

# Introduction

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**O**n August 29, 2005, WQRZ-LP, a non-profit, 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 micro-broadcast 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 post-colonial 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?

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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

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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

the English-speaking world, these developments signaled the beginning of a new era of international cooperation, security, and prosperity. Others, particularly people from “the global South,” were far less sanguine. These critics expressed concerns over the imposition of Western and, more specifically, Anglo-American values and ideologies—individualism, modernity, and consumerism—on non-Western societies that threatened traditional ways of life and undermined the sovereignty of newly independent nations.

In the absence of legal and structural arrangements that would ensure equal access to satellite communication technologies, address the imbalance in news flows between the North and South, and otherwise work to democratize communication within and between nation-states, representatives from so-called developing societies feared a new form of domination described as “cultural imperialism” (Schiller, 1976). In this context, the struggle to define, secure, and preserve “communication rights” became an issue of global proportions.

Throughout the 1970s, governments debated the question of communication rights in the United Nations and other international bodies. Although Cold War politics confounded these deliberations, an emerging consensus supported democratic-minded reform of global communication systems. Eventually, these deliberations produced the McBride Report: the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) sponsored study that recommended structural reform of the global communication infrastructure (UNESCO, 1980). Predictably, perhaps, both the United States and the United Kingdom withdrew from UNESCO in protest over the reports findings and conclusions. This development set the stage, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, for the ascendancy of neoliberalism—a regulatory philosophy that advocates market-based approaches to economic, social, and cultural policy—and all but ensured that the debate over communication rights at the inter-governmental level would put the interests of multinational corporations above those of individuals, communities, and societies.

In the intervening years, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community organizers, academics, media workers, and other civil society groups have taken up the cause of communication rights in a number of international venues, most recently the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Addressing a range of issues, civil society groups amplified and expanded popular understandings of communication rights (Civil Society Declaration to the World Summit on the Information Society, 2004). According to one such group, the World Association of Christian Communicators (WACC, 2006), communication rights

go beyond mere freedom of opinion and expression, to include areas such as democratic media governance, participation in one’s own culture, linguistic rights, rights to enjoy the fruits of human creativity, to education, to privacy, peaceful assembly, and self-determination. These are questions of inclusion and exclusion, of quality and accessibility. In short, they are questions of human dignity. (p. 67)

Thus, civil society groups positioned communication rights within a broader framework of human rights articulated in various international agreements and conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This strategy has been instrumental in garnering broad-based support for an emerging global media reform movement and encouraging unprecedented popular participation in global communication policy debates (Calabrese, 2004). Nevertheless, as media activist Sean O’Siochrú (2003) observes, the codification of communication rights in international agreements—let alone widespread recognition that communication is a basic human need as well as a fundamental human right—is no guarantee that these rights are respected or upheld within and between nation-states.

In theory, many of the key aspects of communication rights are included in legally binding Treaties . . . to which virtually every government is a signatory. The practice on the

ground, however, is very different. All of these Treaties are virtually unenforceable, lacking the instruments to compel compliance by signatory states. They provide little more than moral and political guidance, too often ignored. (p. 23)

In the post-9/11 environment, the struggle to secure and maintain communication rights takes on an even greater sense of urgency. Indeed, the crackdown on political dissent coupled with illegal wiretapping and other forms of electronic surveillance represent an ominous form of collusion between state and corporate interests. In this light, civil society assumes a tremendous responsibility for ensuring that communication rights are upheld at a moment when these rights, and a host of civil liberties, are under assault across the globe.

## Place Matters

As the previous discussion illustrates, developments in communication and information technologies are deeply implicated in the process of globalization. To be sure, modern communication systems enable geographically dispersed people to interact with a sense of intimacy and immediacy as never before. In an era of instantaneous worldwide communication, it is easy to see why some people might think place is losing its significance in human experience.

