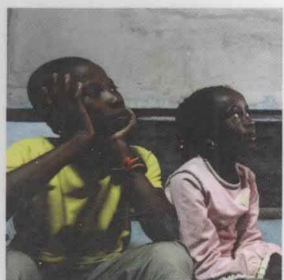
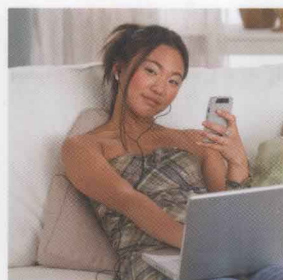
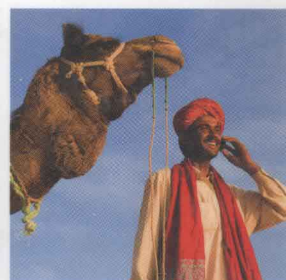
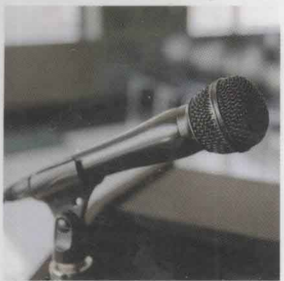
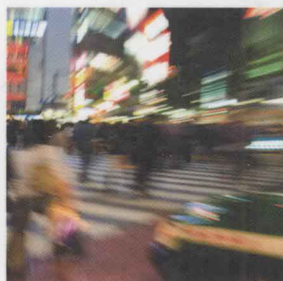
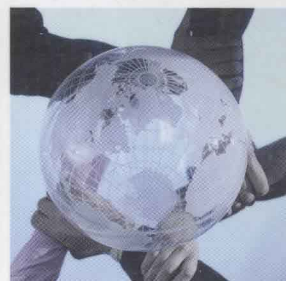
Understanding COMMUNITY MEDIA



Edited by
Kevin Howley

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Kevin Howley

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Preface

When I first met Kevin Howley at a 2004 Symposium on Media Studies and the liberal arts, I was struck by the originality and significance of his research on community media. Howley had just completed his book *Community Media: People, Places, and Communications Technologies,* and as he spoke of his broader research agenda, I was reminded of some of the big questions that initially drew me to media studies two decades earlier, questions about media, representation, power, participation, and identity.

On its publication, *Community Media* quickly jumped to the top of my reading list, and it has been required reading for my advanced media studies students ever since. Howley has a rare capacity to make connections between theory and practice: He can both see how particular cases illuminate broader processes and how social theory helps identify productive questions about specific media objects. At the same time, Howley has experience working with various community media projects, which gives him valuable practical knowledge that enhances his scholarly work on community media.

All this makes Howley an ideal person to conceptualize and assemble a much-needed collection on the current state of community media. So I was not surprised by the richness and depth of this new reader, *Understanding Community Media.* As you will see, this edited collection is a rare gem, one that will stand out among bookshelves of edited volumes in media studies for its clarity and coherence, the depth of the questions it explores, and the range of the cases it considers. Perhaps most important, though, is the sheer significance of the subject matter this collection treats; *Understanding Community Media* shines a light on nagging issues that we, in media studies, have neglected far too long.

We've known for a very long time that mainstream, commercial media, while relentlessly visible, are only part of media culture. A whole range of media objects, practices, and experiences exist alongside, often in critical relation to, commercial media. While media studies scholarship has long nodded in the direction of these alternative media forms—with some outstanding studies that have helped nurture the field, including Ron Jacobs's *Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society,* Deirdre Boyle's *Subject to Change,* and Howley's *Community Media*—the study of community media (or alternative, independent, underground, radical media—our inability to name these media is a sign of our general inattention) has remained marginal. This persistent marginality has real costs. With new forms of digital media emerging—media that may have some capacity to challenge, if not replace, traditional forms of media—the lack of a well-developed body of critical research and theory has the unfortunate consequence of limiting our collective understanding of what's at stake and what's possible.

