts and official government and institutional sources tailored to users' locale by identifying their IP address. Other sites such as Patch.com (http://www.patch.com) strive for a model that generates original content relevant to local neighbourhoods, with separate sites currently covering three New Jersey areas (Miller and Stone 2009). The development of these services presents another way in which local communities may make use of the globally expansive Internet to meet the needs and interests of local geographic communi-

ties. In essence, sites such as Outside.in and Placeblogger provide local filters for the vast amount of information available online, illustrating that the Internet can be a tool relevant for geographic as well as virtual communities.

Returning to the question of geography then, community-oriented websites on the Internet are unique in that they at once address a small group of local individuals but are available and open to all. Unlike most other forms of community media, the Internet crosses geographic boundaries, regardless of its target audience. Microbroadcasting for example, is explicitly a for-anyone-as-us structure. Low Power FM (LPFM, the legal low power radio license in the US) is limited to a transmitter power of 100 watts, capable of broadcasting signals within a radius of approximately 3.5 miles, though terrain and atmospheric conditions can expand these signals' reach to greater distances. As such, LPFM is explicitly bound by geography, and has no intention or desire to reach beyond those limits. When community media do exceed those bounds, their structures change significantly, reaching beyond "us." However, programming that addresses the needs of a specific geographic community will be of little if any utility to individuals outside of that community. If community media exist to serve local needs, their content is likely to lose relevance as the medium reaches beyond community borders, as specific needs vary across different localities.

The Internet's collapse of geographic boundaries does not render it incapable of community formation, nor does it necessarily diminish the importance of geographic considerations. Although there is a tendency to consider the Internet as a global medium given its expanse, it is equally capable of allowing the construction of smaller, more limited spheres of interaction. This of course includes not only virtual supplementation to geographic communities, but virtual communities of interest as well. The Internet's structure accommodates these larger and smaller public spheres simultaneously. The structure and relative openness of the Internet also lends itself to an inherently participatory character. Anyone with access to a computer and the Internet can participate in online forums, chat rooms, e-mail list-servs, social networking and the blogosphere, not to mention sites that thrive on user-driven content such as GarageBand.com, Wikipedia and You Tube. Such open participation is in fact a defining characteristic of all public spheres, whether large- or small-scale.

Participation and "Strong Democracy"

Rather than the authoritarian qualities exhibited by US public broadcasting, community media not only serve their local audiences through programming content, but should also provide access for and facilitate the participation of community members.[4] As Hauser notes, "we belong to a community so long as we are able to participate in its conversations" (Hauser 2008, 67). Public spheres are not merely public spaces (material or virtual), but ones in which members may engage in discussion and debate regarding matters relevant to their lives as citizens (Habermas 2006, 73). In order to constitute a public sphere, small-scale media must base themselves on a participatory, rather than representative model of democracy, taking the form of what Benjamin Barber labels "strong democracy."

Barber's model of strong democracy revolves around the active participation of citizens in the decision-making and legislation of their polity (Barber 1984, 151).

Here, citizens "are literally forged through the act of public participation, created through common deliberation and common action and the effect that deliberation and action have on interests, which change the shape and direction when subjected to these participatory processes" (Barber 1984, 152). Applied to the context of media, strong democracy is unable to thrive within mass media systems. Mass media systems do lead to other forms of participation, such as the media-inspired dialogue mentioned by Scannell. Even here though, the lack or inability to participate directly relegates audiences to a purely receptive role, excluded from the processes of production.

Community media on the other hand provide a site for active participation and foster democratic talk, "where no voice is privileged, no position advantaged, no authority other than the process itself acknowledged. Every expression is both legitimate and provisional, a proximate and temporary position of a consciousness in evolution" (Barber 1984, 183). Democratic talk can only truly exist in a small-scale context, where contiguity minimises or eliminates the barrier of distance. As Barber argues, "the problem of scale *is* the problem of communication, and to deal with the second is to deal with the first. Scale produces alienation (the sociologists claim), but by the same token in overcoming alienation one overcomes scale – at least to a degree" (Barber 1984, 248). The sheer size of a larger, national public sphere disallows democratic talk, save for a form abstracted by a representational system, such as writing your Congresswoman. The small-scale public sphere and its media overcome this problem of scope, allowing subjects to become citizens with opportunity to participate in discussion and debate. Although limited in its geographic reach, participatory media of the small-scale public sphere figuratively and literally amplify citizen voices and expanding their power of citizens in shaping their local community and their everyday lives within it.

