International Journal of Communication 16(2022), 566–584 1932–8036/20220005

Fragility and Empowerment: Community Television in the Digital Era

ANDREW Ó BAOILL
National University of Galway, Ireland

SALVATORE SCIFO
Bournemouth University, UK

The advent of television technologies has significantly restructured the context within which community television producers operate. Digital technologies have undercut "spectrum scarcity" arguments for limiting access to distribution platforms and opened up new paths to reach audiences. It has also, however, seen a decline in some of the regulatory structures that provided protection to noncommercial providers in eras of spectrum scarcity. The rise of the prosumer has, in its focus on production by individuals, weakened some of the underpinnings (economic and ideological) for community-based production, with consequent challenges for the sustainability of these often precarious projects. In this article, we tease out the implications of digitization for community television operators, exploring the state of the sector in the liberal North Atlantic region, and compare "traditional" community channels with "newer" channels that have emerged in the digital context in the past two decades. Our study explores the opportunities and challenges that face the sector following the transition to digital models.

Keywords: community television, participation, public access, community development, media policy, social movements, digital networks

The advent of television technologies, as Amanda Lotz (2017) notes, "destabilizes nation and geographic proximity that were reasonably assumed of the cultural role of previous television distribution technologies and practices" (section 2). It has also significantly restructured the context within which community television producers operate. As Ellie Rennie (2006) notes, "spectrum scarcity" was frequently deployed in the predigital era as a rationale for excluding or marginalizing community media. The advent of digital technologies undercuts such arguments, and Rennie (2006) posits that "community media may therefore be better accommodated in the new media environment" (p. 5). New platforms, together with the weakening of traditional gatekeeping institutions, have indeed offered new opportunities for this sector, but those opportunities are—as Zeynep Tufekci (2017) puts it in *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Content*—"a story of intertwined fragility and empowerment" (p. xi). Digitization has opened

---

Andrew Ó Baoill: Andrew.obaoill@nuigalway.ie
Salvatore Scifo: sscifo@bournemouth.ac.ak
Date submitted: 2020-06-07

Copyright © 2022 (Andrew Ó Baoill and Salvatore Scifo). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://ijoc.org.

up new paths to reach audiences, including increased channel availability (on cable and satellite networks) and nonlinear Internet-based providers such as YouTube. It has also, however, decreased some of the regulatory structures that provided some protection to and resources for noncommercial providers in eras of spectrum scarcity. The rise of the prosumer has, in its focus on production by individuals, weakened some of the underpinnings (economic and ideological) for community-based production, with consequent challenges for the sustainability of these (often precarious) projects (Ó Baoill & Scifo, 2019).

In this article, we tease out the implications of digitization for community television operators, exploring the state of the sector in the countries. Hallin and Mancini (2011) have identified as embodying the *liberal* or *North Atlantic* model, which also broadly approximates a primarily anglophone setting. These countries have, as Hallin and Mancini note, a distinctive media history, with commercial outlets long established, and an ideology of nonpartisanship dominating the sector. Both of these tendencies pose particular challenges for noncommercial outlets, particularly those associated with social movements. Our article explores a number of case studies and compares "traditional" community TV channels (with a history of aerial and cable broadcasting spanning with their origins in the 1970s and 1980s) with "newer" channels and platforms that have emerged in the digital context in the past two decades. This approach allows the study to build upon and expand other explorations of the sector in this region, such as that of Ali (2012), who noted the experience of the sector as "both a 'living organism,' and a site of contestation" (p. 1119), and argued that public policies "fail to incorporate the salient aspects of place and the 'experience of media production,' favoring instead the end result—the product, the program, the content" (p. 1127). We explore the opportunities and challenges facing the sector following the transition to digital models and situate emerging modalities, such as livestreaming, within that historicized trajectory. We are particularly concerned with the policy landscape within which community television operates and the ideological framework within which that policy is formulated. Our analysis suggests that community television has thrived when public policy recognizes the holistic benefits afforded by the sector, rather than focusing solely on short-term, quantified benefits of individual projects. The digital and social media tools have provided opportunities to reach global audiences, something not facilitated by analog local distribution. However, the ownership of such platforms is no longer in the hands of community groups. These are controlled by large multimedia organizations, which can decide on, more or less arbitrarily and outside of national media policies, what they allow.

Background

Television, as Dowling, Doolan, and Quinn (1969) note in their classic critique of Irish public service television, *Sit Down and Be Counted: The Cultural Evolution of a Television Station*, is "in the mind of the technologist, the businessman and the politician, too dangerous a set of instruments to be left in the hands of the technically non-expert" (p. 241). They were concerned by what we might describe, in Habermasian terms, as the colonization of communication spaces. Community-based media projects constitute numerous solutions to this perceived problem.

Longtime community media activist Jack Byrne (1998) suggests that the term *community* can be understood as operating on three complementary levels: descriptive, value, and active. That is, *community* refers to a particular community, to a certain ethical approach to human interaction—e.g., "solidarity, participation, and non-discrimination" (Byrne, 1998, p. 37)—and is linked to notions of community

empowerment the belief that community media can and should afford "people the power to inform themselves and to organize for agreed collective actions" (Byrne, 1998, p. 37). The impulse to organize spaces for learning and discussion, as part of broad political emancipatory projects, fits within a historical arc that Williams (1961/2001) has termed the *long revolution* and in relation to which E. P. Thompson (1961) has noted the long history of a number of *reading publics* "differentiated [among other factors] in the relation between the writer and the audience" (p. 178)—a differentiation we see repeated in the approach to reconceptualizing the producer-audience distinction in the community media sector.