The agenda for media studies is quite clear at this point: We need to move beyond the simple platitudes that appear in so much of the buzz about new media and look carefully and critically at the structure and forms of community media, how people create and use such media, and how community media interact with major corporate

media. In other words, we need a theoretically informed and empirically rich media studies of community media. Anything less, at this historical moment, would be more than simply a missed opportunity but would challenge the fundamental relevance of media studies in the 21st century.

Understanding Community Media is more than a productive starting point. It is an investment in our field's commitment to the study of the wide range of objects and practices, experiences and identities that are part of the community media landscape. Throughout this volume, Howley and the contributors take seriously the complexity of what it means to *understand* their object of study. As a result, there are no simple narratives or easy answers here; instead, the contributors challenge us to think with them about how and why community media might matter, and what it means to put community media at the center of our scholarly inquiry.

It is also worth noting that several specific strengths of this collection set it apart from many other edited collections. The thematic organization of *Understanding Community Media* is, itself, an important contribution, as it helpfully articulates key dimensions of the field. Even more important, Howley has written a series of substantive introductions to the seven parts, identifying the key questions and how each specific contribution fits in to the broader picture. I found the introductory essays for the parts most closely aligned with my own work—"Civil Society and the Public Sphere" and "Community Media and Social Movements"—to be refreshingly clear and challenging. These part introductions will provide a treasure trove of ideas and questions for seasoned scholars and graduate students alike. In addition, this collection is genuinely global, with chapters that focus on media in a stunning range of settings. This diverse collection of case studies is organized so effectively that each part remains coherent, with each set of chapters reflecting on a core set of questions. As a result, the global dimension on display here help open up a productive cross-national dialogue about the meanings and possibilities of community media.

The variety of community media out there—some long standing, others still emerging—should be a central focus for media studies. *Understanding Community Media* moves us a significant step forward by giving us a series of valuable theoretical frameworks and rich case studies that help map the contours of a field that will only become more significant in the years ahead. This collection deserves our attention and Howley our gratitude, both for the work contained here and for the new questions and projects it will undoubtedly inspire.

—William Hoynes
Vassar College
March 2009

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Acknowledgments

I want to express my sincere gratitude to all the contributors for their efforts. It has been a rare privilege to work with such a talented and committed group of scholars and writers. And at the risk of being presumptuous, I believe we are all indebted to the community media workers and organizations who inspired and supported our research efforts. On behalf of myself and my contributors, I'd also like to thank the following reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions: Rosemary Day, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick; Carlos Fontes, Worcester State College; Eric Freedman, Florida Atlantic University; Josh Greenberg, Carleton University; William Hoynes, Vassar College; Robert Huesca, Trinity University; Fred Johnson, University of Massachusetts, Boston; Peter M. Lewis, London School of Economics & Political Science; Rashmi Luthre, University of Michigan, Dearborn; Vicki Mayer, Tulane University; Clemencia Rodriguez, The University of Oklahoma; and Susan Ryan, The College of New Jersey. Finally, to my editor, Todd Armstrong; his assistants, Aja Baker and Katie Grim; production manager, Sarah Quesenberry; and all their colleagues at SAGE, I offer my heartfelt thanks for your encouragement, professionalism, and skill in bringing this work to fruition.

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Introduction

Kevin Howley

On August 29, 2005, WQRZ-LP, a nonprofit, low-power FM radio station located in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, was one of only four radio stations between Mobile, Alabama, and New Orleans, Louisiana, operating in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. WQRZ-LP provided vital emergency communication—including information related to evacuation procedures, search and rescue operations, and distribution points for food and water—for area residents when other local media outlets had gone silent. Nine months after the storm, WQRZ-LP was still the only broadcaster serving Bay St. Louis, Waveland, Diamondhead, and other devastated communities in Hancock County, Mississippi.

Between 1999 and 2002, hundreds of children, fourth-generation Palestinians living in refugee camps in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories, took part in a participatory media project sponsored by Save the Children UK called Eye to Eye. The program offered photography workshops to Palestinian children and encouraged them to tell their stories and share their perspectives through words and pictures. Photographs and accompanying text documenting the children's lives, their surroundings, and their daily experiences were exhibited locally and shared with students in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, via an interactive Web site.

