Towards a reconceptualisation of the lumpenproletariat: The collective organisation of poverty for social change through participatory media

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Abstract

This study examines the activist-oriented participatory media processes of those who arguably could be classified as contemporary lumpenproletariat in San Francisco, California. Based on ethnographic research conducted at POOR Magazine in San Francisco, this article argues that, despite obstacles of disenfranchisement and disindividuation, people living in poverty and homelessness can organise collectively for social change via participatory media processes. Working with POOR Magazine, I conducted a qualitative analysis of the process of participatory media production and the media artefacts of people living in poverty and homelessness. The data are analysed through a critical/cultural theoretical lens to help reframe and redefine the conception of the lumpenproletariat. The findings of this study saw the possibility for collective organisation emerge in four ways: ideology, leadership, organisation and collective identity; this gives us a better understanding of the power and potential of lumpenproletariat media.

Keywords

Participatory media, critical media studies, poverty, lumpenproletariat, media ethnography

Introduction

There is an ongoing debate about the applicability of Marxism and neo-Marxism in the twenty-first century, where scholars have argued that nineteenth-century conceptualisations of class structure struggle to account for the complexities of the current post-industrial and digital eras (Filc and Ram, 2014; Gibson-Graham et al., 2001). As part of this debate, one concept in particular, the lumpenproletariat, has come under siege as being not only derogatory in conception, but also vague and under-conceptualised. However, since the mid-twentieth century, scholars have analysed and reconfigured the application of this term to account for its revolutionary potential and ability to address inherent classist assumptions of people who may fall into this category (Draper, 1972; Fanon, 2007; Mills, 2014). The present article seeks to revive this conversation and apply this concept through the examination of participatory media created by contemporary lumpenproletariat who are able to collectively organise and create social change.

In this article, I use the term ‘lumpenproletariat’ to describe the political term popularised by Marx and Engels, which I define as economically excluded and socially dislocated people across classes. Although they did not create the term lumpenproletariat (cf. Bussard, 1987), Marx and Engels (2012) propagated and applied it through a classist lens, evoking negative assumptions about those to whom they felt it applied. In this primary conceptualisation, the

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lumpenproletariat consisted of individuals who were disenfranchised to the point of existing outside class designations. People living in extreme poverty or homelessness, those who were revolutionaries or criminals and those living in mental asylums were placed in this category. However, other scholars have broadened this term to include anyone who voluntarily chooses to live outside the capitalist class structure as a form of political struggle (Avrich, 1970; Stallybrass, 1990; Thoburn, 2002). Contemporary scholars have attempted to reframe and redefine this categorisation by arguing that the lumpenproletariat can be a vanguard of revolutionary force for social change (Andrews, 2014; Denning, 2010; Draper, 1972; Henderson, 1997). This reframing creates theoretical implications for critical media studies scholars to better understand the ways in which class structures play out in the creation, dissemination and impact of media systems. This article contributes to critical media theory by analysing the activist-oriented participatory media process of those who, I argue, may be considered contemporary lumpenproletariat in San Francisco, California.

Based on ethnographic research conducted at POOR Magazine in San Francisco, this article argues that, despite obstacles of disenfranchisement and disindividuation, people living in poverty and homelessness can organise collectively for social change via participatory media processes. Working with POOR Magazine, this study conducts a qualitative analysis of the process of participatory media production and the media artefacts of people living in poverty and homelessness. For example, one post that was written as part of a resistance blog series states:

I walked down a hall that smelled of medicine; vicious screams resonating in my ear. I was on the 6th floor psychiatric ward at San Francisco General Hospital. The nurse with her glasses peering over her nose, ‘How may I help you?’ ‘I am here to visit my husband Jerome,’ I replied. Fear and sadness struck me as I thought about the mental complexity that he and so many other Black Brothers experience in this racially oppressive society called America. (Sheppard, 2011)

Blog posts like this work to reunite disenfranchised voices by disseminating experiential knowledges that speak to shared social injustices. In this article, the data are analysed through a critical/cultural theoretical lens in order to help reframe and redefine the conception of the lumpenproletariat to develop a better understanding of the power and potential of lumpenproletariat media. The first section of this article examines the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the lumpenproletariat as a critical theoretical conception. The next section looks at the significance of this conception in relation to the literature on critical/cultural media ethnographies and participatory media processes. The data analysis explores ethnographic themes that emerge through a lumpenproletariat conceptual lens to provide a better understanding of the social change potential for poverty media.