However, established media interests are likely to resist the development of community media in small-scale public spheres, as was the case with the opposition to LPFM in the US mentioned earlier. However, governments and regulatory bodies have the power to overcome this reluctance in the name of the public interest. In addition to the US example, governments of other countries such as Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands similarly sanctioned low power citizen broadcasting, showing that small-scale media can coexist with established commercial, public and state broadcasting systems, offering complementary broadcast services to citizens for consumption and participation (Jankowski 1995; Menduni 2004; Moshe 2007, 70-71; Soley 1998, 3; Yoder 1996, 143). By balancing participatory and representative models, both forms of broadcasting can benefit citizens, for each excels where the other falls short. Where the representative model (typified by full power broadcasting) fails to serve the interests of local communities, the participatory model (typified by low power, community broadcasting) grants citizens the means to have a hand in discussing and governing their immediate environment. Likewise, the participatory model's inability to serve a large-scale, national public efficiently is resolved through a representative model. In a large-scale society such as the United States, neither of these models is able to serve the citizenry fully, as each serve different purposes to different publics. Media of large- and small-scale public spheres are thus complementary to each other, rather than necessarily oppositional. By incorporating each to their appropriate context, we may reap the best of both worlds, or the best of both spheres, as the case may be.

Objections and Limitations

While I argue for the value of small-scale public spheres and community media, they are by no means a cure-all for the ills of mass media systems. Just as Habermas' formulation of the bourgeois public sphere came with certain limitations, so does the small-scale public sphere. Media systems based in a small-scale public sphere provide greater opportunities for participation and access than do mass media, but the benefits of community media do not come easily. Three main limitations present barriers to media of the small-scale public sphere: capital investment, restricted access and apathy.

First, media systems in a small-scale public sphere require capital investment. While startup costs are likely to be significantly less than those of mass media institutions, such costs are relative and can act as a barrier to the establishment of community media systems. The initial cost of transmitting equipment can range anywhere from $800 to $9,000 (Hamilton 2004). Particularly on the higher end of that spectrum, startup costs can be prohibitive for communities interested in constructing local, noncommercial media. Still, there are many ways to ease this burden. Acquiring donated or used station equipment, community fundraisers, grants, fiscal sponsorships, local taxes and underwriting are a few examples. Just as participation is central to the content of media systems in a small-scale public sphere, it is equally important in the construction and maintenance of these media systems. Debra Spitulnik argues that small media "function more generally as expressive devices in the formation of group identity, and community or subcultural solidarity" (Spitulnik 2002, 181). I want to extend Spitulnik's claim, adding that this formation of identity and solidarity begins in the developmental stages of community media. By voluntarily participating in these early stages, community members put forth an investment in their small-scale media systems, one that ought to tie them ever closer to fulfilling its purpose of serving the community.

The trying tasks of acquiring funding and equipment as well as securing and constructing a broadcast site most vividly emphasise the need for collaboration in media systems of the small-scale public sphere. By forming group cohesion early on, members begin to build ties with one another around the media system itself, uniting them in a common purpose. Once established, small-scale media such as low power broadcasting can then function as a means of managing this community identity. This is precisely the function of the Prometheus Radio Project's barn-raisings. The Prometheus Radio Project (http://prometheusradio.org/) is a non-profit media advocacy group that has been instrumental in representing microradio activists before the US Congress and the Federal Communications Commission. Indeed, the FCC even invited Prometheus' input in the development of the Low Power FM license. In addition to their policy work, the Prometheus Radio Project also organises and assists local community members in starting their own low power radio stations. In doing so, Prometheus organises as many community members as possible to participate in these barn-raisings. Prometheus director Pete Tridish openly admits that this is far from the most efficient means of constructing a radio station. However, what Prometheus' barn-raisings lack in efficiency, they make up for in strengthening the bonds among community members, a sense of solidarity that ideally carries over to the station's operation (Klinenberg 2007, 260-261).

A second limitation in media of small-scale public spheres is that they do not necessarily guarantee access. In short, members of the community are at the mercy of whoever owns the means of production. In her study of women's community radio, Caroline Mitchell addresses this problem as it applies to the station Radio Pirate Woman, noting, "the simplicity of this model may also be its main weakness, as it is vulnerable to the control of one woman (who lives in the house)" (Mitchell 1998, 81). The individual or organisation owning and housing the means of production reserves the right to restrict access to that equipment. This poses a significant problem, as it may inhibit the ability of a small-scale public sphere to flourish, suffering from one of the primary pitfalls of national media systems. Even within local communities, factors such as gender, race, religion and sexuality can act as markers and differentiators of social status and power. Yet community media broadly seek to break down these types of power structures, diversifying media otherwise dominated by elites, and a potential solution to this problem lies in configuring community media's structures of ownership and management. Small media designated to serve the community should be owned publicly, by the community-at-large, not by private individuals or group interests. Similar to a community centre, in this configuration of collective ownership allows citizens to express their views while preventing any single individual or viewpoint from dominating the medium. This public ownership structure also minimises problems associated with gate keeping so prevalent in mainstream media.

