

# Understanding Community Media

## Community Media and Social Movements

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[p. 233 ↓ ]

## Part V: Community Media and Social Movements

The chapters in this section explore the relationship between community media and collective action aimed at social transformation. Drawing on work in sociology, communication, political science, and social movement studies, contributors illuminate the role that grassroots and community-based media play in producing and legitimating oppositional discourse, creating a shared identity among movement participants, and sustaining and enlarging social movements over time.

We begin with a brief discussion of the complex interaction between social movements and dominant media organizations. This line of inquiry maintains that news production and distribution constitute a “critical arena” of struggle for activists and community organizers (Ryan, Carragee, & Schwerner, 1998). Following this, we observe the importance of cultural expression and place-based institutions to movement organizing, mobilization, and cohesion. Throughout, we consider mainstream media coverage of social movements as well as the communicative forms and practices generated within and through movements themselves. In so doing, we can better understand and appreciate the strategic value of communication within social movements and between movement actors and wider publics. Furthermore, these insights reveal the potential that community media studies hold for interrogating the communicative dimensions of social movements.

### A Critical Arena

In an influential article, Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) identify the structural and cultural dimensions of the interaction between news media and social movements. Briefly stated, analyses concerned with the structural aspects of this relationship examine the power imbalances between social movement organizations (SMOs) on the one hand and news organizations on the other (e.g., Carroll & Ratner, 1999). Typically, structural

analyses emphasize the unequal but mutually dependent relationship between media and movements.

According to Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993), “Movements need the news media for three major purposes: mobilization, validation, and scope enlargement” (p. 116). That is to say, press [p. 234 ↓ ] coverage is instrumental in communicating the movement's goals, status, and activities to its core constituency and beyond. In this way, media coverage can legitimate the change agenda being advanced by social movements. Moreover, favorable press coverage can help movement participants forge alliances with other groups and constituencies, thereby increasing the movement's ranks and enhancing the movement's potential to influence public opinion and affect public policy. In short, movements need media coverage to promote, legitimate, and publicize social change messages in the public sphere.

But, as Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) observe, news media depend on social movements as well. Journalists cover social movements because they “often make good copy for media. They provide drama, conflict, and action: colorful copy; and photo opportunities” (pp. 116–117). In contemporary journalistic practice, the importance of compelling visuals of the sort associated with social movements—mass rallies, public demonstrations, and the like—cannot be overstated. What's more, an emphasis on drama and conflict is a central feature of the narrative structures and techniques employed by news workers. All this is to say that reporters and editors find social movements useful insofar as they often provide dramatic and visually arresting raw material for press reports.

Of course, negative press coverage can undermine the credibility of social movements by marginalizing movement participants and otherwise trivializing social change issues and demands (e.g., Solomon, 2000). The difficulty confronting social movements, therefore, lies in getting accurate, ongoing, and, if possible, sympathetic press coverage (Ryan, 1991). The point here is that the relationship between movements and news media is based on *asymmetrical dependencies*. Put another way, movements require press coverage far more than the press needs social movements.

Not surprisingly, this condition “translates into greater power for the media in the transaction” (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993, p. 117). This power differential is, perhaps,

most obvious in terms of journalists' newsgathering routines: a preference for the pithy sound bite over nuanced argumentation, an uncritical reliance on "official sources", and an attendant skepticism toward issue advocates. In short, professional news values and practices represent formidable obstacles for activists, community organizers, and SMOs working to influence public opinion and effect social change (Hackett & Zhao, 1996).

More critically, in light of the institutional arrangements between dominant media organizations and powerful corporate, financial, and political interests, it seems unlikely that progressive social movements could receive fair, accurate, and ongoing press coverage in mainstream media (Howley, 2008). As Scott Uzelman (2005) observes,

The very structure, institutional interests, and routines of mainstream, corporate media effectively act as blockades to dissenting opinion. ... Media corporations have little reason to give sustained coverage to voices critical of the conditions in which such entities thrive. (p. 19)

Herein we can detect community media's significance to social movements.

As nonprofit, self-managed media organizations, community media are insulated from the structural arrangements and institutional interests associated with corporate and public service media. By providing movement actors and participants with resources for media production and distribution—microphones, recorders, cameras, transmitters, and such—community media circumvent the structural barriers to communication for social change associated with dominant media. In this way, community media provide a forum for dissent and a vehicle for cultural resistance and oppositional politics (e.g., Kellner, 1992; Land, 1999). And in the absence of substantive, let alone sympathetic press coverage from mainstream media outlets, social movements rely on grassroots, independent, and alternative media organizations to mobilize movement participants, publicize their concerns to wider constituencies, and sustain collective identities over time (Downing, 2001; Streitmatter, 2001).