**A discussion on class and media**

Marx and Engels (1970) argued that the lumpenproletariat were unable to organise towards revolutionary or social change goals because of their disenfranchisement and the lack of a foundational collective identity from which to start. However, scholars have since argued against this perspective, and have worked to redefine and reconceptualise this classification. During Marx and Engel’s time, Bakunin (1990) also analysed the role of the lumpenproletariat in modern society, although he was more interested in examining their potential for revolutionary social change. According to Bakunin, because the lumpenproletariat have the least exposure to corrupt bourgeois ideologies, they are not as tainted by upper- and middle-class aspirations as the working class (Avrich, 1970). They are also more likely to revolt because they have the least to lose in terms of materialistic chains – in other words, because they are in poverty or homelessness, they may have no material comforts or goods to lose. Bakunin (1990) saw the potential power of the lumpenproletariat as those who would forcibly rise against their
oppressors and against anyone who benefited from their misery and enslavement. For these individuals, existing outside of the capitalist class system was preferential to becoming working-class proletariats, enslaved to a bourgeois or aristocrat elitist agenda. As such, the consciousness of the lumpenproletariat would be outside that of a working-class consciousness; it would lack the corruption inherent in working-class assumptions and instead lie somewhere deeper in a ‘purer’ consciousness.

In the mid-twentieth century, Fanon (2007: xi) resurrected the term to analyse the ways in which colonialism produced ‘disposable populations’, asserting that, ‘The colonized, underdeveloped man is a political creature in the most global sense of the term.’ Fanon understood the revolutionary potential of the lumpenproletariat when disenfranchised people are provided with ideology, leadership and organisation. Fanon saw this possibility enacted in Algeria during the 1950s as Algerian nationalists fought a bloody and merciless war against colonialism: ‘The insurgent energies of the Algerian peasantry and lumpenproletariat, Fanon believed, would guard against the corruption and cooptation of “westernized” nationalist parties led by urban elites’ (Bhabha, 2004: xxxvii). Parallels can be drawn from Fanon’s use of the term and the political situatedness of those in homelessness and poverty, who can be seen as political agents set against a backdrop of marginalisation, oppression and denigration through laws and policies created to further criminalise and subjugate them. Bakunin and Fanon provide starting points for an examination of the metamorphosis of the term; however, this article moves away from their focus on anarchy and violence, respectively, to examine how contemporary lumpenproletariat in information societies use different ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott, 1987): subaltern resistance media via participatory media processes.

In redefining the term ‘lumpenproletariat’, contemporary scholars have focused more on the absence of collective identity and on the ability of individuals to reside outside the class-system structure. According to Thoburn’s (2002: 441) analysis of Marx’s writings, ‘The lumpenproletariat is not itself an identity (a particular social group), but in each of the diverse sites of its emergence in Marx’s texts, it is a tendency towards the maintenance of identity.’ Worsley (1972: 211) also adds that the lumpenproletariat consists of ‘people in process’, transitioning from immigrant to citizen or country peasant to urban dweller; the people, like the category, are not ‘a fixed and consolidated, let alone self-conscious and organised social class’. Draper’s (1972: 2309) thorough scholarship on Marx and his conceptualisation of the term points out that the lumpenproletariat ‘is the catch-all for those who fall out, or drop out, of the existing social structure so that they are no longer functionally an integral part of society’. The lack of a coherent collective identity can also be attributed to the insolubility of the variety of people who fall within this classification. The lumpenproletariat signifies those who do not wish to adhere to capitalist social norms and attitudes, for a variety of reasons that do not necessarily bond individuals together.

Scholars have also viewed this classification as a space where ‘the political’ can reside outside of the class-system structure (Stallybrass, 1990), allowing individuals to ‘pop up everywhere rather than exist as a neat and distinct social group’ (Thoburn, 2002: 438). An example of this is people living in homelessness who experience disindividuation and solitude from one another through their migratory and nomadic existence. Due to this disenfranchisement:

Minor politics operate in the ‘cramped spaces’ and ‘impossible’ positions of ‘small peoples’ and ‘minorities’ who lack or refuse coherent identity – those who, constrained by a wealth of determining social relations, exist under, and in a sense affirm, the condition that ‘the people are missing’. (Thoburn, 2002: 436)

It is in these ‘cramped spaces’ that we find the possibility for individuals to leave their class designation and reside (whether voluntarily or involuntarily). In this conception of lumpenproletariat,
we see the possibility for individuals to create space within the cracks and crevices of capitalism for the genesis of revolution and social change.

