




Notions of Community



**A Collection of Community Media
Debates and Dilemmas**



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Introduction

The young woman stands behind one of the regimented line of trees. She attempts to shield the mobile phone from the noisy shouts and chanting coming from the crowd of protesters outside the government building. She is speaking to her local community radio station and her commentary of the demonstration, taking place in front of her, is going out live on air to local people. But, significantly, her report is also being uploaded on to the internet and rebroadcast within a few minutes to other community stations around the country. Government denial of the protest is impossible.

This is a true story and it is one that could be told of many areas around the world. Community media is using old and new techniques to provide forums for public discussion and culture. It is providing a powerful and fast dissemination of events and enhancing the ability of ordinary people to communicate on matters of public concern. However the chapters in this book get beyond simple descriptions of the values and practices involved in community media and are seeking argument and deliberation around the issues of this vibrant sector of the media. The contributors examine the recent debates and provide case studies to provide a critical overview. They also take a sideways look at some of the dilemmas that community media practitioners and their audiences must engage with.

The book was prompted by the development of community radio in the United Kingdom. This is a relatively new area of media in the UK. It was only in 2004 that community radio became legally recognised, although many activists have been promoting its worth and advantages for some years. As the first UK stations were licensed and got on air, it became clear that although there was much general support for the community media sector and the principles behind it, there was little examination as to what differentiated 'community' from 'mainstream' media and in particular, what issues it was uniquely having to address. Even in

Australia where the community media sector has been functioning since the 1970s and there is considerable academic discussion, there has only recently been a systematic examination into its audience and the value attributed to the sector.

Questions emerge not just concerning the traditional media platforms such as radio, but also the newer technologies such as online community initiatives and mobile telephony. Early publications sometimes give a somewhat sugary view of community media. The implication being that because it is 'community media' everything must be OK. On the other hand there has been a fashion to prefix government projects with the word 'community' as a thin disguise for a reduction in quality. In the UK the perception of the 'Community Policing' initiative was that there were fewer police officers to be seen and the 'Care in the Community' policy closed centres for the mentally ill. However 'Community Media' offers some very real alternatives to mainstream, commercial or public service media outlets. As the chapters in this book show, it can stand up robustly to critique and examination.

A difficulty in researching this area of the media is that what some commentators term 'community' media is termed 'alternative', 'radical' or 'activist' by others. This could be regarded as a grading of content rather than a difference of delivery modes. In addition the term 'citizen journalist' has come to prominence and this concept has synergies with some of the aims of community media practitioners. Within this book several terms are used and this is perfectly apposite in an exploration of the various notions of what community media may be. Each chapter gives its own definitions of the media that it discusses. This seems entirely appropriate for a book exploring these concepts and should aid readers in understanding the variants involved. It is also predicted and desirable that readers may not necessarily agree with all the authors. It is hoped that *Notions of Community* will provoke debate and an appreciation of the dilemmas.

The book is organised into three sections. Section one looks at some of the more theoretical and ethical aspects of community media. Saba ElGhul-Bebawi starts with some useful definitions and a helpful literature review of some of the main commentators on this area of academic study. She poses the argument that there is a blurring between mainstream and

alternative media, but that ultimately the distinguishing feature will be the way that alternative media contests media power. It may circumvent the hegemonies of mainstream information. However community media does not operate in a vacuum and Lawrie Hallett's chapter examines the rationale of government legislating for community radio within an existing mediascape. He describes the relationship between the new UK stations and the regulatory body and between community media and mainstream media providers. He concludes that even community radio is going to need to make itself distinctive in order to gain an audience, whether in traditional delivery methods or on new delivery platforms. Chapter three details research conducted amongst UK and Australian community radio stations. It asks how they are being funded and if, or to what extent, funding agencies are influencing the content provided by the stations. The final chapter of this section examines the ethics of conducting research 'within' or 'with' a community. For Kathryn A. Burnett and Tony Grace this included how they approached using media interventions within a tight island community in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland.

The second section of the book has examples of community media as it relates to the community's own identity. Katie Moylan details a programme for the migrant African community broadcast on Anna Livia FM in Dublin. She concludes that the difference between this programming and the mainstream ethnic programming is that the latter represents the ethnic communities as 'different', rather than facilitating participation by the migrant communities in the Irish public sphere. Gavin Stewart's chapter continues on the theme of identity by questioning who is actually blogging? He points out that the internet is not the non-commercial public sphere that it is assumed to be by many and that there are some dubious corporate practices operating under the guise of on line community media. As Stewart puts it, '[I]n suggesting that there are negative aspects in the current enthusiasm for community media it feels like I am advocating voting against fresh air or babies.'

The following two chapters are themselves providing two views of a debate. Michael Meadows, Susan Forde, Jacqui Ewart and Kerrie Foxwell draw on their recent research to show that community broadcasting in Australia is providing an alternative service for the diverse Australian communities to the commercial sector that was deregulated in 2007,

thereby allowing greater ownership by foreign companies. This chapter suggests that community media is able to 'disturb' the power base of the established mainstream and provide a variant interruption of cultures. However in the following chapter Kitty van Vuuren expresses her disquiet about the direction of community media and suggests that it is drifting into the mainstream in terms of content and now risks marginalising alternative political opinion.

In the final section of the book, the chapters give critiques and examples of media used for activism. Pollyanna Ruiz uses the case study of a group of activists using public relations techniques to motivate their local community and local newspaper into adopting a cause and publicising the detention of a local resident Omar Deghayes, in Guantanamo Bay. The following chapter again uses case studies, but of mobile phone usage in three critical situations, the SARS outbreak in China, the Sumatra-Andaman tsunami and the London bombings. This chapter suggests that the ability for members of the public to use a mobile phone to give eyewitness accounts is an enhancement of the public sphere and allows almost anyone to become a 'citizen journalist'. Jason Wilson, Barry Saunders and Axel Bruns follow this with a critique of the setting up and running of an online citizen journalism website. They argue that it is not enough to simply set up the website, a producer cum editor or 'preditor' is necessary to ensure success. This is a theme explored further in the final chapter by Dimitia L. Milioni who examines the Indymedia project in Athens and concludes that the internet will not necessarily lead to an influential public discourse.

Community media in all its guises has come to have an importance and significance for communities in many differing circumstances. At its best, it has developed as a public sphere, uncensored by authoritarian or hegemonic view-points. It has aided economic and social development and has provided an outlet for cultural products of minority, under-represented or repressed groups of people. Community media outlets have given practical information, self-esteem and self-worth to those without other media forms at their disposal, 'a voice for the voiceless'.

Janey Gordon, 2008