If we can trace a long, varied history of community and activist media, it is also true that these outlets are "typically small-scale, generally underfunded" (Downing, 2001, p. xi) and frequently opportunistic in their use of communication technologies, regulatory affordances, and forms (Ó Baoill, 2014). Downing identifies two broad tendencies in the sector that different projects can emphasize to different degrees: to "express opposition" from below and to "build support, solidarity, and networking laterally" (p. xi). Scholars and activists have differed in the characteristics and factors they have foregrounded and advocated for, with a range of nomenclatures that reflect this. Rodríguez (2001), with her concept of citizens' media, argues for projects that contribute to group identity and organization among minority populations. Many of the projects Rodriguez identifies place a significant emphasis on participation as part of fostering an active citizenry. Sandoval and Fuchs (2010), on the other hand, have argued for the primacy of effective mobilization—which relies on organization and resources—as alternative media "need to gain public attention if they want to be successful in raising awareness and mobilizing social struggles" (p. 143). What the various models have in common is an understanding of the social context within which (and for which) media are produced.

The history of community television provides a prime example of an opportunistic approach to new media technologies. Boyle (1997) suggests that it was "the arrival of lightweight, affordable consumer video equipment" that made possible the emergence of what she terms "guerrilla television" from the mid-1960s onward, as part of the broader alternative and underground media sectors (p. xiii). The development of cable access systems—which drastically expanded the number of channels that could be offered in a particular geographic area—was another significant enabling technology. As video technologies became even more accessible and affordable in the 1980s, however, the dominant narrative in the United States and often elsewhere is one of co-option and diffusion, as simultaneously video recording was reframed and marketed as "a medium for nostalgia, sentiment, and private memories, but not for public discourse" (Boyle, 1997, pp. 204–205), while the features of guerrilla television (of the 1960s and 1970s) were appropriated, in various forms, by professional producers. It is also, of course, true that television has significant barriers to entry that we don't see in other platforms commonly leveraged for community/activist projects, which poses challenges for sustainability and reinforces the need for internal structures that foster engagement, training, and collaboration, if broad community engagement is a goal. Community and activist media projects are often, as Downing notes, temporary or short-lived (p. xi), and Howley has noted that in the case of community television, many of the "video underground" projects Boyle explores were short-lived, though more community-oriented collectives survived (Howley, 2005, pp. 136–137).

The affordances offered by technologies and the emergence of new forms of community media to leverage such affordances can be seen again as the Internet came to prominence. As Carpentier (2019)

notes, "community media organizations migrated to the Internet, using a mélange of technologies, or simply started as online-only community media organizations, while still remaining community media organizations" (para. 14). We will see how this has shaped the contemporary experience of community television, in all its diversity, and the trade-offs inherent in leveraging emerging technologies that are set within a corporatized political economy.

Origins

Ideology

Community video spans a number of philosophies and approaches. As Howley (2005) notes, "the community television movement draws upon a variety of traditions, including social justice and media reform movements, documentary production, avant-garde aesthetics, indigenous cultural traditions, as well as the goals and objectives of participatory and development communication" (p. 136).

Community media have been explicitly "enshrined as one of three components of the Canadian broadcasting system" (Ali, 2012, p. 1124) since 1991 and have origins "within the National Film Board's Challenge for Change project as a radical experiment in the democratization of mass media in the late 1960s" (Lithgow, 2012, p. 125). In Britain, community cable television experiments started more as a side effect of policies for cable television and the regionalization of broadcasting rather than as a result of explicit governmental policy (Hollander, 1992).

Gillan (2010a) traces a succession of community-based projects in Ireland from the 1960s onward, organized largely around the dual poles of Irish language activism and "the community organizing that evolved from urban resettlement strategies" (p. 165). While most projects were pirate operations, limited in duration, and motivated by "enthusiasts experimenting with the technology or the possibility of . . . a form of community expression" (p. 169), Gillan documents the history of one project (Ballyfermot Community Association Television, [BCATV]), which secured a broadcast license as early as 1974 (well before the licensing of commercial broadcasting from the late 1980s onward), and was integrated into broader structures for community development and organizing (pp. 167–169). Titley (2010) describes community radio and television in Ireland as originating in "adult education, anti-poverty networks and local activist groups" (p. 36).

Toward Participation

While early producers used various approaches to reach audiences—including public and private viewings and sometimes even direct mailings to targeted recipients—the 1969 ruling by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) "that CATV [Cable Access Television] systems with 3,500 or more subscribers had to provide a certain amount of locally originated programming" provided a boost in reaching (potential) viewers (Boyle, 1997, p. 97). CATV systems originated in the 1950s as a means to bring television reception to remote rural areas, where broadcast signals could not be easily received. Erecting tall, well-placed antennae to receive signals, the CATV systems then relayed the signals to local subscribers (p. 96). The function of CATV providers changed from redistribution to origination, thanks to a mixture of

technologies, the FCC mandate, and an "image as a local provider of services to discrete communities" (Stein, 2001, p. 301). The FCC mandate provided an early advantage for rural community producers and extended to urban settings when the FCC lifted the ban on secondary cable provision. By 1971, public access channels had been established in New York (Castellanos, Bach, & Kulick, 2011, p. 158).

By the early 1970s, cheaper and simpler broadcast production tools, together with interest in alternative media and community arts and politics, attracted an increasing number of practitioners to community and small-scale media. Advocates and activists started to exchange their experiences and bring back to their countries examples of best practices that had been successful elsewhere. Negrine's (1977) work on cable and communication access in Britain, based on data collected from 1972 to 1975, examined community television as a participative tool, but, reflecting on the closure of *Greenwich Cablevision*, launched as an experimental community cable channel in 1972 (Nigg & Wade, 1980), it stated that it reflected "the economic background to the experiment and the need to find alternative sources of finance to fund novel and financially unprofitable forms of broadcasting" (Negrine, 1977, abstract), something that would remain a challenge three decades later.