With these definitions in mind, this study’s conception of lumpenproletariat focuses on people who have been economically excluded and socially dislocated across classes, and have the potential for collective organisation as they navigate the cramped spaces of capitalism. While the term could be applied as a general category to group together disparate identities, it is more accurate and useful when taking into account the unique positionalities of specific individuals, like their contextual and historical situations, to avoid essentialist or reductionist approaches. The individuals at POOR Magazine fit this category because they possess the revolutionary potential for positive social change by wielding the necessary ideology, leadership, organisation and collective identity for their given historical context: the post-Great Recession era of 2010. In the San Francisco Bay area, the creators and participants at POOR Magazine have emulated the lumpenproletariat’s revolutionary potential through the creation of participatory media resistant to laws and policies that further criminalise, and mainstream media depictions that further denigrate, those in poverty and homelessness.

 Ethnographic inquiries of participatory media

POOR Magazine is a ‘poor people led/indigenous people led non-profit, grassroots, arts organisation dedicated to providing revolutionary media access, education, arts, education and solutions from youth, adults and elders in poverty across Pachamama’ (POOR Magazine, 2016). The concept of revolution is at the root of what POOR Magazine aspires to, because the organisation believes it is engaging discriminated people in new and dramatic ways. POOR Magazine is located in San Francisco, California, and works to promote social change for people whose lives are marked by their struggle with homelessness, poverty, racism, classism, (dis)ability, immigration, incarceration, and discrimination. The organisation was created by the current director, Lisa Gray-García (‘Tiny’), and her mother, Dee, in 1996. They launched a concept of ‘poverty scholarship’, and they were in fact, poverty scholars. Poverty scholarship is an epistemological perspective that assumes that people who experience homelessness and poverty also produce legitimate knowledge, and that this knowledge builds power (Tiny, 2011). Based on these assumptions, POOR Magazine offers opportunities for media production and training where people in poverty and homelessness can voice their own knowledge and perspectives. True to its namesake, POOR Magazine could initially only afford to produce a few print issues before its budget was exhausted. However, the accessibility and lower production costs of digital media technologies have afforded POOR Magazine the ability to continue its mission with online publishing, which is financed through grants and donations.

To analyse the lumpenproletariat potential for social change in contemporary US society, I examined the participatory media created at POOR Magazine by people living in poverty and homelessness. This study relies on White’s (2003: 75) definition of participatory media, which views the participatory process as dependent on interaction and dialogue, where communication is the foundation of any social change process. The concept of participatory media is used due to its focus on media production as a process rather than as the product. As Rodríguez (2001: 116) explains, the focus on video-as-process ‘involves a professional communicator working together with community members in all phases of the production process’, and concentrates on the symbiotic relationship of the external and internal agents working together to create a video reflective of that community. White (2003) argues that participatory communication must be visualised as ‘process methodology’ that enables people at the margins or grassroots level to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to generate their own messages. White (2003) further states that critical consciousness can be raised through participatory media production processes where dialogue serves as a catalyst for creating
empowerment through independence and interdependence. In his research on a Bolivian tin miner radio station, Huesca (1995) finds that participatory media can be a double-edged sword in which participants can be marginalised as well as empowered, and that they are able to express their voices as well as be silenced. Huesca (1995: 115–16) argues that ‘this two-sidedness of alternative communication should be taken as axiomatic’, but ‘if communication follows a design guided by democratic principles, responsive procedures can be developed to identify and amend inequalities’. In this research, Huesca argues for establishing communicative procedures that media practitioners should follow in order to encourage the potential and avoid the pitfalls of participatory media. The design of this study heeds this call, and was created in collaboration with Tiny and the participants at POOR Magazine to engender a democratic environment for participatory media production.

