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85

<u>Reviews</u>

Community Media; People, Places, and Communication Technologies. By Kevin Howley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 324p. (cloth, $84.00) ISBN-10: 0521792282; ISBN-13: 9780521792288; (paper, $39.99) ISBN-10: 0521796687; ISBN-13: 9780521796682.

Community Media is a landmark study that extends an understanding of grassroots media practice in crucial and exciting new ways.

Not only does it address key examples of community media projects in the United States, Canada, and Australia, it extends the study of community media paradoxically and necessarily to the global instead of isolating it as solely a localized practice, and to the historical instead of similarly isolating its study as the description of what is done today. By regarding the global and the local as well as the past and present as mutually constitutive instead of as separate spheres or analytic levels, *Community Media* stakes out new, significant ground not only for the study of community media, but for the critical study of communication.

The key terms in the title are worth commenting on, if only to illustrate and perhaps contradict initial impressions potential readers may have. By the use of "people," the book counters deterministic, structural arguments in which praxis is reduced to the expression of conditions. By "places," the book emphasizes not only the variety of forms of community media in different areas, but also the central importance of understanding how the global and the local are mutually constitutive. Thus, "place" has a theoretical as well as descriptive value. Finally, by "technology," the book seeks to foreground the determinations of concrete techniques and apparatuses, but in ways discovered and developed by people in specific conditions, rather than as some McLuhanesque, inevitable outcome.

The key critical moves made in this study are also worth highlighting. The first is not to take communities nor community media as essentialized, already existing, and thus the starting point of analysis. Instead, *Community Media* grounds them in a theoretically sophisticated analysis of historical conditions, to which communities and community media are a response. This perspective requires locating the starting point of analysis not in the ostensible topic at all, but in the consolidation and narrowing of commercial and state-owned media companies and systems. In this way, the book poses a critical and historical argument that is sorely lacking in many studies of community media.

The second critical move is to historicize communities as modes of sociation and as ongoing problems and projects instead of as essentialized objects. Rather than regard communities as already existing objects and community media as the simple, derivative expression of a community, *Community Media* sees communities as both the agent and outcome of community media projects. As such, communities are notoriously unstable, multiple, and contradictory. While *Community Media* sees

great possibilities in the general response of community media, it refuses to uncritically celebrate all communities, nor to treat community media practice as uniformly successful.

This kind of nuanced, sophisticated theoretical perspective derives from a broadly defined cultural-materialist approach, with scholars such as Williams, Martin-Barbero, Hall, and others enabling a focus on process and contradiction in historically specific ways. Just as there is no single kind of community medium, each community media project changes throughout its course, determined by while also reproducing its conditions. Thus, the focus in the book is on mediations and articulations between the global and the local, and between projects, technologies, and conditions in a recursive and reflexive historical process.

The book accomplishes this admirably not only in the wholly amazing encyclopaedic second chapter, which is as fine a global overview of community media as one could hope for, but also in a range of cases represented in individual chapters. The case studies in these chapters illustrate well the book's premises and approach. In their virtually novelistic attention to the mutual constitution of conditions, projects, and actions, they have few peers in terms of their depth and vision.

For example, the chapter discussing the community radio station WFHB in Bloomington, Ind. is a hugely detailed and rich description and analysis. While its descriptive first part might leave one wondering about the relevance of understanding the economic basis and historical emergence of southern Indiana to understanding its community radio station, this discussion resonates in the later, more analytic part of the chapter. Among its critical insights is how contradictory definitions of communities (via culture or spatial proximity) determine the practice and the form of community media. The relationships and contradictions teased out here are extremely insightful.

Similarly, the analysis of Manhattan-based Downtown Community Television maps the contradictory role and relationship of community media with institutionalized media organizations. DCTV pioneered a new television aesthetic by pioneering new kinds of relationships with its audiences and subjects. Due in part but to a fortuitous emergence of high-quality small-format video, this aesthetic became for a time a bankable innovation, in that DCTV was able to sell its personal documentaries to commercial and public networks and thus finance its primary purpose as open resource and training ground for neighborhood residents. The discussion highlights the contextual nature of its work by explaining both the emergence and decline of its commercial success in terms of political, technological, and economic conditions spanning international relations, the emergence of small-format video, and the dynamics of commercial media in a capitalist society as much as in terms of the DCTV documentaries themselves. The exploration here calls into question easy and essential distinctions between community and commercial media practice.

The chapter on street journalism and, in particular, the street paper *Street Feat* produced and sold in Halifax, Nova Scotia illustrates the possibilities and the contradictions of articulating commercial forms with activist intentions, but in ways different from DCTV. The street paper sought to bring to social consciousness the enforced invisibility of the homeless as a spatially coterminous but illegitimate community. Its possibility lay in its embodying the lived experience of diverse sets

of people as they negotiate and challenge the spatial enforcement of neoliberal economic and social policies. This case brings into sharp relief tensions between patrician philanthropy and charity on the one hand, and entrepreneurialism as one of a number of forms of grassroots direct action.

The final case study presents the possibilities and problems of so-called virtual communities by examining VICNET, the Australian state of Victoria's inaugural attempt at establishing a public online community resource. The book distinguishes a community media use of online resources from non-community use, in that the former is explicitly at the service of a place-based and coterminous community rather than a scattered, diasporic one. At the same time, in its global availability, VICNET exemplifies the ways in which the conception of community media as small-scale, place-based projects no longer adequately describes the range of possibilities. The complexities dealt with here not only include the ways in which the day-to-day operational complexity of online media work against their goal of inclusiveness, but the difficulty of conducting a rich analysis of such a project as a remote (in all senses of the word) researcher. The book concludes by revisiting and elaborating its originating premises.

The innovative intentions of the book are more than matched by its concrete accomplishments. *Community Media* not only illustrates a novel and sorely needed approach. It also exemplifies the value of such an approach for understanding a crucial development in global media practice that will only become more central in the years to come.

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