Like many other European countries, Ireland was restricted to state-run broadcasting operations for much of the 20th century, with independent broadcasting (other than Ballyfermot) not licensed until the late 1980s. From the 1970s onward, however, there was significant growth in pirate (unlicensed) radio stations, driven in part by the availability of less-expensive transmission equipment and in part by sociocultural changes. Rapid cultural changes were coupled with what was termed a failure to "develop more effective feedback mechanisms and access that might refresh the dominant one-way flow and allow audience and readers to talk back" (Farrell, 1984, p. 121). Pirate radio was accompanied by some experiments with television, but these were limited in scope and longevity, largely because of the cost and complexity associated with the medium (Farrell, 1984, p. 119; Mulryan, 1988, pp. 86–87).

International Linkages

British practitioners took their inspiration from North American and Western European examples of the community media sector through publications, participation at international gatherings, and growing network activities. For example, Canadian community television and global networks established in Montreal in 1983 (Lewis, 1984) had important roles in setting the debate of practitioners in the UK. A precious archive of community video materials of this period is the London Community Video Archive (LCVA), where a selection of videos from 1970 to 1985 has been archived and digitized, "thus recovering and reviving this history so that it can be used as a resource for contemporary debates and activism [including] 20 oral history interviews with a representative sample of people active in Community Video" in the London area (LCVA, para. 2).

We also see international influences in Ireland, where as early as the 1980s, activists for the minority Irish-speaking population explored the possibility of launching their own pirate operation, though it was not until 1987 that a short-term station was established, inspired by a visit to a project on the Faroe Islands. While the station—based in a rural area and with a limited range—lasted only four days, it was significant in changing public perceptions about the viability of Irish-language broadcasting, leading to the

establishment of a state-supported, professionally operated station, Teilifis na Gaeilge [Television of the Irish Language] (Watson, 2003, pp. 84–87).

Precarity and Continuity

Throughout the 1970s, community providers in the United States were linked to the emerging public television sector, though there were concerns over the reticence of public stations to contract with independent producers. As a result of the efforts of media activists and independent producers, the Jimmy Carter presidential administration supported legislation that became the 1978 Public Telecommunications Financing Act, which directed the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB, which administers federal funding for the U.S. public broadcasting sector) to "earmark 'a significant amount' for producers working outside public broadcasting's established institutions" (Ledbetter, 1998, p. 162). Over time, however, the public sector came to rely more on professional content providers—including imported content—to the exclusion of amateur and community providers. This content was less likely to raise concerns among politicians or the increasingly influential commercial sponsors. As Ledbetter (1998) notes, "programs that have already run their course on British television are discounted accordingly" (p. 147), an important consideration for the perennially underfunded Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).

The same period had also seen a range of regulatory approaches from the FCC, first recommending in 1969 that cable operators "set up public access channels in order to provide a platform for members of the community to share their message and to offer spaces for communication that were not controlled by the cable operator" (Molstad, 2019, pp. 2–3), later mandating such channels on many systems. In 1979, however, the Supreme Court ruled the FCC mandate as outside the authority of the agency, with a 1984 act of Congress explicitly providing local *franchising authorities* with the power to require Public, Educational, and Government (PEG) Access Channels as part of any franchising agreement (Molstad, 2019, pp. 3–4). As Stein (2001) notes, this has meant that, in the United States, "the continued existence of access television has been precarious and has depended on grassroots politicking within individual communities" (p. 303).

In Canada, as Ali (2012) notes, formal recognition has not prevented radical changes in regulation and structure over that period, including in 1997, when "deregulation permitted cable operators to eliminate public participation and consolidate stations" (p. 1124) as part of a regulatory shift that—responding to new modalities—was intended to create a platform-neutral regulatory approach (Armstrong, 2016, p. 129). Those changes—which removed the requirement for many cable systems to operate an access channel and strengthened their ability to control those channels and the funds allocated to them—met with significant resistance from activists associated with the sector (Skinner, 2015, pp. 201–202) and led indirectly to more favorable regulations in 2002 and 2010 (Ali, 2012, p. 1124).

Although sidelined, video activism continued through the 1980s in the United States. Toward the end of that decade, and in the early 1990s, it was integral to a number of news events, most notably the filming of the "savage police beating [of] Rodney King" (Boyle, 1997, p. 206). Boyle (1997) notes the generational transition from pioneers of the 1960s and 1970s to a new cohort in the late 1980s, with "politically astute veteran video makers like DeeDee Halleck" of Paper Tiger Television offering something of a bridge (p. 207). New York's Paper Tiger began in 1981, initially as a program on local public access,

progressing to become a larger video production collective, and spawning Deep Dish TV, "the first national public-access series of community-made programs on issues such as labor, housing, the farming crisis, and racism" (Boyle, 1997, pp. 207–208), which was distributed via leased satellite time.

Among those organizations that did successfully navigate the shifting political, economic, and technological sands, Howley (2005) documents the work of Downtown Community Television (DCTV), a New York-based community television project founded in the early 1970s. Crucially, Howley (2005) situates the work of the project "as part of the long tradition of cultural politics in the Lower East Side" (p. 142). Howley (2005) also argues that "DCTV's willingness and ability to negotiate the demands and constraints of public service and later commercial television allowed the organization to subsidize its community organizing efforts and video arts training" (p. 137).

Structural Changes

After 18 years of Conservative Party rule (1979–1997), in 1997, the UK Labour Party won a landslide election, led by Tony Blair. Rennie (2006) argues that the Community Media Association (CMA) managed to make "the most of Blair government's community rhetoric" (p. 151). In 1999, the New Labour government launched the Information & Communication Technology Learning Center initiative and the CMA successfully argued for an integrated approach to ICT learning (Buckley, 2007). By 2003, the scenario included a growing number of community media centers equipped with multimedia workstations, broadband Internet, digital editing software, and digital radio studios for audio/video production and live broadcasting. Also, "many community groups were successful in getting funding and this also helped to create further awareness of the presence of the sector" (Buckley, 2007, as cited in Scifo, 2016, p. 6), with Buckley (2007) also arguing that "these multimedia centres had to involve disadvantaged communities to stimulate creativity as well as productivity" (as cited in Scifo, 2016, p. 6).