Additionally, community media must be accountable to the citizens of the community that they serve. For example, to ensure that a community's LPFM station is responsive to community needs and interests, stations should regularly hold open meetings wherein community members may directly voice their concerns and opinions, which should in turn carry some weight in directing the station's policies and programming. Moreover, a community advisory board could serve as a means to check the policies and programming of the station. Composed of community members (and ideally representing diverse interests), such boards would act as liaisons between community members and the radio station. Weighing heavily on station operations, policies and programming, the institution of such a board gives representational voice to citizens in directing their community radio station, facilitating participation even amongst those who are not producing broadcasts. By taking these measures to provide access and accountability, community radio stations guard against the pitfalls that domination by a single interest can pose to a community broadcast resource.

Lastly, apathy presents a potential limitation on the effectiveness of a participatory, small-scale public sphere. Following an experiment in local broadcasting in Kenya, organiser John Nkingyangi lamented, "[w]hile appropriate radio programming can inspire more participation in community activities, it cannot actually make people participate" (Lewis & Booth 1989, 170). Held further asks of participatory democracy, "[w]hat if [citizens] do not really want to participate in the management of social and economic affairs? What if they do not wish to become creatures of democratic reason?" (Held 1996, 272). Lazarsfeld and Merton famously argue that mass media are capable of narcotising audiences, producing "only a superficial concern with the problems of society, and this superficiality often cloaks mass apathy," leading audiences to "mistake *knowing* about problems

of the day for *doing* something about them" (Lazarsfeld and Merton 2004, 235). If we follow the narcotising dysfunction hypothesis, mass media have conditioned citizen apathy, making it difficult to engender participation when such opportunities are available.

The problem of apathy cannot be understated. While the small-scale public sphere must provide open access, it does not require the participation of every member to fulfill its function. The choice of a few to opt out of participating in democratic debate and discussion does not necessarily impair the democratic character of the community at large. There is a potential danger of course, if all (or most) elect not to participate. On the one hand, apathetic citizens still exercise democratic choice, so long as their lack of participation is not due to any restrictions imposed from larger structures. However, a vacuous small-scale public sphere serves no substantive purpose to citizens of the community, but does pose potential harm to the vitality of democratic life in the small-scale public sphere.

Paramount to overcoming the problem of apathy is an awareness of the value of active participation in the small-scale public sphere. For as Held observes, "If people know opportunities exist for effective participation in decision-making, they are likely to believe participation is worthwhile, likely to participate actively and likely, in addition, to hold that collective decisions should be binding" (Held 1996, 268). Regarding community radio, Hochheimer similarly notes that a number of studies have found that "those most active in programme production are most likely to be most active in the community, the middle class, and centrally located in local networks" (Hochheimer 1993, 477). Still, there is no way to guarantee citizen participation in the media of small-scale public spheres, or even politics more generally. However, awareness of the ability to participate and an understanding of its value encourages and motivates citizens to take an active role in their communities. Likewise, the kind of community building that can occur in the fundraising and construction phases noted above can help to underscore the value and importance of citizen participation.

Taken together, these three limitations – cost, ownership and apathy – can pose very real obstacles to the successful creation and maintenance of small-scale public spheres. Even in acknowledging these shortcomings however, the impossibility of guaranteeing access, active citizen participation and adequate capital do not necessarily preclude the existence of small-scale public spheres. An implicit argument throughout *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is that access need not be absolute, but the *potential* for access must be available. In discussing the inclusiveness of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas suggests that here, "[t]he issues discussed became 'general' not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility; everyone had to *be able* to participate" (Habermas 1991, 37, emphasis in original). Habermas later discusses the role of public opinion as "aimed at providing citizens with the *equal opportunity* to participate in the process of public communication" (Habermas 1991, 227, emphasis added). Thus, for Habermas, what matters more than overcoming the limitations of the public sphere is the availability of structures allowing for its construction, cultivation and criticism.[5] To be sure, overcoming the above limitations is a challenging task for community members. In communities where no such structures exist, the challenge becomes much more arduous. The ease with which information flows within extensive communication networks today can facilitate the creation of such structures. The Internet allows

for the ready exchange of information regarding broadcast policy, programming and technology amongst current and potential broadcasters in small-scale public spheres. In addition, there now exist groups such as the Prometheus Radio Project, which work to assist communities in upstarting low power radio stations. Existing communicative structures and efforts of groups such as Prometheus provide ways of establishing structures for small-scale media in communities where they may not otherwise exist. Once such structures are in place, citizens can build upon the potentiality of a small-scale public sphere and its media and see it to fruition.