In addition to process methodology, this study takes a media ethnographic approach to capture the production process as it is learned and implemented by participants. Media ethnography differs from conventional ethnography only in that its primary focus is on media studies, a field which has come to define as well as hinder the application of this methodological approach (Murphy and Kraidy, 2003). Media ethnography focuses on mediated communication, which inherently is tied to the complexities of order, space, agency and reflexivity (Couldry, 2003). These complexities force the ethnographer to reconceptualise how traditional ethnographies must be conducted in mediated, displaced and fragmented research sites. Marcus (1998) has created a compelling reimagining of this through his multi-sited approach. His concept of complicity urges researchers to share the participants’ awareness of the complexity of space and location by identifying the external forces that impact and influence the mediation of their social lives. Media ethnographers advocate that conventional ethnography be modified to accommodate this complexity by addressing the conventional areas of media consumption – such as the home – and other areas influenced by media circulation – for example, school, work, the bar, the street corner (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Couldry, 2003; Murphy, 2008; Radway, 1991).

For this study, media ethnography was implemented through participant observation. In the summer of 2010, I enrolled in PeopleSkool/Escuela de la Gente, an educational initiative designed to teach community media production, to observe the educational process as the group met twice a week for nine weeks. This ethnographic data is a good representation of how participants engaged in media education, media production and, ultimately, in collective organisation for social change in the years following the 2009 financial crisis in the United States. Through this ethnography, I watched and participated alongside local community members as they learned to use digital media technologies to respond to the mainstream media’s misrepresentations and stereotyping of their communities. In my interactions with POOR Magazine staff and participants, I attempted to create a dialogue of knowledges (Freire, 1970) by seeking engaged conversation between my academic perspective and the experiential knowledge and understanding of POOR Magazine participants. Listening to POOR Magazine participants as authentic producers of their own knowledge and perspectives helped me to develop a greater understanding of the organisational process and the participants’ experiences. In this ethnography, I participated in and observed classes, protests, press conferences and the FAMILY Project. I also helped write and edit articles, and facilitated video production.

To conduct this study, I used media ethnography that included field notes, thick description and reflexivity to capture as much detail of the experience as possible, and to reflexively analyse the implementation of the research methodology. In addition to field notes, I kept a participant journal that consisted of notes maintained during classes and activities at Escuela de la Gente, as well as personal reflections on obstacles and impediments encountered during the ethnography. Also included for analysis were all media created by participants during
the summer session as well as online publications made by participants over the next two years. These included videos, blogs, articles, photos, poems and audio recordings. I also analysed course literature: course handouts, activity sheets, agendas, supplemental readings, fliers, PowerPoint presentations and packets. Staff members and media facilitators at POOR Magazine created the course literature used during Escuela de la Gente, with the exception of the video-editing handout I created for participants. To better understand the revolutionary potential of lumpenproletariat media, the next section will analyse the participatory media process and artefacts created by lumpenproletariat at POOR Magazine.

Lumpenproletariat Media: The Voice of Poverty

When applying the lumpenproletariat concept to critical media studies, questions addressing organisation and application emerge: How can lumpenproletariat move beyond obstacles of disenfranchisement and disindividuation to collectively organise for social change? How can lumpenproletariat use participatory media to create space to respond to laws, policies, and mainstream media that further criminalise and subjugate them? Scott (1987) begins to address some of these questions in his research on everyday forms of peasant resistance, but falls short of identifying the tools available for people in extreme poverty and homelessness, and the role they play in everyday resistance. This study explores these questions throughout the analysis of participatory media creation among lumpenproletariat in poverty and homelessness.

A grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which relied on critical/cultural theories and conceptualisations as a framework, was used for the qualitative analysis. Field notes and media artefacts were analysed through open coding and axial coding, consisting of close textual ‘reading’ and a constant comparison of code categories. Codes transitioned from a descriptive form of coding to a more analytical/theoretical coding process through the re-examination of data under critical/cultural conceptual frames.

Using Fanon’s (2007) and Worsley’s (1972) work to help understand how lumpenproletariat move beyond obstacles of disenfranchisement to collectively organise, the data showed that this occurred in four ways: ideology, leadership, organisation and identity. According to Fanon (2007: 163), ‘The task of bringing the people to maturity is facilitated by rigorous organisation as well as the ideological level of their leaders.’ At POOR Magazine, participants learned media production and literacy skills that intertwined the thought of revolutionary ideology in every lesson plan and protest rally. In the office:

The walls were covered in murals, artwork, and fliers. A large poster that read ‘Manifesto for Change/Manifiesto para el Cambio’ laid out all of the goals and initiatives of the organization. It was displayed prominently in the center of the room for everyone who entered to see. (Field notes, 2010)

