Community Media: People, Places, and Communication Technologies

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With the advent of community literacy, the traditional barriers between the university and the community have started to deteriorate. This is partially due to recent interest in contesting what counts as literacy. While conventional definitions of literacy place emphasis on measuring an individual's success at mastering a given set of discursive practices, emerging definitions of literacy blur the distinction between public and private and focus on how literacy is collectively used for social and political action.

Because literacy has inextricable ties to democracy and civic engagement, the denial of fair access to acquiring literacies is the denial of opportunity. In his book *Community Media: People, Places, and Communication Technologies*, new media theorist Kevin Howley examines how communications technologies are used for progressive social action in local communities. He is interested in how technology can be more equitably distributed so that traditionally marginalized groups can use media literacies to give voice to their social concerns. Howley asserts that the technological divide is created by existing social conditions; the struggle for communicative democracy "threatens to intensify rather than alleviate [. . .] class tensions" (25).

Traditionally marginalized groups are not the only victims in the struggle for communicative democracy. The corporate control of mass media has threatened engagement in and commitment to local communities by accelerating cultural imperialism (4). Despite this threat, Howley does not romanticize local communities or globalizing technologies: local communities are not egalitarian or static and globalizing technologies may "exacerbate [existing] tensions" in them (38). Though he admits that "the introduction of new technologies challenges, upsets and alters the character and conduct of social intercourse within and between communities," he affirms that community media is vital in creating a sense of place that may preserve the autonomy of local communities (8). Taking on Stephen Doheny-Farina's challenge to use global technologies

to connect to and re-imagine local communities, Howley examines how people can use technology for purposes of agency in their own neighborhoods, creating knowable communities and shared consciousness (266). Howley's conceptions of technology are in direct opposition to technological determinist views (e.g., those theories influenced by Marshall McLuhan): he asserts that "the mediators are the message," not mediums (12).

Howley locates agency for community members in using technology for local democracy by adopting the notion that all communities are constructed. He conceptualizes community as a construction defined by symbolic practices (language, dress, custom, ritual) shared by a group of people (6). These symbolic practices also help to differentiate communities from one another, which makes "communities [. . .] expressions of commonalities as well as differences" (6). Using Stuart Hall's definition of articulation, Howley claims that communication technologies can connect these disparate groups in the local context by forging unities that exist not because of heterogeneous symbolic practices, but because of a different sense of belonging: a sharing of place (6). Through communication technologies, difference can be contained and maintained in local communities (258). This preservation of difference, however, does not prevent local communities from engaging in self-reflexive inquiry; instead, it allows difference to be used as an asset in community problem-solving efforts.

According to Howley, the way in which asset-based community problem-solving is best approached is through community media. Community media involves "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" (2). Believing it to be one of the last remnants of participatory democracy, Howley asserts that community media "collapses the distinction between media consumers and producers" (3).

Though traditional notions of literacy are usually grounded in social and political contexts, Howley purports that economic contexts play an enormous role in the success and failure of community media (and, consequently, community literacy) initiatives; the roles of citizen and consumer/producer are inextricably intertwined. By ignoring economics as a social force that both enables and constrains activism, community media organizations run the risk of becoming obsolete (224).

Through four case studies, Howley analyzes how economics and a constellation of social forces affect community media initiatives in their local contexts. He introduces each case study by first providing extensive historical background on the local community being examined, using it to provide a clear context that explains why the community media initiative was created. He then traces the history of the community media initiative, noting how social forces play an essential factor in the success or failure of the initiative. Among the community media initiatives he studies are Bloomington, Indiana's Firehouse Broadcasting, WFHB (a community radio station); lower Manhattan's Downtown Community Television (DCTV); Halifax, Nova Scotia's Street Feat (a street paper created by impoverished citizens to inspire awareness of inequality in their city); and Victoria, Australia's VICNET (an online community network). All of these community media initiatives depend on capital (typically from wealthy donors) in order to operate. Their willingness to appease donors depends on the particular ideologies of the people running these initiatives. For example, while the DCTV crew

is comfortable with using free lance assignments for CBS to fund their non-profit efforts, the Street Feat staff criticizes mainstream conceptions parroted in the Royal Gazette even though the funds from contributing to the latter support the production of the former (176). Paradoxically, the struggle for funds both aids these community media initiatives in achieving their goals and prevents them from being able to achieve more.

Creating a theoretical model in a largely empirical field takes time as well (5). As a theoretical framework, community media is not without flaws (269). Howley vows to rearticulate communication technologies and does so through explaining how they relate to social forces and historical contexts (6). Yet another possible rearticulation could include combining his notion of community media with prevailing theories of technological determinism. If every technology has a unique rhetoric, human agency is further complicated: social forces become one of many factors that makes complete autonomy impossible. If "mediators are the message," then could the definition of "mediator" be expanded to include human and non-human agents? Could there be room in community media theory to explore this complex relationships between human and non-human agents?

Though Howley created this theory in hope that media intellectuals and cultural studies scholars would begin to acknowledge the role of community media in media studies, his work is useful for audiences he did not anticipate. Technical communication instructors, directors of non-profit organizations, and community activists who use communication technologies for the purpose of reconnecting to their local communities will be able to better analyze the constellation of forces surround their community media initiatives if they read this book.