Community media: Institutions, trust and groups

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This journal has arrived at a critical time. A new and very different information infrastructure is being built over the top of the internet. Platforms designed to bring certainty to that which is currently unsecure and unverifiable in online systems are currently under construction. Identity checks, contracts, payments and property will be transformed at the technical layer (Swan, 2015), with implications for everything from law and fiat money to organisations. The emerging online era is far from the open ideal of the early internet pioneers (for instance, Barbrook and Cameron, 1995), but it also offers new possibilities for cooperative systems. What we currently think of as community media may or may not feature in the Web 3 environment. However, we can learn from community media because it is a communications institution that has had to carve out a place among stronger organising forces antithetical to its group-centred design.

The field of community media was constructed within the broadcast era under conditions of spectrum scarcity. From the start, it was considered an alternative – a way to do things differently from the mainstream. Community media was and remains a unique sphere of activity that works well when it is accorded different rules that enable it to uphold the interests of those it is intended to serve, but might always remain marginal or small scale when compared with platforms designed for the many (Rodriguez, 2001). The three areas where research into and knowledge of community and alternative media can be useful in thinking through the challenges of the emerging information paradigm are institutions, trust and groups.

Institutions
Institutions matter for what they enable or shut down. Cooperative systems require institutions that produce particular outcomes for those involved, and that can provide a different path to content innovation. The sphere of community media is an institution – albeit one that differs according to national and local parameters. These include the laws that license community broadcasters, the codes of practice that inform how organisations should behave and the shared knowledge and social norms of what community media stands for: non-profit motives, access, participation and localism.

In the broadcast era, community media had a marginal appeal to a different way of doing media, existing within broadcasting policy regimes that at best tolerated them. Yet community media groups managed to create an identity, a movement and resources that enabled the field to grow into a sizeable sector in some countries. The original end-to-end nature of the internet, and the use of open-source software in its development up until the 2000s, provided access and participation on a scale never seen before. Theoretically, community media might have done well in an environment where access was not about getting into to a controlled territory, but where that territory was freely accessible to begin with (Rennie 2003). However, community media platforms did not prevail online, and by the early 2000s the debate was already turning

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to how to preserve and maintain the commons of the internet against corporate interests (Benkler, 2006; Lessig, 1999).

**Trust**

A small number of online platforms now dominate, facilitating content-sharing and harnessing the ideas, causes and social needs of many. Why is that community media organisations did not evolve to the scale of social media platforms?

To take a conventional media studies mode of analysis, the ‘media convergence’ policy decisions of the past decade are revealing (for instance, in Australia, Boreham, 2012). Throughout these reviews, community media were sidelined, and presumed unnecessary because access and participation were easily achieved online. Efforts to bring some kind of system of identification, regulation and navigation to community media endeavours fell flat (including my own – see Rennie, Berkeley and Murphet, 2010), and community media advocates assumed that any community media platform worth preserving would be identifiable by its audiences (Welch, 2008). However, the unique rules and parameters of community media were not necessarily visible online – either to audiences or to producers who might have wanted to use community platforms for content distribution. Aside from a few notable exceptions – Wikipedia, Creative Commons – the dominant organisations and institutions of the online environment fell into the categories of pre-commercial (blogs), long-tail niche markets or the new tech giants.

The fate of community media in the online environment suggests that open access was problematic for community media. Perhaps we were thinking about the problem all wrong. So what will sustain community media? The answer lies not in open platforms but in defined rules, guidelines, policies and norms.

**Groups**

To clarify – that is rules, guidelines, policies and norms that are designed for groups.

Technology has progressed again. Emerging platforms such as Ethereum (Buterin, 2014) can enable forms of cooperative distribution and sharing that work not just at the content layer, but at the organisational layer. The result might not be called community media, but it will come from the same motive: groups wanting a cooperative space to enable the sharing of not just resources, but ideas, information and creativity.

The internet, along with everything built upon it, has dramatically lowered the transaction and coordination costs associated with group formation and collaboration, resulting in a system-wide shift from closed- to open-access models of knowledge production and communication. But this transformation has turned out to be far messier than was ever expected. Open-access systems (including many open-access journals) have struggled for what are essentially behavioural reasons, because people are not cooperative enough.

Yet the problem might have a technical solution. New Web 3 technologies that enable groups to come together and to trust each other, and that can create rules at the technical layer, are now on the horizon. Understanding how knowledge, culture and innovation arise is important for sustainable industries and platforms that rely on group coordination. The field of community media studies has much to offer this new paradigm.

**References**