The ‘Manifesto for Change’ poster hung over participants as they learned about interviewing, research and using video technologies, reminding them of the over-arching ideologies that had brought everyone to POOR and the dominant ideologies against which they were trying to fight. The Manifesto for Change was written by POOR participants as a ‘template for global and local revolutionary change’ that they hoped could be ‘launched in any city in the US with a Revolutionary Giving Ally’ and addressed three components (POOR Magazine, 2010):

**The Declaration of Inter-dependence**

RECLAIMM: Reclaiming Community & Land Access (through) Investment in Micro-Business (on) Mother (Earth)

The HOMFULLNESS Project

The manifesto was built from and based on members’ conceptualisation of what it means to be in poverty in contemporary US society. The Declaration of Inter-dependence focuses on
accountability and caregiving, and moves away from the US-held value of independence towards an ideal of working with and relying on one another to achieve common goals for the betterment of the community. The RECLAIMM project proposes ‘a new form of indigenous, sustainable “green” equity and resource redistribution that will enable us to reclaim and build equity, support and promote micro-business, micro-economics and land ownership in our native urban communities’ (POOR Magazine, 2010).

The HOMEFULLNESS project was implemented in 2012 when POOR moved its headquarters from the Mission District in San Francisco to the nearby town of Oakland. Using personal funds, donations and an ‘equity campaign’, POOR acquired a home in Oakland that houses POOR staff and family; the FAMILY school; the POOR newsroom; and the Race, Poverty, and Media Justice Institute. The idea behind HOMEFULLNESS is to build a revolutionary space for people in poverty to escape the threats of gentrification, terror and abuse that plague their existence.

As stated in the Decolonisers’ Guide to a Humble Revolution (POOR Magazine, 2011: 7), which is a POOR Press publication given to participants and donors, POOR’s self-defined conceptualisation of ‘Poor People’s Oppression’ is:

conflicted with race and struggle and ablism and criminalization and the multiple ways that poor peoples are hated, marginalized, separated, talked about, silenced and fetishized from both the people who overtly hate us and our so-called saviors, pimps and investigating institutions of Academia. We are so named ‘poor’ in Amerikkka due to several forms of racist and classist signifiers including our use of language, our clothing, where we live, and the way we act in or outside of white, euro-centric norms of ‘acceptable’ behavior.

The use of ideology was integrated in all classes and opportunities for participants to engage with POOR to the extent that ‘The power of ideology … elaborated and strengthened as the struggle unfolds, taking into account the enemy’s maneuvers and the movement’s victories and setbacks’ (Fanon, 2007: 163). The ideas outlined in the Manifesto for Change were reinforced with every successful protest campaign (online and offline) and reimagined every time a community member entered the room to address a civil rights injustice. By building revolutionary spaces for participants, POOR seamlessly wove its ideological values into the infrastructure of the organisation so participants experienced it in everything they created.

Leadership was used as a tool for collective organisation through power structures as well as support structures. The leadership structure at POOR was rhetorically constructed as non-hierarchical, but tangibly took the shape of one director, supported by internal organisational staff, supported by long-term participants who asserted organisational knowledge, followed by new participants on the receiving end of knowledge. Recalling Fanon’s (2007: 163) observations on the role of leadership, ‘The leadership demonstrates its strength and authority by exposing mistakes and, through experience, learning better ways of going forward every time consciousness takes one step backward.’ This was observed at POOR as Tiny and staff members worked with participants to share knowledge through dialogue as well as through reflexive critical analysis of the narratives they collectively constructed via participatory media. For example, after visiting City Hall and shooting videos of interviews with people protesting the proposed ‘Sit/Lie Law’ (a city ordinance that outlawed sitting or lying down on sidewalks in San Francisco), participants returned to the POOR office to view and collectively reflect on the experience and video products. During this video session, a staff member reinforced the idea of teamwork by encouraging participants to ‘work as a tribe’ to ensure effective communication and teamwork. The staff member also used the opportunity to point out the mistakes participants made in shooting, like cropping an interviewee out of the image or not having the microphone close enough to the interviewee. While addressing these mistakes, the staff member was also
careful to point out that ‘we learn from the mistakes’, to bring home the point that everyone makes mistakes, but should learn to avoid making them again in the future.