For instance, media theorist Joshua Meyrowitz (1986) makes a compelling argument that modern communication systems create new realms of social interaction that render place inconsequential, if not irrelevant. There is, of course, an element of truth to such claims. Consider, for example, the “placeless” interaction of telephone conversations or online chat sessions between two people living in different parts of the world. Likewise, satellite technologies allow us to witness events—football matches, political rallies, and, in the case of the Iraq War, a full-scale military invasion—in “real time” as they unfold in far-off places. Furthermore, cultural forms such as hip-hop, telenovelas, and zines are easily adapted and reconfigured to suit the tastes and preferences of (trans)local audiences. In

many respects, then, proximity and copresence are no longer prerequisites for myriad forms of cultural production and social interaction in the era of global communication.

That said, the disappearance of place, or to be more precise, the diminishing importance of place to our understanding and experience of community that typifies much of the discourse on globalization, is overstated. As economist Michael Shuman (2000) reminds us, the relationship between place and community remains an essential feature of everyday lived experience: “Parcels of real estate are where consumers live, farmers grow food, producers operate factories, and workers clock-in their time. And around these stationary islands emerge the networks of people, arts, music, crafts, religion, and politics we call *community*” (p. 8). Without putting too fine a point on it, even in the era of cell phones, satellite broadcasting, and the Internet, place matters. In fact, place may have even greater significance in our daily lives in the wake of the social disruptions, economic reorganizations, and cultural encounters associated with globalization.

For example, cultural geographer David Harvey (1989) suggests that the forces of globalization—worldwide flows of people and capital, goods and services, technology and culture—upset or challenge popular conceptions of place as being a stable, coherent, or bounded social space. Thus, when immigrants alter the demographic makeup and cultural character of local neighborhoods or when factories close and employers relocate, our sense of place is upset. In light of these social, economic, and cultural disruptions, Harvey argues, we reassert collective feelings of safety and security, solidarity and belonging, associated with a particular place. On the one hand, this impulse may manifest itself innocently enough, in nostalgic and idealized longings for a sense of place. On the other hand, these same feelings may have far more sinister consequences, as evidenced by recent instances of ethnic cleansing.

Place, it turns out, has long been, and continues to be, subject to claims from rival groups and factions. That is to say, in the era of globalization,



place—and the meanings we attach to and derive from place—remains a site of intense struggle. Consider ongoing disputes over place in the Holy Land, the Darfur region of Sudan, or at World Trade Center site in New York City, for that matter.

The point is that place still has enormous relevance to human experience. Indeed, far from making place less relevant to our everyday lives, globalization intensifies the significance of place. As the world's population increases, so too will the competition for scarce resources. By some accounts, the 21st century will be marked by “resource wars”—economic, political, and military conflicts over access to natural resources such as oil and natural gas, potable water, and arable land (Klare, 2002). As a result, place will become the site of enormous contest over access and control of these dwindling resources.

Place also has a less tangible, if not a more fundamental relationship to human experience. As anthropologists have long observed, place provides a basis for individual and collective identity formation. Indeed, our sense of self, and of others, is shaped in large part by our identification with, and our affinity for, a particular place. What's more, we articulate a shared sense of place through custom and tradition, dress and food, sound and imagery: in a word, through “culture.” In short, the relationship between place and identity is intimately tied to cultural forms, practices, and traditions. By way of illustrating this point, consider the use of flags, anthems, intellectual and aesthetic traditions, and founding narratives that are part of “the calculated constructions of national identity” (Massey & Jess, 1995, p. 2). All this is to suggest that our sense of place—neighborhood, city, region, or nation-state—is not only a matter of individual subjectivity but also a social construction mediated within and through communication and culture.

### Knowable Communities

Beyond issues of personal and place-based identity, cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1973) alerts us to the crucial role communication plays

in shaping individual and collective consciousness of the relations of “significance and solidarity” that we call community. Williams captures this dynamic with his notion of “knowable communities,” a phrase he used in relation to the historical development of the English novel: a cultural form that registered and articulated the dramatic social, economic, and cultural changes associated with the Industrial Revolution. Briefly stated, Williams argued that the scale and complexity of modern industrial societies made it increasingly difficult for people to discern the connections, dependencies, and relationships that give structure and meaning to human communities. By articulating the significance of these relationships within and between disparate characters and settings—relationships that are often hidden or obscured—the novel presents a set of social relations that are manifest, accessible, and comprehensible: a knowable community.