The CMA case—as with community television activists in Canada in the early 2000s—offers an example of the gains that can be made by community media through engagement with sympathetic policy and regulatory structures. Simultaneously, we can see the challenges for the sector in persuading media regulators—used to assessing content as a measure of value—to understand the value placed by the sector on the community-building that can occur through the process of production, not just in bringing a final product to audiences. Community TV requires supportive regulatory interventions, as acknowledged by the UK's Ofcom (2009), in examining the limited reach of the sector in the UK. As can be seen below, changes in costs and technologies have opened up opportunities for new structures in the sector and simultaneously driven changes in regulatory arrangements. While this has resulted in some gains for the sector, overall funding of the sector (in particular) remains precarious, and a focus on content as a measure of output rather than other forms of social impact is a significant constraint.

Changing Regulations

In the American context, Comstock and Butler (2004) note that (about federal U.S. regulation) "the underlying premise of cable regulation is that the facility owner in general may control the content and who may offer services that are transmitted over its cable facilities" (p. 284). This approach differs from the

common carrier approach, which has been used in relation to telecommunications facilities. In addition, as Putnam (2020) notes, legislation allows for local or federal regulations "requiring channels be set aside for the purpose of public access" (p. 195) and for the imposition of charges on cable franchisees to support the operation of such channels.

As with the United States, Canadian community television has faced significant structural challenges, with cable providers gaining greater control over cable channels (with a dilution of access and funding requirements) as part of the neoliberal re-regulatory process associated with the preparation for digitalization in the late 1990s and early 2000s. However, in Canada, there have been some (minor) regulatory gains—for a sector that while enshrined in law has historically been viewed as politically weak (Lithgow, 2012, p. 126)—which some scholars have associated with the emergence of visible and vocal advocates like CACTUS (Ali, 2012, p. 1130; Skinner, 2015, p. 202). However, while observers like Lithgow identify the heterogeneity of production practices that make up the contemporary sector, numerous scholars identify significant limitations to the enabling structures and the underlying goals that shape the sector. As mentioned previously, the 1997 regulatory changes shifted power (and resources) back to the cable operators, and while more recent changes, in 2002 and 2010, have involved some gains, the underlying focus on content—as opposed to the ecosystem within which community-based content is developed—has constrained the growth and development of the sector, an issue identified in Ali's (2012) review of the sector.

With the transition to digital cable systems, capacity in Irish systems increased, and with it the potential for space being made available for community operators. This resulted in the sector being addressed as part of two broader sets of legislative provisions: the 2001 Broadcasting Act, which provided for the introduction of digitalization and made provision in law for community television for the first time (Gillan, 2010b); and the 2009 Act, which made further changes to the regulatory landscape as part of the continued process of digitalization, including a reference to *social impact* as a goal for community media. This improved on the focus on access present from 2001, but it has been criticized by O'Brien and Gaynor (2012) as privileging a depoliticized measure of benefit that strips out the commitment to "promoting social change" (p. 10; AMARC Europe, 1994), which is part of the Community Radio Charter for Europe that had been used by the regulator from 1995.

We can trace similar policy responses in the UK as digitization progressed. By the early 1990s, a series of technological developments changed the media context, embedding the potential new risks of digital divides even as the growth of the Internet and community communication networks brought more people into the community media sector and created the possibility of Internet TV broadcasts and converged platforms. The Community Radio Association (CRA) and its members recognized a growing need for a national body not only for radio but also for video, film, television, and the Internet (Scifo, 2011). This led to the CRA changing its name to the Community Media Association (CMA) in 1997 and then to opening its membership base to community television stations and an increasing number of Web-based practitioners and projects. This was reflected in the approval of a Community Media Charter in Edinburgh on October 25, 1997 (CMA, 1997). The name change was timely, given that the 1996 Broadcasting Act (UK Parliament, 1996) did bring some good news for the community media sector, with the introduction of the restricted service television license (RSL), a broadcast license for a limited time during a year.

Funding

Media activists argue that the ongoing travails of the U.S. public television system—"a shadow of public broadcasting abroad, forever hobbled by congressional threats to 'zero out' its budget" (Goodman, 2012, p. 263)—are mirrored by a public access sector "under attack from cable companies, who want to defund and shutter them" (Goodman, 2012, p. 263). Putnam (2020) points to a 2019 FCC regulation that weakens the funding model of public access channels by allowing franchisees to set in-kind support (such as equipment or services) provided by them against the financial levies intended to support these channels, and notes concerns that these developments will "harm the channels' economic viability" (p. 207).

Alternative media providers frequently operate in a precarious space. While PEG franchisees, who operate public access channels, can have some stability from franchise levies, the producers who provide the content lack such support. A case in point is Paper Tiger Television, a long-running video collective based in New York City. Established in 1981 (Freedman, 2004, p. 352), the collective survived when many contemporary groups did not. However, longevity is no guarantee of future survival, and the organization's projects have often been tenuously financed (see, e.g., Halleck, 2002, p. 171).

Many community media groups in Ireland have relied on state-funded *community employment projects*, a labor activation program intended to provide skills and experience to the long-term unemployed and to supply staffing. Gillan (2010a) identifies several elements of unsustainability implicit to this model—first, that such schemes are intended to prepare workers to enter the workforce, and so the experience and skill development fostered by these schemes is continually lost to the project; second, the supply of available participants is inversely proportional to the overall health of the labor market; and third, from the late 1990s onward, there was opposition to such labor market interventions from proponents of a dominant free-market ideology. This was reflected in a focus on competitive short-term project funding rather than stable programmatic support, and in a belief from government that community media should be funded either by community development organizations as a form of service provider or through cross-subsidy from undertaking commercial work (Gillian, 2010a). This was reflected in 2001 legislation that was "designed to introduce digital broadcasting, reform the State Broadcaster and essentially privatize the broadcasting sector" (Gillan, 2010b, p. 131). In the wake of that shift, community media have leveraged the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland's *Sound & Vision* funding scheme to underwrite the ongoing needs of the sector (Gillan, 2010b, p. 132). As the program is based on a competitive model and is designed to subsidize the production costs of individual pieces of broadcast content, it is not well-suited to support the infrastructural needs of the sector or the work of community media producers who seek not only to report on but also to engage with and support the development of volunteer organizations within local communities. Again, then, we see here a sector that creatively leverages the opportunities available to it but is constrained by the architecture of those systems.