Since 2002, media activists have appropriated broadcast television technology and unused portions of the electromagnetic spectrum to create microbroadcast stations in neighborhoods throughout Italy. By combining "old technologies," such as analog video cameras and TV antennas, with "new technologies," such as computer servers and broadband Internet connections, microbroadcasters have fashioned a nationwide network of street television stations. Building on a rich tradition of radical media in Italy, the so-called telestreet movement attempts to reconfigure the relationship between the Italian people, local neighborhoods, and the medium of television.

These brief cases illustrate different facets of the fundamental relationship between communication and community. For instance, WQRZ-LP was instrumental in helping the residents of Hancock County sustain and rebuild their community in a time of crisis. The Eye to Eye project raised public awareness of the thoughts, feelings, and experience of Palestinian children—a marginalized group among a marginalized people—within their own communities as well as for far-flung audiences across the globe. Finally, the telestreet movement reveals that the institutional structures and technological apparatus of television are rather flexible and can be reoriented to serve the distinctive needs and interests of local communities. Thus, despite the geographic, cultural, and technological diversity of these initiatives—and the varied motives and aspirations behind them—each can be said to represent a form of community media.

Understanding Community Media examines how, why, and to what ends communities make use of communication and information technologies. The term *understanding* is used in the

title to indicate that community media is a complex and dynamic object of study—one that demands critical scrutiny to fully comprehend the range of structures and practices, experiences and meanings, associated with community media. The word "understanding" is also used to signal the fact that, until quite recently, community media have been somewhat misunderstood and undervalued within academic circles and among the general populace.

The phrase "community media" encompasses a range of community-based activities intended to supplement, challenge, or change the operating principles, structures, financing, and cultural forms and practices associated with dominant media. This rather generic definition is purposeful insofar as it accommodates a diverse set of initiatives—community radio, participatory video, independent publishing, and online communication, to name but a few—operating in a variety of social, political, and geocultural settings. Indeed, the *context* in which community media operate plays a decisive role in shaping and informing these disparate efforts (Tacchi, Slater, & Lewis, 2003).

For example, in the United States, where commercial interests have long dominated the media system, community media oftentimes operate as a noncommercial alternative to profit-oriented media industries (Halleck, 2002). Conversely, in Western Europe, Canada, and Australia—where public service broadcasters enjoyed monopoly status throughout much of the 20th century—community media challenge the public broadcaster's construction of a unified, homogeneous national identity by addressing the diverse tastes and interests of ethnic, racial, and cultural minorities that are often ignored, silenced, or otherwise misrepresented by national broadcasters (Berrigan, 1977).

Community media are also common in postcolonial societies across Latin America and Africa. In this context, participatory communication strategies and techniques are used to help stimulate social, political, and economic development (Berrigan, 1979). And in societies where state-run media was commonplace, community media emerged in direct opposition to repressive regimes and the propaganda associated with "official" media (Ibrahim, 2000; O'Connor, 1990). Of course, these motives are not mutually exclusive; for instance, even in societies with constitutional protections of freedom of speech and expression, oppositional and radical media are quite common (Downing, 2001).

All this is to suggest that community media assumes many forms, and takes on different meanings, depending on the "felt need" of the community and the resources and opportunities available to local populations at a particular time and place. With this in mind, *Understanding Community Media* aims to reveal the value and importance of community media in an era of global communication. In doing so, this volume seeks to promote greater comprehension of, and appreciation for, community media's significance in the social, economic, political, and cultural lives of people around the world.