Conclusion

As a decreasing number of multinational corporations increase their holdings, mass media systems become more centralised. Compounded by the very nature of addressing mass audiences, national and international media systems cannot adequately serve locally specific needs. More importantly, the structural nature of mass media systems cannot function as a participatory public sphere, but only one of representation. Certainly, the refeudalisation of the public sphere has detrimental effects that challenge the livelihood of rational-critical debate and public opinion formation, as deregulatory trends in US broadcasting illustrate. Not only does refeudalisation limit the diversity of voices in mass media, but it also restricts the communicative agency of citizens within mass media systems. Further, the contemporary mass media landscape directly affects local and community media, as many local outlets are bought out by or increasingly reliant upon mass media conglomerates. Even so, refeudalisation is not absolute, and does not eradicate the public sphere's potential for strong democracy. Small-scale public spheres, typified here by community media, provide a site of redemption within the refeudalised public sphere.

In assessing the public sphere's refeudalisation, it is common to react by indicting corporate mass media. However, it is equally detrimental to the health of community media if we simply sit back and lament the lack or perceived loss of the participatory public sphere. Again, we come to the problem of apathy. Active participation is necessary not only for small-scale public spheres to thrive, but for their very existence. If individual communities and their members do nothing to express the value of and need for community media, there is no motivation for the parent public sphere to support small-scale public spheres. LPFM provides a case in point. Due at least in part to vocally active members of the microradio movement throughout the 1990s, the Federal Communications Commission established the LPFM license in 2000. Dissatisfied with the FCC's configuration of LPFM, the same voices expressed their discontent, leading to a reconsideration of the license's structure throughout the FCC's rulemaking proceeding. Most recently, the FCC's 2007 Third Report and Order and Second Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking enacted and proposed policies to reduce significantly the restrictions imposed upon LPFM licensees, while proposed legislation seeks similar ends (see Federal Communications Commission 2007 and United States Congress 2009).

Similarly, in opposition to a 2003 proposal by the FCC to deregulate broadcasting in the US even further, activists organised and defeated the FCC's proposal in the courts (Prometheus Radio Project v. Federal Communications Commission 2004). The Prometheus Radio Project also successfully petitioned the FCC to dis-

miss a series of identical LPFM licenses that the Commission traced back to the Calvary Chapel organisation (Lucas 2006, 59; Nappo 2001).[6] Although many of these dismissals were appealed and reinstated, the concerns of the Prometheus Radio Project and the National Lawyers' Guild prompted the FCC to investigate the applications in question. These few examples from the short history of LPFM illustrate the importance of community agency. Without the vocal actions of these microradio advocates, the course of events would likely have been much different for LPFM; it is possible the license would not even exist.

The case of LPFM underscores the fact that in the context of a refeudalised public sphere, apathy is not the answer. As Robert Hutchins so acutely put it, "[t]he death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment" (Hutchins 1954, 23). Citizen apathy also threatens the small-scale public sphere and its media systems. In fact, apathy is as much a threat to the small-scale public sphere as is the monopolisation of communication channels by mass media conglomerates (perhaps an even *greater* threat). The structure and activity Habermas presented in his discussion of the bourgeois public sphere is not lost – it may still be found in small-scale public spheres and their media. However, for small-scale public spheres to develop and survive, citizens must take an active role in their creation and maintenance. Apathy will only assure the death of small-scale public spheres, and thus the demise of the arena most accommodating to strong democracy. The fate of small-scale public spheres and their media systems ultimately rests in the hands of citizens and community members.

Notes:

1. WOMA-LP, WNRB-LP, KOCA-LP, WACM-LP, KJVA-LP, KPCN-LP, WRTE-LP, WPLO-LP and WCTI-LP are among such stations.

2. Corporate underwriters for NPR as of FY 2005 (the latest report available as of mid 2009) include: Wal-Mart, Acura, Prudential Financial, Saturn Corporation, Sodexho, Barnes and Noble, Travelocity, Jeep, Toyota, Verizon, and a host of media corporations including film studios, record labels and cable networks (National Public Radio 2005a, 18-19).

3. Clock towers and village bells provide two such examples. See Corbin 1998 and Mumford 1963.

4. Examples of low power radio stations embracing open access and participation include former pirate broadcaster microKIND radio in San Marcos, TX as well as licensed LPFM stations in Portsmouth, NH (WSCA-LP), Davis, CA (KDRT-LP), Georgetown, CA (KFOK-LP), Wailuku, Maui, HI (KEAO-LP), Moscow, ID (KRFP-LP), Urbana, IL (WRFU-LP), Berkshire, MA (WBCR-LP), Northampton, MA (WXOJ-LP), Nashville, TN (WRFN-LP), Houston, TX (Montrose Radio), Great Falls, VT (WOOL-LP) and Clay, WV (WTAP-LP)

5. Coopman (2006) keenly articulates this point in relation to community and alternative media.

6. Activists including Prometheus, REC Networks, and the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ have had moderate success in petitioning the FCC regarding the abuse of FM translators by some religious organisations, also to facilitate national low power networks.

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