According to Fanon (2007: 160), ‘All this clarification, this subsequent raising of awareness and the advances along the road to understanding the history of societies can only be achieved if the people are organized and guided.’ Organisationally, POOR worked to create change models for long-term economic sustainability and to facilitate agency for people from many different cultures, races and generations through the resources and support it provided. This support included transportation to and from the POOR office, transportation for children, on-site childcare, meals, on-site direct legal advocacy, and monetary stipends for time spent learning with POOR. Through these resources, participants were able to engage in the media production and literacy courses offered by POOR. Fanon (2007: 160) saw the availability of educational resources, like POOR’s courses, as a way for people in poverty to ‘improve their knowledge through practical experiences and prove apt to lead the people’s struggle’. Through these courses, participants learned how to produce media (radio, television and publication), undertake investigative journalism (‘digital resistance’), conduct research, gain awareness of systemic oppression and resist oppression through media and education. According to Tiny:

How do you ensure that the silenced voices of people in poverty are heard? By addressing the subtle and not so subtle ways in which our voices and research and scholarship is separated out and suppressed. We teach on our forms of media revolution and media justice at the Race, Poverty, & Media Justice Institute and PeopleSkool. 

(Angola 3 News, 2010)

Participants were also able to voice their stories, ideas, and knowledge in a variety of media on the POOR website and via POOR’s affiliates, which included the San Francisco Bayview newspaper, KPFA/Pacifica, The Oakland Tribune, Alternet, Paper Tiger TV, Free Speech TV, Race, Poverty and the Environment, Street Sheet, Street Spirit, the San Francisco Bay Guardian, the Media Alliance and the Free Press. According to Harris (2009: 539), this type of participatory media practice enhances bonding capital, or access to local networks, which ‘contributes to community building and dialogue’. Through POOR’s organisational strategies, participants were also afforded the opportunity for organisation of thought: a break from the unrelenting demands of poverty to focus their minds on their place within the struggle and their role in liberation. PeopleSkool brought together people with diverse poverty experiences and perspectives to create a communal dialogue that values and shares experiential knowledge as key to the creation of social change. In this sense, lumpenproletariat at POOR used the process of participatory media as a vehicle to engage one another in active participation that worked towards raising critical consciousness about systemic forces of oppression.

In addition to the components of collective organisation identified in Fanon’s work, the data analysis showed a fourth component: collective identity. Through collaborative assignments and community media projects, participants were able to engage in open dialogue with one another about the facets of their lives and experiences in poverty that united them. For example:

One participant said, ‘People fear for themselves and don’t realize they should fear corporations, the wealthy, etc. It’s easier to fear people than corporations like immigrants, welfare mothers, etc.’ To which Tiny responded, ‘It’s easier to fight united than as individual people.’ Another participant said, ‘Poor people never get a voice so it’s easier to target us’, to which Tiny responded, ‘Poor people do have a voice but nobody wants to listen.’ (Field notes, 2010)

Within the organisational structure described above, collective identity for group members differed, depending on placement within the structure. For Tiny, collective identity stemmed from a reputational concern and obligation to group members, where an expectation of
consistency was placed on her, and her role and identity were constructed around this responsibility (Chong, 1991). Staff members and long-term participants engaged in collective identity through loyalty towards their causes and towards one another. According to Fireman and Gamson (1979: 22):

A person whose life is intertwined with the group [through friendship, kinship, organizational membership, informal support networks, or shared relations with outsiders] … has a big stake in the group’s fate. When collective action is urgent, the person is likely to contribute his or her share even if the impact of that share is not noticeable.

New participants’ collective identity was not entirely shaped by pre-existing class or group identification, but rather through the central identity of POOR Magazine itself. ‘PeopleSkool has made me feel independent and heard, by writing about things that matter to me and other people at POOR Magazine’ (Smith, 2014). Through this collective identity, participants were able to forge what Worsley (1972: 217) sees as ‘a sense of common identity as sharing a lifestyle, within, usually, a local community, which is distinctly different from that of other classes … Communal class-consciousness takes the form of a diffuse sense of being part of Hoggart’s “Us” as against “Them”’. However, unlike Hoggart’s (1960) assertion that this type of class-consciousness only leads to interpersonal mutual aid (as opposed to collective political action), participants at POOR used this collective identity as a way to collectively organise around issues important to them, which was seen through the media they produced.