This introductory chapter proceeds with a succinct discussion of community media's relevance to the issues and concerns taken up by media studies. The implicit assumption here is that community media is a significant, if largely overlooked, feature of contemporary media culture; as such, it warrants scholarly attention. In addition to providing a rationale for the academic study of community media, we briefly consider broader intellectual concerns and social-political issues raised by the growth and development of a global community media sector. As we shall see, community media hold enormous potential for interrogating the forces and conditions associated with globalization. For instance, the relationship between the struggle for communication rights and the emergence of global civil society is especially germane to community media studies. Furthermore, community media provide an exceptional site of analysis to consider the changing dynamics of *place* in an era marked by transnational flows of people, culture, capital, and technology.

Taken together, these insights help situate this collection of original articles in relation to previous work on "participatory," "alternative," "citizens,"

and, of course, "community media." As a number of critics have observed, the proliferation of terms and analytic categories has complicated the study of community media (Fuller, 2007; Howley, 2005; Rennie, 2006). Nevertheless, rather than attempt to make hard-and-fast distinctions between these categories, contributors to this volume recognize the explanatory value of each of these terms insofar as they yield distinct yet related insights into different facets of community-based media. Put differently, this collection attempts to capture the *multidimensional* character of community media through an examination of a geographically diverse field of countervailing structures, practices, and orientations to dominant media.

Why Study Community Media?

The global dimensions of community media reveal that the struggle to create media systems that are at once relevant and accountable to local communities resonates with disparate peoples and across different cultures. This realization has stimulated considerable interest in the theory and practice of community media. Before addressing this growing body of literature directly, we should briefly consider community media's relevance to the key issues and debates taken up by communication and media studies. Only then can we productively engage with the insights, perspectives, and developments of the emergent field of community media studies.

As a field of inquiry, media studies examine the influence and impact of media and communication on human culture and society. In this vein, media studies consider how communication technologies and communicative forms and practices affect community structures, social and economic relations, and political processes. The study of community media likewise interrogates these issues. Significantly, the study of community media also provides an opportunity to turn this formulation on its head. That is to say, community media studies examine how, through community organizing and collective action, local communities affect media structures, behaviors, and performance. To borrow media scholar Roger Silverstone's (1999) useful phrase, community media represent a fertile site to examine "what media do as well as what we do with media" (p. 2). As an object of study, then, community media serve as an exceptional vehicle to explore the way local populations create media texts, practices, and institutions to serve their distinctive needs and interests.

Political Economy and Cultural Studies

The study of community media foregrounds one of the central concerns of contemporary media studies: namely, the issue of media ownership and control. Working under the rubric of political economy, scholars have demonstrated how methods of financing, organizational structures, and the regulatory environment in which media institutions operate have important and far-reaching consequences on media behaviors and performance (Golding & Murdock, 1991; Herman & Chomsky, 1994). Political economists are particularly interested in documenting the detrimental impact privately owned, advertising-supported, and profit-oriented media systems have on cultural production and democratic processes. Indeed, in an era marked by the decline of public service broadcasting on the one hand and the ascendancy of corporate-controlled media on the other, the political economy of media has enormous implications for the character and conduct of public discourse on the local, national, and, given the scale and scope of transnational media corporations, global levels (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006).

Community media operate in sharp contrast to their corporate counterparts. For instance, in terms of financing, community media rely on donations, underwriting and limited advertising, grant funding, in-kind contributions, and other noncommercial forms of support. In this way, community media are insulated from the direct

and indirect influence advertisers exert over media form and content. Likewise, the organizational structure of community media is far less hierarchical than either corporate or public service media (Carpentier, Lie, & Servaes, 2003). More often than not, community media operate with relatively small paid staffs, relying instead on volunteers to perform the tasks and functions associated with media production and distribution. And, like other voluntary associations, community media encourage participatory decision-making structures and practices of the sort that are antithetical to either commercial or public service media outlets.

From a political economic perspective, then, community media represent a significant intervention into the structural inequalities and power imbalances of contemporary media systems. By providing local populations with access to the means of communication, community media offer a modest, but vitally important corrective to the unprecedented concentration of media ownership that undermines local cultural expression, privatizes the channels of public communication, and otherwise threatens the prospects for democratic self-governance.