In the UK, the Davies Committee on the future funding of the BBC requested in 1999 that any additional revenue given to the BBC be used to develop digital services in an increasingly converging media sector. The CMA used the consultation promoted by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to make the case for a community media fund to support local public service broadcasting initiatives outside of the BBC system. The suggested share for a subvention was 1% of the license fee. Reflecting the new multimedia nature of the organization, the CMA proposed that the funding should be made available to any

possible platform: radio, television, and Internet projects (CMA, 1999). Community media activists also highlighted the potential uses of community television for regeneration with radio and Internet-based projects (CMA, 2000). The CMA had a convergent approach within the framework of the forthcoming Communications Act to the role of community media in the information society and as a tool to exercise the right to communicate (Select Committee on Culture, Media, and Sport, 2001). Despite such high hopes, by 2009, Ofcom was reporting similar concerns about the funding of the sector as have been expressed about the Irish situation, acknowledging that there "remain a number of funding challenges. These include the often short-term nature of grants, issues of independence from funding organizations (e.g., local authorities), and reduced funding availability, as grant-giving organizations face challenging funding settlements" (Ofcom, 2009, p. 129).

Precarity and Activism

Alongside concerns about the ongoing financial stability of the sector are questions about the manner in which public access can be relied on as a form of *public forum*, given evolving legal precedents. In 2019, the U.S. Supreme Court dismissed a case filed by veteran community media activist and Paper Tiger Television co-founder DeeDee Halleck, ruling that the operators of public access channels are not *state actors* and do not need to be neutral in their provision of access to airtime. Consistent with a narrow reading of First Amendment protections (Rathmell, 2019), this decision meant that such channels are not to be seen as public forums, but rather that those granted such franchises are "not bound by the First Amendment's speech strictures" (Putnam, 2020, p. 204), and can thus "engage in viewpoint discrimination" (p. 208) on their channels. Putnam (2020) and others have thus cautioned that this has the potential to "stifle the voices of those who come first" (p. 208).

In addition, the very existence of public access channels has been under attack across the U.S. Cable providers have opposed the bandwidth and other resources they provide to support such channels and have pointed to the growth of Internet distribution to argue that these resources "might be better used to bring new products to communities" (Haugsted, 2003, para. 9). In the case of AT&T, the Alliance for Community Media, which advocates for public access television, has criticized it for "providing an 'inferior' platform" for public access channels (Spangler, 2008, para. 1). The U-verse system allocates all PEG channels a single channel number, with viewers then navigating to individual channels using a secondary menu, something thought likely to deter casual viewers (Spangler, 2018). From being a low-digit channel that people would often scroll past (and perhaps stop at) in the analog era, it is now something users need to search out.

In Ireland, when the government finally responded in the mid-1990s to calls for an Irish-language television station, that station (currently named TG4) was developed around a hybrid model—based in a rural Irish-speaking area, but explicitly targeting itself not only toward those communities where the language was still dominant but also toward the much larger population that had some level of bilingualism. Gillan (2010a) argues that by being framed within a language rights framework, the station was separated from the broader concerns over community sustainability (of which language was but one element, if integral) that had motivated the earlier community activists. The station was also developed on a publishing model, with most content produced by independent (commercial) providers, in contrast to the in-house

production dominant in Irish broadcasting. This last feature offered synergies with government goals of developing the independent audiovisual sector. It also meant, however, that rather than fostering community production, the channel had limited capacity to support content or public engagement that could not be captured by a commercial production contract.

Technology and Space

New Pathways to Audiences

The development of digital media tools and platforms over the past decades has been leveraged by social and political activists. Goodman and Moynihan (2012) trace the development of digital independent media from indymedia.org, which "days after going live [in 1999] was getting more hits than CNN.com" to Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in 2011, when "live video streams of OWS advanced independent media strategy by making the unfiltered activity of the occupation available in real time to a global audience" (p. 260). One of the most prominent vehicles for Goodman's program is Free Speech TV, a U.S.-based progressive independent news network that since 1995 has used satellite, digital cable, and a plethora of other platforms to distribute its content (Free Speech, n.d.).

The advent of digital cable platforms, with significantly expanded channel capacity, has not been sufficient in itself to prompt a growth in community television services. Although a report on local and community television in the UK (Hewson, 2005) listed eight RSL services labeling themselves as community television, only one of them, *Northern Visions Television* (NVTV) in Belfast, had the typical ethos of nonprofit and public access. To date, NVTV remains the only channel that broadcasts on *Freeview*, the open-access digital terrestrial television service (NVTV, n.d.). Similarly, in Ireland, while Titley (2010) saw the rollout of "Internet television and the cable/digital spectrum" as making possible "the sustainable development of community television" (p. 36), the sector has since faced significant challenges that have hampered its development and growth. There are currently two licensed community channels in Ireland, operating over cable platforms in the largest cities of Dublin and Cork (Titley, 2010, p. 36), with a third, based in the commuter town of Navan, no longer in operation.

Rise of the Individual

The very accessibility of digital tools has created fresh challenges for community media—paralleling, in ways, the expansion of access to video in the 1980s reported by Boyle (1997). Tools now "allow individuals to create media in their own homes" (Castellanos et al., 2011, p. 157) and to distribute that content online through a multitude of social media platforms. Thus, one of the challenges for community-based media is to articulate and sustain relevance in the face of changing sociotechnical conditions.