The participatory media process was integral to creating space for lumpenproletariat at POOR to respond to laws, policies and mainstream media. In other research, I have argued that the participatory media process is transformative for participants to articulate their voices, engage in dialogue and raise critical consciousness, which leads to an increase in self-empowerment and agency (Vincent, 2014). Through engagement with this transformative process, I saw that participants were able to create space for dissent within the ‘cramped spaces’ of capitalism (Thoburn, 2002) through what Deleuze, Guattari and Brinkley (1983) refer to as ‘minor literature’. According to Deleuze, Guattari and Brinkley, minor literature stems from minority groups responding to a dominant rhetoric using what Tiny calls ‘the oppressor’s language’ (which stems from her understanding of Freire’s (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed). Minor literature ‘exists in a narrow space, [where] every individual matter is immediately plugged into the political’ (Deleuze, Guattari and Brinkley, 1983: 16). The operation of lumpenproletariat media in these cramped spaces occurred through several ways: citizen journalism, digital storytelling, multimedia production and guerilla press conferences.

Participants learned citizen journalism skills through PeopleSkool/Escuela de la Gente, which introduced them to the POOR journalism structure of the POOR News Network (PNN). This program provided participants with various outlets to publish and broadcast the projects they created in PeopleSkool, in turn creating rhetorical space online, in print and over the airwaves for their poverty perspective. According to Tiny:

Unlike CNN we’re PNN. We’re the People-led News. How do you make people-led news? With the people! It’s a community process. It’s urgent that poor people make news because things are happening to us everyday and nobody is reporting on it, so it’s up to us to get the word out. (Field notes, 2010)

An example of the ‘personal is political’, for participants at POOR can be seen through digital storytelling/blog projects like the Working to Feed Our Children series of blogs written by Mama Skolars:

I believe everything in the universe happens for a reason and I am truly grateful. I am grateful for my child I am grateful for cal works because without the food stamps and the financial help and medical my child and I would be hungry homeless and sick.
Although we have experience hunger homelessness and illness I know in my soul that it would be so much worse. As a welfare mom I recently had the blessing of being given work experience for pay. This work experience at San Francisco City College has boosted my self-esteem and truly helps me realize that I am working for myself and the betterment of my child. Although I only make $400 month this has truly been a help to the betterment of my mind soul and spirit. (Sheppard, 2010)

Through class assignments like this, participants were able to individually articulate their experience through drafts, collectively share and edit their writing with POOR staff and participants, and then create space for their perspective through the POOR website, social media and local media affiliations. This process is what Deleuze, Guattari and Brinkley (1983: 18) refer to as ‘collective arrangements of utterance – [where] literature expresses these arrangements, not as they are given on the outside, but only as diabolic powers to come or revolutionary forces to be constructed’. This specific project, the Mama Blog Series, was forwarded to the office of Congresswoman Pelosi, who responded with a letter to the participants that the congresswoman was deeply concerned about the impact of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) budget cuts and appreciated that the mothers brought their perspective to her attention for consideration in local policy-making.

Through multimedia production classes, participants learnt to transform citizen journalism and digital storytelling from a blog or article format to multimodal depictions of their poverty experiences. In addition to learning technical media production skills (like how to turn on a video recorder or crop a scene), participants also learned to account for aspects like gaze and body language to effectively convey their experiential knowledge of poverty to their target audiences of policy-makers, voters, mainstream media outlets and other people engaged in poverty experiences. For example:

Tiny entered and exited the class periodically and said, ‘In the video blogs this is your story and the perspective of the gaze lets someone know you’re telling your story, which is very different than reporting. With a talk-story there is different emotion, the camera is like a relative.’ Tiny told participants, ‘if you treat this like a news report no one’s going to care; the emphasis is on gaze, body movement and engagement. Be an actress, not a reporter.’ (Field notes, 2010)

The ability to create and disseminate multimodal experiential knowledges of poverty not only empowered participants by providing an internal space in the POOR office for voice articulation, collaborative dialogue and consciousness-raising (Vincent, 2013), but also gave participants an external space via publishing outlets to engage with broader audiences. As Meadows and colleagues (2009: 178) note in their research on community media, ‘community broadcasting plays an important cultural role by encouraging dialogue between diverse “public arenas” – a unique way of “making spaces” integral to formation of the broader public sphere and enhancing the democratic process’.