Informed by political economic perspectives, ideological criticism examines the role media plays in reinforcing and legitimating systems of domination and control. For scholars interested in ideological critique, media take center stage in the process of legitimating and naturalizing structural inequalities and hierarchies of power and prestige. From this perspective, media form and content do the important ideological work of supporting the status quo, glossing over the contradictions of the prevailing socioeconomic order, and otherwise taming or neutralizing dissent (Gitlin, 1982).

In contrast to corporate and public service media, community media organizations often align themselves with, and emerge from, counterhegemonic struggles. In terms of ideological critique, then, community media represent a field to examine hegemonic processes at work at the local level. Indeed, by providing a vehicle for individuals and groups routinely marginalized by dominant media to express their hopes and fears, their aspirations and frustrations, community media can serve as a forum for oppositional politics and ideological perspectives that are inconsistent and incompatible with the interests of dominant media.

For scholars working from a cultural studies perspective, then, community media provide ample opportunity to examine how media are embedded in the everyday lived experience of so-called ordinary people. Likewise, cultural studies' emphasis on "active audiences," negotiated readings of media texts, and the innovative and creative ways audiences resist ideological manipulation is especially suitable to academic analyses of community media (Howley, 2002).

Keen to complicate earlier assumptions regarding media effects, including the ideological force and influence of media texts, cultural scholars have focused attention on individual and collective agency in light of structural constraints and power imbalances (e.g., Ang, 1985). Insofar as community media undermine notions of the passive audience by providing community members with the technical skills and infrastructure to become media makers, community media represent palpable expressions of organized, local resistance to ideological manipulation and repressive regimes of state and corporate power. In short, community media embody what cultural theorists describe as the "emancipatory potential" (Enzensberger, 2000) of media technologies and techniques.

Media Power

The operation of media power figures prominently in the study of alternative, citizens,' and community media (Couldry & Curran, 2003; Langlois & Dubois, 2005; Lewis & Jones, 2006). For instance, dominant media habitually misrepresent or underrepresent individuals and groups based on distinctions of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and lifestyle. For those with little

or no access to mainstream media outlets, community media provide resources and opportunities for marginalized groups to tell their own stories, in their own voices, and using their own distinctive idioms (Rodriguez, 2001). In doing so, community media are instrumental in protecting and defending cultural identity while simultaneously challenging inaccurate, prejudicial, and otherwise unflattering media representations. Thus, through the production and dissemination of media texts that assert and affirm cultural identities, and otherwise challenge the ghettoization (Downing & Husband, 2005) of marginalized groups, community media make visible cultural differences in discursive as well as social space.

Media power is also exercised in terms of relaying and representing formal as well as informal political processes. Nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of news and public affairs reporting. In highly mediated societies, news organizations play a decisive role in setting the political agenda, framing the terms of public debate, and shaping public opinion. News, therefore, is not a simple reflection of historical reality; rather, it is a complex system through which we attempt to understand and make sense of the world. More to the point, as Philip Schlesinger (quoted in Gitlin, 1980) observes, "News is the exercise of power over the *interpretation of reality* [italics added]" (p. 251). All too often, commercial and public service media unproblematically relay elite consensus in the interpretation of reality, thereby narrowing the range of debate and limiting public participation in deliberative processes (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978).

Embracing innovative practices variously described as "alternative," "participatory," and "citizens'" journalism, community media disrupt the codes and conventions associated with contemporary journalistic practice (Harcup, 2003; Huesca, 1996). For example, community journalism eschews objective journalism's uncritical reliance on official sources. Instead, community journalism features the voices, opinions, and perspectives of ordinary people, not just those in positions of power and authority. In its more radical formulation, community journalism challenges the category of "professional" journalism altogether by adopting the philosophy associated with the Indymedia movement: "Everyone is a witness, everyone is a journalist" (Independent Media Center, 2004).