Numerous scholars (Barlow & Clarke, 2001; Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017) have pointed to the manner in which communication technologies have been leveraged by activists, both to reach audiences and to support new forms of flat, loose structures, in partnership with existing media-centric organizations and independently. Video becomes part of a panoply of resources, with Thorson et al. (2013) describing how videos are used as "communicative resources within '*ad hoc* publics,' widely distributed conversations,

and information-sharing streams that emerge through usage practices within Twitter" (pp. 426–427). The architecture and functions of these interlocking platforms have impacts on the ways in which video is used. Thorson and colleagues (2013) note that most YouTube videos cross-promoted with protest-related hashtags on Twitter are shared only once, with most sharing happening shortly after the video is uploaded, and that there is a practice of "YouTube archaeology" (p. 438) with some Twitter content mining older footage and content available on YouTube. These platforms therefore facilitate new forms of active engagement with, and repurposing of, current and archival content.

New Movements, New Models

The affordances of online video distribution have, of course, been leveraged by what Castells (2015) terms the "networked movements" represented by Occupy Wall Street. One prominent use has been in livestreaming, with Castells (2015) noting that "livestreams are ephemeral, but they are essential during moments of police repression" (p. 176). The use of the term *essential* is interesting because of what it says about the perceived interconnectedness of the social movements and digital media tools and also because of Castells' (2015) observation that livestreaming is controversial within these movements for many reasons, such as concerns about producers "gravitating toward sensationalism," worries that those producers will act as self-appointed spokespeople for the movement, and concerns that footage might be used by police and others to suppress protest (p. 176). Watching a stream is also one of the ways in which individuals perform their membership of a social movement, with one survey (Milkman, Luce, & Lewis, 2012, p. 7) finding that more than 60% of respondents listed this among the ways in which they had participated in Occupy Wall Street. Davis (2015), in exploring the use of livestreaming by Dream Defenders (advocates for undocumented migrants who arrived in the United States as children) notes how livestreaming can "engage the broader public, in real time" (p. 135). Castells (2015) also documents the use of YouTube and other video-hosting services to support "a constant practice of storytelling" that is part of the strategic arsenal of such movements (pp. 177–178).

Livestreams garner particular attention at times of conflict. While imagery (still or video) from clashes with police attracts most attention, Marcus (2011) argues that the livestream "decenters the big event in favor of the casual banality of everyday life in a democratic public space" (p. 265). Marcus (2011) notes too that contemporary digital technologies facilitate this by allowing the work of documentation, of "the immortalization of the big event," to be undertaken not by an official video team but by "thousands of citizen videographers" (p. 265). Additionally, as Gould-Wartofsky (2015) notes, the livestreams formed part of a broader production ecology, a "complex chain of media production and consumption" (p. 80), with raw content (including livestream footage and other video material) being created, distributed online, remixed, and reshared, and some of it finding its way into the mainstream media system. This rhizomatic structure is associated with the ephemeral and opportunistic approaches to media activism, known as tactical media, which as Garcia and Lovink (1997) outlined, are

> what happens when the cheap "do it yourself" media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the Internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture. (para. 1)

The affordances offered by these technologies to those working in this area relate primarily, then, to access to production and distribution by individual producers.

Conclusions

Digitization has, in many ways, offered new opportunities for participation and innovation, but it has also destabilized some of the hard-won gains of previous generations in ways that are not always readily apparent. In exploring the history of community television, we can see parallels with earlier generations, along with the persistence of not just challenges but also cycles of innovation that expose fresh points of weakness in the sector's ecosystems. As technologies emerge and are pressed into the service of capital, activists explore their affordances and limitations, innovate and experiment, and develop structures and systems to leverage the opportunities offered by the new technosocial context. We can see in the neoliberal ideologies that shaped legislative and regulatory changes at numerous periods—the late 1970s in the United States, the late 1990s/early 2000s in various countries—the manner in which various strategies of regulatory arbitrage (Ó Baoill, 2014) are undercut by virtue of the fact that they are seen to rely on ancillary characteristics of the regulatory regime. Even when, as in Canada, there is explicit acknowledgement of the community sector, however, there is no guarantee that there will not be erosion of supports and commitments won through earlier periods of activism. McChesney (2007, 2013) has suggested a path dependency model for understanding these processes of change, identifying critical junctures at which radical change in the underlying logic of the media system can occur, with contestation among these periods operating largely within the systemic boundaries that have been previously established. Those same developments that open up new opportunities for production and participation can also be associated with structural changes that undercut the viability of existing community-focused production models.

We can see this cycle repeat as contemporary networked publics seek to leverage the affordances of social networking platforms and video distribution tools. While these services offer new opportunities for production (particularly mobile production) and distribution, and for new forms of archiving and what Thorson and colleagues (2013) call "video archaeology" (p. 440), the underlying logic of many of these systems is predicated on the individual user—social engagement is facilitated only insofar as it adds to the value of the "audience commodity" (Dolber, 2016, p. 747). There are, therefore, a number of intertwined challenges for the contemporary community television sector. While production—as a technical process—is easier and cheaper than in the past, both the preproduction (and ongoing) work of organizing in communities and the ancillary task of reaching and sustaining audiences are resource-intensive. Identifying the metrics by which success should be measured is a persistent challenge—and frustration—for the community television sector, and ongoing critical attention to this issue in policy development would be valuable. Ali (2012) has noted the focus on content creation in the Canadian system, and similar critiques have been offered of funding systems in Ireland (Gillan, 2010).

A key issue highlighted by Ali (2012) is that community television is perceived by the majority of the public, policy makers and regulators as no different from any user-generated digital platform, often leading "to further calls for defunding or increased barriers to access and infrastructure capital" (p. 1126). The community-building role that many in the sector see as their primary purpose, or the internal community-building that makes volunteer-led organizations sustainable, can be difficult (and expensive) to

measure, so hours of content becomes the measure of success and thus what is funded. Even where *social benefit* is recognized as a goal, as in Ireland, this has not necessarily been reflected in how funding has been structured.

