Human agency and media praxis: Re-centring alternative and community media research

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In alternative and community media research, significant findings often occur in unexpected places. This was the case during my fieldwork in a Colombian region where the war between leftist guerrillas and the army had driven unarmed civilians into the crossfire. As the community experienced armed men patrolling its streets, surveillance, and community-disrupting recruitment of informants, its people retreated into the private sphere. When residents abandoned local public spaces, a tightly knit community spiralled downward into isolation and collective terror.

As a response, the local community radio station created a Christmas decorating contest in which every rule was designed to increase inter-community interaction. Families could not enter the contest alone, and only a whole block could compete, meaning that neighbours had to come together and interact to decide on a theme, find the materials and tools, and collectively decorate their entire block. Once different blocks began decorating, the station used its radio-cycle, a tandem bicycle refurbished as a mobile radio unit, to transmit from a different block every night. These nightly broadcasts inspired people from one block to go and see what other blocks were doing, creating even more interactions. The station announced the winner just before Christmas. The prize was all the necessary supplies to throw a block party and invite everyone in the community; even the prize was designed to promote interaction and repopulate the public sphere. The contest created a space in which individuals were once again able to experience how it felt to be a member of a tightly knit community and interact with others. The radio station used media technologies to design a performative space that made it possible for these men, women and children to recover their sense of collective agency in the face of armed violence (Rodríguez, 2011).

Several key lessons emerge from this use of media technologies in a context of war:

First, each context triggers specific communication and information needs, and savvy community communicators will bend, hybridise, redesign, refurbish and converge technologies to address these always-changing needs. (This includes all media technologies, from radio and graffiti to digital platforms.) As researchers in the area of alternative and community media, we need to re-centre our focus onto human agency instead of on the type of technology used (digital or analogue) or the type of communication process (whether communication is horizontal or vertical). Rather than focusing on individual technologies, we need to research and theorise how embedded communicators creatively use media to address local needs within the boundaries of existing media ecologies that offer different resources and constraints in each historical situation. In sum, alternative and community media research should re-centre the agency of communicators over technologies and refocus on context, uses and needs. A focus on context reveals intriguing similarities both cross-culturally and historically, as well as sharp contrasts. Similar experiences of collective terror, isolation and surveillance can be found in

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Colombia, among African American communities targeted by police departments, and within communities of undocumented immigrants in the United States. On the other hand, as communities experience shifting contexts because of climate change, health crises or political uprisings and protests, communication and media ecologies, needs and uses shift and change.

Second, despite recent waves of enthusiasm around digital platforms, alternative and community media research needs to maintain a sharp focus on the political economy of media technologies. In the case of the Christmas decorating contest, this community could count on the ‘detachability’ and malleability of radio technologies; once the community owned the equipment, it could sever all ties with the parent company. Then local communicators could bend and reinvent according to their specific needs. The degree of ‘detachability’ of digital platforms and mobile phones is very different. Because these tools can’t function without the parent companies and their algorithms designed for profit and commodification, alternative and community media cannot detach from them (Dencik and Leistert, 2015; Rodríguez, Ferron and Shamas, 2014). Research in this area is key and, in addition to corporate logics, needs to keep an eye on regulatory regimes, non-corporate technology design and innovation, and issues of surveillance and control.

Third, in my own work I have drawn from different disciplinary fields to theorise what I find in my fieldwork. Chantal Mouffe’s theory of radical democracy was key to formulating my theory of citizens’ media (Rodríguez 2001); in 2002, I used the work of postmodern feminist Luce Irigaray to analyze Wide Fields, a short video produced by three Latina girls (Rodríguez 2002). My most recent book, Citizens’ Media Against Armed Conflict (Rodríguez, 2011), draws from performance theory to interpret what happens when communities use their own media to buffer the impact of war on their social fabric. Traditionally, alternative and community media research has been an interdisciplinary field (Downing, 2001; Reyes Matta, 1983; Riaño, 1994), and this is a tradition worth maintaining because it allows for much richer interpretations of the data we collect in the field.

Finally, intriguing research questions emerge in today’s complex alternative and community media landscape. Our field should explore the complex linkages between traditional participatory media and more contemporary media activism; longitudinal historical studies should reveal whether any connections exist between community radio in Spain in the 1960s and the media activist praxis of Indignados in 2011 or between the liberation theology-inspired Latin American grassroots media of the 1970s and recent anti-neoliberal uprisings in Bolivia and student movements in Chile and Colombia. Our research should also explore how different media activists and social movements cross-pollinate and share best practices. The human microphone used by Occupy protesters in 2011 was passed from the anti-nuclear movements of the 1980s in Germany to the factory occupations in Argentina and anti-globalisation demonstrations of the early 2000s, and then on to Occupy (Radovac, 2014). Similarly, the use of Twitter during the Egyptian uprising of 2011 was passed down from the previous but failed April 6th Youth Movement in 2008 (Lim, 2012).

To conclude, re-focusing on context, human agency and political economy of media will keep alternative and community media research relevant and strong. Recent history has moved our field to the limelight: since the 1990s, when Zapatistas reinvented social movement media and Indymedia centres mushroomed all over the planet, to the more recent use of digital platforms during the Arab Spring, Occupy and Black Lives Matter, alternative and citizens’ media is experiencing a type of momentum never seen before. Our research endeavours need to be up to par.
References