Here, we can begin to appreciate the utility of Williams's (1973) notion of “knowable communities” to community media studies. That is, while dominant media tend to conceal the interconnected and mutually dependent character of social relations, community media work to reveal this fundamental aspect of human communities. Elsewhere I have argued that the democratic structures and participatory ethos associated with community media enable local communities to articulate relations of solidarity and significance through a variety of communicative forms and practices (Howley, 2005). In a similar vein, media anthropologist Alan O'Connor (2006) employs Williams's concept of the knowable community in his analysis of “mountain community radio.” Despite their apparent isolation and seclusion, O'Connor observes, the lives of indigenous people in Ecuador and the miners of Bolivia are determined by forces and conditions that are, at once, close at hand and at a distance.

No village or community exists apart from these underlying global systems. Every village is internally shaped by the demand for its commodities and work, by the national government

that seldom leaves the village alone and by wars that call its people to serve in the army. There is therefore, Williams argues, an urgent need to have a sense of this larger system. (p. x)

At a time when our lives are intertwined with people and places far removed from our local communities, there is, as O'Connor (2006) argues, "an urgent need" for a much more sophisticated understanding of our mutual dependencies. Furthermore, we need to recognize that the process of globalization is complex and contradictory, uneven and unequal, and bound up in relations of power and domination. The irony here is that despite all our technological sophistication, we often fail to comprehend what Williams described as the "crucial and decisive" relationships we have with people across town and around the world. Simply put, the concept of the knowable community has enormous relevance in an era of globalization.

None of this is to suggest that there is anything new in all this. The process of globalization—understood in terms of mass migration, colonialism, international trade, and global communication—has long been a part of human history. Rather, the current era is marked by an *intensification* of these historical processes. More so than ever, then, our experience of a place called home is shaped by circumstances from within and without. As we shall see, in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, community media provide a modest but by no means inconsequential mechanism to promote "a global sense of place" (Massey, 1994).

## Thematic Overview

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Acknowledging the disparities of material and symbolic relations of power in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, *Understanding Community Media* aims to identify and analyze the role community media play in the global struggle for communicative

democracy. Drawing on insights and perspectives gleaned from a growing body of literature on alternative, citizens,' and community-based media, this volume represents a comprehensive, but by no means definitive account of community media in the early 21st century. That is to say, despite the scope and variety of cases contained herein, this collection has its limitations.

First, this collection features contemporary case studies or historical assessments of community media of a recent vintage. Missing from this collection are historical analyses of alternative and community-based media prior to the 1970s—arguably a watershed moment in the global movement for communicative democracy. Second, many of the cases discussed throughout are affiliated with progressive politics if not the "political left." This is not to suggest, however, that community media do not align themselves with conservative, "right-wing" or even reactionary political projects. Rather, it is to acknowledge that this collection falls short of capturing the experience of alternative and community-based media from across the political spectrum. All this is to say that choosing illustrative and representative studies for inclusion in this volume proved a daunting task.

Ultimately, four factors informed my decision-making process. First, I was eager to include theoretically informed empirical analyses of community media alongside perspectives from community organizers, media activists, and others engaged in the day-to-day operation of community media initiatives. Second, because community media is common the world over, the collection needed to reflect the geographic and cultural diversity of these efforts. Third, because local populations must make use of resources that are not only available to but also appropriate for a specific geocultural setting, this collection includes discussions of "old" and "new" technologies, as well as innovative examples of "converged" media. Finally, I sought contemporary research from an international team of well-known experts, media activists, and promising

young scholars who together could bring fresh insights to the study of community media.

Organized thematically, *Understanding Community Media* explores the relationship between community media and democratic theory; cultural politics and social movements; media activism and neoliberal communication policy; as well as grassroots organizing and international solidarity building. The volume is structured to accommodate sequential reading as well as a more selective approach to the specific issues addressed in each of the book's seven sections. Introductory remarks preceding each section are designed to orient the reader to the terms, concepts, and debates taken up in each of these thematic sections. Specifically, *Understanding Community Media* is organized into seven overlapping sections described below.

### **Part I: Theoretical Issues and Perspectives**

In this section, contributors offer a variety of theoretical perspectives that account for the multifaceted character of community media. For some, community media are equivalent to oppositional, radical, and so-called alternative media. Others note the correspondence between emerging forms of participatory culture and community media. Taken together, these chapters examine the relationship between community media and local constituencies—a line of inquiry that emphasizes community building and maintenance. Throughout, contributors wrestle with questions of “citizenship,” “publics,” and “community” raised by community-based media.