While the technologies to share content globally are being used by community activists and social movements around the world, Couldry and Rodriguez (2018) have offered a timely reminder that "the algorithmic mechanisms that shape what is available to users of digital platforms are driven exclusively by an advertising logic that undermines diversity and reproduces the social capital of those with power" (p. 180). Within this context, as Stalder (2008) warned, public access TV and community TV/video projects risk becoming "just another narrow-caster among a near-infinite number of channels" (para. 4), and while the decreased cost of video production tools has made it easier for activists worldwide to record, edit and publish content, the "commercial capture of the infrastructure is creating new bottlenecks where censorship and control of media content can and does function efficiently" (para. 11). Although Stalder's words are more than a decade old, they still have significance when reflecting on community television, related policy, licensing, and funding schemes to make sure that they remain distinct, independent and a site of empowerment for local community groups and offer bottom-up forms of participation. As we have seen, while community media activists are adept at leveraging the opportunities afforded by shifting technological, financial, and regulatory systems, those systems—set within a capitalist system that privileges a narrow, instrumentalist concept of value—are not always well-suited to measuring and supporting the holistic benefits of collective practice or the value of community media for collecting and sustaining heritage and history. A recognition of the value that community television can provide as part of the fabric of communities—not merely a service provider, but offering a particular integrative role in social networks—requires shifts in how institutional supports are structured to foster and reward the long-term relationships that make the sector distinctive. While this study has provided a perspective that will hopefully encourage further debate, more research should be welcome to provide national-level analyses and attention to global regions not covered here.

References

Ali, C. (2012). Media at the margins: Policy and practice in American, Canadian, and British community television. *International Journal of Communication*, *6*, 20, 1119–1138.

AMARC Europe. (1994). The AMARC community radio charter for Europe. Retrieved from https://amarceurope.eu/who-we-are/amarc-charter/

Armstrong, R. (2016). *Broadcasting policy in Canada,* (2nd ed.). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Barlow, M., & Clarke, T. (2001). *Global showdown: How the new activists are fighting global corporate rule*. Toronto, ON: Stoddart.

Boyle, D. (1997). *Subject to change: Guerrilla television revisited*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Byrne, J. (1998). *Noo-age media: A survey of information technology in the 21st century*. Dublin, Ireland: Self-published manuscript.

Carpentier, N. (2019). *The art of community media organisations*. Retrieved from http://respublika.neme.org/archive/art-community-media-organisations

Castellanos, I., Bach, A., & Kulick, R. (2011). Youth Channel All-City: Mapping the media needs and interests of urban youth. In P. M. Napoli & M. Aslama (Eds.), *Communications research in action: Scholar-activist collaborations for a democratic public sphere* (pp. 157–176). New York, NY: Fordham University Press.

Castells, M. (2015). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Community Media Association. (1997). *Community media charter* (Policy Briefing 97/10). Sheffield, UK: Author.

Community Media Association. (1999). *Funding public service broadcasting: The case for a community media fund. Proposals from the Community Media Association* (Policy Report 99/02). Sheffield, UK: Author.

Community Media Association. (2000). *Community media centers: New funding for the digital generation* (Policy Report 00/01). Sheffield, UK: Author.

Community Media Association. (2001). *Community media manifesto*. Sheffield, UK: Author.

Comstock, E. W., & Butler, J. W. (2004). Access denied. In M. N. Cooper (Ed.), *Open architecture as communications policy* (pp. 283–303). Stanford, CA: Center for Internet and Society, Stanford Law School.

Couldry, N., & Rodriguez, C. (2018). *Why the media is a key dimension of global inequality*. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/why-the-media-is-a-key-dimension-of-global-inequality-69084

Davis III, C. H. (2015). *Dream defending, on-campus and beyond: A multi-sited ethnography of contemporary student organizing, the social movement repertoire, and social movement organization in college* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Dolber, B. (2016). Blindspots and blurred lines: Dallas Smythe, the audience commodity, and the transformation of labor in the digital age. *Sociology Compass, 10*(9), 747–755. doi:10.1111/soc4.12387

Dowling, J., Doolan, L., & Quinn, B. (1969). *Sit down and be counted: The cultural evolution of a television station*. Dublin, Ireland: Wellington.

Downing, J. D. (2001). *Radical media: Rebellious communication and social movements*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Farrell, B. (Ed.). (1984). *Communications and community in Ireland*. Dublin, Ireland: Mercier.

Free Speech TV. (n.d.). History. Retrieved from https://freespeech.org/about-us/history/

Freedman, E. (2004). Public access/private confession: Home video as (queer) community television. In R. C. Allen & A. Hill (Eds.), *The television studies reader* (pp. 343–353). London, UK: Routledge.

Garcia, D., & Lovink, G. (1997). *The ABC of tactical media*. Retrieved from http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9705/msg00096.html

Gillan, M. (2010a). Class, voice, and state*: Knowledge production in self-organised working class activity and the politics of developing community television in Ireland using PAR strategies* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). National University of Ireland Maynooth, Maynooth, Ireland.

Gillan, M. (2010b). Class and voice: Challenges for grassroots community activists using media in 21st century Ireland. *Interface, 2*(2), 126–148.

Goodman, A., & Moynihan D. (2012). Occupy the media: Journalism for (and by) the 99 percent. In J. Byrne (Ed.), *The occupy handbook* (pp. 259–264). New York, NY: Back Bay.

Gould-Wartofsky, M. A. (2015). *The occupiers: The making of the 99 percent movement*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Halleck, D. (2002). *Hand-held visions: The impossible possibilities of community media*. New York City, NY: Fordham University Press.

Haugsted, L. (2003). *Battle lines form over PEG support*. Retrieved from https://www.multichannel.com/news/battle-lines-form-over-peg-support-148395

Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (Eds.). (2011). *Comparing media systems beyond the Western world*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Hewson, C. (2005). *Local and community television in the United Kingdom: A new beginning? A policy review*. Sheffield, UK: Community Media Association/University of Lincoln.