Another way in which POOR created physical space in the narrow confines of San Francisco was through guerrilla press conferences, where participants would create their own press conference (sans legal permits) in crowded areas of San Francisco’s busy streets. For example, participants planned a press conference that was held in front of the POOR office building, which was used to publicly challenge gubernatorial candidate Meg Whitman to a debate on poverty issues in California:

‘Meg Whitman has repeatedly attacked immigrants and poor mothers, building her campaign on the backs of poor people, so we, the poor people, have a response,’ Tiny said. The street bustled with the noise of cars and foot traffic. At one point a small group of ten to fifteen people gathered around the press conference and attracted passers by to watch and pay attention. Each speaker was translated between English and Spanish and every Escuela de la Gente mother/participant spoke at the press conference. (Field notes, 2010)
In this act of civic participation, we see engagement as a form of dissent, in which participants did not seek consensus with their oppressors, but rather sought to engage the dominant public sphere from a subaltern perspective. According to Phillips (1996: 244), ‘we cannot truly engage diversity without recognising the diverse sites and conditions in which differences come to the fore’. Norris (2002) extends this argument in her research on protest as an accepted form of political participation. For both these arguments, one way to be civically engaged with one’s community and political processes is to express discontent and dissent about oppressive structures. This press conference allowed participants at POOR to construct a physical presence within the cramped spaces of capitalism at the heart of one of the largest cities in the United States to engage passers by in critically analyzing political rhetoric. Through the participatory media process, POOR created physical and rhetorical spaces for poverty scholars to join the mainstream media’s exclusive conversation through the power of their own unique voices and stories.

**Conclusion**

The lumpenproletariat help us to better understand how economically excluded and socially dislocated people across classes can engage in revolutionary potential for social change through participatory media creation and dissemination. The conception of lumpenproletariat allows us to see the possibility for individuals to create space within the cracks and crevices of capitalism for the genesis of revolution and transformation. Using POOR Magazine as an example, we see that people living in extreme poverty and homelessness are able to forge collective identities and collective organisation for the creation of social change despite obstacles of disenfranchisement and disindividuation. This study showed that participatory media can be used as a way to bring together isolated individuals with a shared vision via ideology, leadership, organisation and collective identity. Ideology was seen as POOR built revolutionary spaces for participants that seamlessly wove their ideological values into the infrastructure of the organisation. Leadership was used as a tool for collective organisation through power structures as well as support structures throughout POOR. Organisationally, POOR worked to create change models for long-term economic sustainability and to facilitate agency for people through the resources and support it provided. Through POOR’s organisational strategies, participants were also afforded the opportunity for organisation of thought, which provided a break from the unrelenting demands of poverty so participants could focus their minds on their place within the struggle and their role in liberation. Collective identity was cultivated for many of the participants through the central identity of POOR Magazine itself, not necessarily by pre-existing class or group identification. As a way to help facilitate engagement, participatory media processes afforded lumpenproletariat the possibility for reflection with others and the world around them, and for the opportunity to raise critical consciousness to interact with the sociopolitical processes that affected them. Through the creation of participatory media like citizen journalism, digital storytelling, multimedia and guerilla press conferences, participants at POOR were able to carve out rhetorical, physical and political spaces in the San Francisco Bay area public sphere to disseminate their experiential knowledges of poverty.

This article has argued for the reconceptualisation and academic inclusion of the term ‘lumpenproletariat’. There is currently a gap in research on class representation and media portrayals, and this study serves to address one piece of this gap by examining the dissemination of poverty knowledge and perspectives of those who experience it in their daily lives: the lumpenproletariat. This study hopes to spark interest in and debate about the revolutionary potential for lumpenproletariat as well as the role of participatory media in the transformative processes that enable them. Throughout history, the lumpenproletariat moniker has moved from a classification of denigration to a form of revolutionary identification. By analysing and incorporating concepts like lumpenproletariat, critical media scholars can improve the tools they use to critically examine the social and political implications of class representation and
the populations that are addressed or ignored in media coverage. It is hoped that critical media scholars will engage in the use of this concept for a better understanding of the power and potential of lumpenproletariat media. I argue that scholars need to shed the historically denigrating shackles on this term and consider its potential for analysing disparate populations who play a key role in economic revolution at a specific point in time when the people and their political representatives are vocally advocating for change. It is when we accept everyone across the economic spectrum in revolutionary change that we will best be poised to create economic social change that benefits everyone.

References


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