### **Part II: Civil Society and the Public Sphere**

Chapters in this section explore the relationship between media institutions, public discourse, and civil society. Each chapter illustrates the significance of neighborhood associations, advocacy groups, NGOs and other elements of civil society to

specific community media initiatives. Likewise, contributors draw on Jürgen Habermas's influential work on the role communicative forms and practices play in the constitution of the public sphere. In doing so, these case studies demonstrate community media's potential to democratize media structures and practices. Throughout, contributors underscore community media's role in creating discursive spaces for individuals and groups marginalized by state-run and commercial media organizations.

### **Part III: Cultural Geographies**

This section explores the relationship between place, culture, and collective identity in an era of global communication. Several case studies consider indigenous peoples' media in relation to dominant media structures, forms, and practices. Others use community media as a site to explore the dynamic interplay between local and global cultures. These chapters examine community media in terms of strategies of resistance and accommodation to cultural globalization. Throughout, contributors emphasize community media's role in articulating cultural identities, and the sociocultural specificity of place, in a global media landscape.

### **Part IV: Community Development**

In this section, contributors consider the relationship between participatory communication and community building and development. Significantly, community development projects, long associated with the Third World, are increasingly common in postindustrialized societies as well. Chapters move from theoretical and pedagogical issues related to training “illiterate” and “nonprofessional” media makers to case studies of community media initiatives that promote economic development and social inclusion. Throughout, contributors explore community media's capacity to promote collaborative efforts aimed at addressing common problems within the local community.

## Part V: Community Media and Social Movements

This section features historical and contemporary analyses of the role of local and grassroots media in popular movements for political change and social justice. Drawing on social movement theory, contributors examine the importance of media to political organizing and mobilization. Chapters consider the strategies and tactics employed by community activists to use media for purposes of advancing progressive causes and garnering popular support for their efforts. Throughout, contributors highlight the decisive role community media play in facilitating cultural expression that gives shape to and informs social movements

## Part VI: Communication Politics

The chapters in this section examine the extent to which communication policies enable or constrain democratic communication. The specter of neoliberalism figures prominently in debates over the creation of a viable community media sector in various national settings. Foregrounding the social, political, and economic forces and conditions that shape communication policy, contributors highlight the efficacy of reform efforts in creating more equitable media systems. Case studies and policy analyses reveal the significance of independent and community-based media in promoting structural reform of existing media systems.

## Part VII: Local Media, Global Struggles

The final section examines community media's role in constructing a critical communication infrastructure through which civil society groups around the world address common concerns, forge alliances, and develop solutions to (g)local problems. Contributors examine a variety of initiatives and communication strategies, including the rise of Independent Media Centers and their

relationship to an emerging global justice movement. Not surprisingly, new technologies figure prominently in these chapters as does the potential these technologies hold for galvanizing global civil society.

After years of neglect, community media has begun to attract scholarly attention. The recent surge in community media studies parallels the explosive growth of locally oriented, participatory, and noncommercial media around the world. Incorporating theoretical, empirical, and practitioner perspectives, *Understanding Community Media* represents the “state of the art” in this emerging field of study. As scholarly interest in this field intensifies, there is growing demand for a comprehensive text—one suitable for advanced undergraduate- and graduate-level coursework—that examines community media in a global context. In short, *Understanding Community Media* provides instructors and students with a single, authoritative text on an intriguing aspect of contemporary media culture.

Furthermore, the book's thematic organization allows instructors to integrate this material into a variety of courses in communication and media studies. Demonstrating the relevance of alternative, citizens,' and community media in an era of global communication, *Understanding Community Media* offers an incisive and timely analysis of the relationship between media and society, technology and culture, and communication and community.

Finally, *Understanding Community Media* seeks to contribute to ongoing debates within activist and policy-making circles regarding communication rights on the local, national, and international level. In addition to providing models for community access and participation in existing media systems, this volume aims to enhance public participation in policy deliberations surrounding the development of new and emerging communication and information technologies.

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