Hollander, E. (1992). The emergence of small scale media. In N. Jankowski, O. Prehn, & J. Stappers (Eds.), *The people's voice: Local radio and television in Europe* (pp. 7–15). London, UK: John Libbey.

Howley, K. (2005). *Community media: People, places, and communication technologies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Ledbetter, J. (1998). *Made possible by . . .: The death of public broadcasting in the United States*. London, UK: Verso.

Lewis, P. M. (1984). Community radio: The Montreal conference and after. *Media, Culture, and Society*, *6*, 137–150. doi:10.1177/016344378400600205

Lithgow, M. (2012). Transformations of practice, policy, and cultural citizenships in community television. In K. Kozolanka, P. Mazepa, & D. Skinner (Eds.), *Alternative media in Canada* (pp. 125–144). Vancouver, BC: UBC.

London Community Video Archive. (n.d.) About. Retrieved from http://www.the-lcva.co.uk/about

Lotz, A. D. (2017). *Portals: A treatise on Internet-distributed television*. Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing. doi:10.3998/mpub.9699689

Marcus, S. (2011). *C-SPAN for radicals*. Retrieved from https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/c-span-for-radicals/

McChesney, R. (2007). *Communication revolution: Critical junctures and new media*. New York, NY: The New Press.

McChesney, R. (2013). *Digital disconnect: How capitalism is turning the Internet against democracy*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Milkman, R., Luce, S., & Lewis, P. (2012). Changing the subject: A bottom-up account of Occupy Wall Street in New York City. New York, NY: Joseph F. Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies, City University of New York.

Molstad, M. (2019). *Categorizing Wayne's World: The public forum doctrine and public access channels*, 60 B.C.L. Rev. E. Supp. II.-1. Retrieved from https://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/bclr/vol60/iss9/1

Mulryan, P. (1988). *Radio Radio: The story of independent, local, community and pirate radio in Ireland*. Dublin, Ireland: Borderline.

Negrine, R. (1977). *Cable television and community access* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Leicester, UK.

Nigg, H., & Wade, G. (1980). *Community media: Community communication in the UK, video, local TV, film, and photography*. Zurich, Switzerland: Regenbogen.

NVTV. (n.d.). About Belfast local TV—NVTV. Retrieved from http://www.nvtv.co.uk/about-us/

Ó Baoill, A. (2014). Copyright, community radio, and change: How the U.S. community radio sector is negotiating changing copyright rules and the rollout of digital distribution. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media, 21*(1), 163–76. doi:10.1080/19376529.2014.891216

Ó Baoill, A., & Scifo, S. (2019). Sustainable community media: The challenge of upholding the public trust. *Journal of Alternative and Community Media, 4*(4), 1–3. doi:10.1386/joacm_00062_2

O'Brien, A., & Gaynor, N. (2012). Voice of the people? Objectives versus outcomes for community radio in Ireland. *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media, 10*(2), 145–160. doi:10.1386/rjao.10.2.145_1

Ofcom. (2009). *Local and regional media in the UK*. Retrieved from https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/15957/lrmuk.pdf

Putman, R. (2020). Manhattan Community Access Corp. v. Halleck. *Ohio Northern University Law Review, 46*(1), 195–208. Retrieved from https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/onulr46&i=205

Rathmell, P. C. (2019). Halleck v. Manhattan Community Access Corp.: The second circuit ignores precedent, creating intra-circuit and inter-circuit splits on what constitutes public forum. *Tulane Law Review, 93*(5), 1297–1299. Retrieved from https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/tulr93&i=1381

Rennie, E. (2006). *Community media: A global introduction*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Rodriguez, C. (2001). *Fissures in the mediascape: An international study of citizens' media*. New York, NY: Hampton.

Sandoval, M., & Fuchs, C. (2010). Towards a critical theory of alternative media. *Telematics and Informatics, 27*(2), 141–150. doi:10.1016/j.tele.2009.06.011

Scifo, S. (2011). *The origins and development of community radio in Britain under New Labour (1997–2007)* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Westminster, UK.

Scifo, S. (2016). Funding the "third way" of radio broadcasting in Britain. *Community Broadcasting Association of Australia*. Retrieved from https://www.cbaa.org.au/article/funding-'third-way'-radio-broadcasting-britain

Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport. (2001, February 23). *Minutes of evidence. Memorandum submitted by the Community Media Association*. Retrieved from http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmcumeds/161/1020711.htm

Skinner, D. (2015). Alternative and community media in Canada. In C. Atton (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to alternative and community media* (pp. 199–209). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Spangler, T. (2008). *AT&T knocked for "inferior" PEG channels*. Retrieved from https://www.multichannel.com/news/att-knocked-inferior-peg-channels-268148

Stalder, F. (2008). *30 years of tactical media*. Retrieved from http://felix.openflows.com/node/7

Stein, L. (2001). Access television and grassroots political communication in the United States. In J. D. H. Downing (Ed.), *Radical media: Rebellious communication and social movements* (pp. 299–324). London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Thompson, E. P. (1961). The long revolution (part I). *New Left Review, 1*(9), 24–39. Retrieved from https://newleftreview.org/issues/i9/articles/edward-thompson-the-long-revolution-part-i.pdf

Thorson, K., Driscoll, K., Ekdale, B., Edgerly, S., Thompson, L. G., Schrock, A., . . . Swartz, L. (2013). YouTube, Twitter and the Occupy movement: Connecting content and circulation practices. *Information, Communication & Society, 16*(3), 421–451. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2012.756051

Titley, G. (2010). The Republic of Ireland. In T. Witschge, N. Fenton, & D. Freedman (Eds.), *Protecting the news: Civil society and the media* (pp. 35–36; prepared for the Commission of Inquiry Into the Future of Civil Society). London, UK: Carnegie UK Trust.

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

UK Parliament. (1996). *Broadcasting Act 1996*. Retrieved from http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/55/contents

Watson, I. (2003). *Broadcasting in Irish*. Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts.

Williams, R. (2001). *The long revolution*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview. (Original work published 1961)