Equally important, community journalism addresses the shortcomings of contemporary journalistic practice. In an effort to reduce costs and increase profit margins, mainstream news outlets have "downsized" newsroom staffs and all but abandoned local newsgathering and investigative reporting. In the process, news organizations have grown dependent on tabloid journalism, celebrity gossip, and prepackaged news items. Not surprisingly, as journalistic standards and values deteriorate so too does public confidence in news workers and institutions. In contrast, community journalists, often working on shoestring budgets, draw on the talents and inclinations of concerned citizens in an effort to provide local communities with useful, relevant information of the sort that enhances and expands community communication (Forde, Foxwell, & Meadows, 2003). Doing so, community journalism revitalizes the public sphere and counteracts the apathy, disenfranchisement, and depoliticization cultivated by lackluster press performance. In short, community media provide opportunities and resources for local publics to reassert journalism's place in the conversation of democracy.

The History of the Future

As the preceding discussion illustrates, the study of community media corresponds with the core concerns of media studies. Adopting media studies' familiar tripartite analysis (e.g., Devereux, 2007), community media studies examine the production, content, and reception of media texts—albeit within a setting that has received surprisingly little academic attention. By the same token, community media offer new points of entry into other aspects of media studies.

For instance, community media represent a blind spot in media historiography. As Rodger Streitmatter (2001) argues, historians frequently overlook the contributions of newspapers operating outside the mainstream of American social and political thought. Furthermore, media scholars seldom acknowledge the contributions of alternative, citizens' and community media in the realms of cultural production, oppositional politics, and public policy. With a few notable exceptions—Jeff Land's (1999) analysis of the Pacifica radio network, Chris Atton and James Hamilton's (2008) history of alternative journalism, and Ralph Engelman's (1990, 1996) work on the development of public access television in the United States readily come to mind—alternative and community media are underdeveloped areas of media history.

Just as the study of community media can complicate and inform our understanding of the past, community media studies are likewise an effective, if underappreciated vehicle to evaluate current and future developments in the technologies and techniques of media production, distribution, and reception. For instance, popular and academic interest in the interactive, collaborative, and participatory potential of social networking technologies and related developments associated with Web 2.0 can be enhanced with insights gleaned from the study of community media. After all, notions of "access" and "participation," so thoroughly embedded in the discourse of "new media," are long-standing concepts in the literature on community media (Berrigan, 1979).

Furthermore, as Ellie Rennie (2006) has argued, community media prefigures what has been described as "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 1992) not only in terms of peoples' use of media technologies but also, significantly, in relation to the policy issues raised by new media and the potential these technologies hold for enhancing public participation in political processes and cultural production. In this light, the marginalization of community media in policy studies has enormous implications for the current state and future prospects of a sustainable independent media sector at the local, national, regional, and international levels. Indeed, inattention and neglect of community media within policy-making circles effectively bars elements of civil society (volunteer associations, clubs, religious organizations, advocacy groups, trade unions, etc.) from fully participating in "legitimate" or "sanctioned" media production and distribution—hence the emergence of "pirate" broadcasting and other forms of "illegal" or "clandestine" media (e.g., Sakolsky & Dunifer, 1998; Soley & Nichols, 1986).

Typically, communication policy debates revolve around a false dichotomy between state-sponsored media systems on one hand and market-based approaches to communication policy on the other (McChesney, 2004). For media activists, community organizers, and others interested in structural reform of existing media systems, community media represent a "third way" for regulators and policy analysts to consider mechanisms that promote the public interest while accommodating commercial and profit-oriented approaches to media and cultural production (Girard, 1992).

As we have seen, community media provide scholars with an opportunity to examine a dynamic if somewhat uncharted aspect of contemporary media culture. Insofar as it represents an object of study, then, community media not only invite but also demand critical inquiry of the sort associated with the finest traditions of media and communication studies (Day, 2009). And as a social practice that is at once local, cross-cultural, and transnational, community media encourage us to consider broader issues and concerns related to globalization and the struggle for communicative democracy in the 21st century.

Communication Rights and Global Civil Society

The advent of satellite communication in the 1960s ushered in an era of unprecedented global communication between distant people and places. For some observers, most notably those representing the scientific, military, and corporate interests of

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