**[p. 235 ↓ ]**

In contrast to the structural dimension of the interaction between dominant media and SMOs, a cultural analysis focuses our attention on the struggle over meaning that takes

place between social movements and news workers. Analyses in this vein start from the assumption that journalists and movement actors alike actively interpret social reality: an insight that highlights the constructed (and contested) character of news production (Tuchman, 1978). As Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) observe, “Events do not speak for themselves but must be *woven into some larger story line or frame* [italics added]: they take on their meaning from the frame in which they are embedded” (p. 117). In other words, news workers and movement participants engage in a struggle over meaning when they assert different, often-competing frames on news events and issues (e.g., Gitlin, 1980). The implications of this struggle come into focus when we consider the relationship between social movements, news frames, and the formation of public opinion (Entman, 2004; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Once again, grassroots and community-based media serve as a vital resource for social movements, this time by taking up the struggle over meaning between mainstream news outlets and SMOs. For instance, in her study of the controversy surrounding plans to build a new runway at Boston's Logan International Airport, Regina Marchi (2005) identifies two competing news frames. The first, employed by various constituencies who would benefit from runway expansion, framed the issue in terms of “economic progress.” Meanwhile, a second group, a coalition of community activists from the neighborhoods surrounding the airport, opposed to the project framed the issue in terms of “environmental justice.”

Marchi's (2005) study reveals how community organizers made effective use of new technologies and grassroots communication strategies to challenge the dominant “economic progress” frame employed by the city's political and economic elites—a frame that was uncritically replicated and amplified by the city's daily newspapers. Through community organizing and savvy media practices, the coalition opposed to runway expansion publicized its concerns throughout Boston and educated journalists, politicians, and city residents about the environmental implications of the new runway. In doing so, this grassroots media campaign successfully reframed the news story to reflect the issue of environmental justice and helped generate public support for people living in the affected neighborhoods.

## Place, Culture, and Collective Action

In contrast to earlier social movements that were predicated on the redistribution of wealth or the attainment of formal political recognition (e.g., the right to collective bargaining, voting rights), the so-called new social movements are defined by their focus on issues of identity and values. These new forms of collective action—such as feminism, gay and lesbian activism, as well as the peace, environmental, youth, and global justice movements—have challenged traditional political-economic and sociological explanations of social movements (Melucci, 1980). Analysts have since focused their attention on the everyday social interactions and cultural practices that shape collective consciousness: the shared identities, perspectives, and sensibilities that provide the basis for collective action. Accordingly, the “cultural turn” in social movement studies explores “the intersection of culture, practice (collective and everyday) and politics” (Escobar, 1992, p. 396).

This emphasis on everyday practices and social relations highlights the importance of place in understanding the dynamics of social movements. For instance, Stolle-McAllister (2007) found that mobilizing collective affection for place is an effective strategy of popular resistance: one that helps individuals and groups overcome feelings of alienation and powerlessness, provides a basis for the construction and an affirmation of collective identities, and encourages community members to assume considerable risk to their lives and livelihoods. Environmental movements, in particular, [p. 236 ↓ ] offer a compelling illustration of the affective and strategic importance of place in popular forms of resistance. When local communities deem development projects to be unsustainable or when environmental degradation threatens public health and local ecosystems, communities reaffirm place-based identities as the basis for collective action, including popular as well as radical forms of resistance (e.g., Taylor, 1995).

All this is to suggest that place, far from being irrelevant in a global era, figures prominently in the emergence of contemporary social movements. Indeed, the forces and conditions associated with globalization—especially the unsettling effects of global capital on local communities—often prefigure the emergence of collective action. As

economic geographer Byron Miller (1992) puts it, “Resistance movements frequently arise in response to colonization and disruption of social life in particular places” (p. 37).

These insights have prompted analysts to interrogate the role played by grassroots and community-based organizations—especially those that facilitate interaction between community members—in movement building. For instance, Evans and Boyte (2000) argue that “the historical evidence now suggests that popular movements with enduring power and depth always find their strength in community-based associations” (p. 259). Indeed, local institutions such as union halls, churches, coffeehouses, university campuses, and the like were instrumental in supporting a variety of movements, including the labor, civil rights, and anti-war movements of the past century.

Introducing the concept of “free spaces”, Evans and Boyte (2000) highlight the role that place-based institutions play in supporting social movements that challenge institutional racism, gender inequity, and economic disparity within (and beyond) local communities. Acting as repositories of collective memory and resources for the revitalization of affective relations of solidarity, community-based institutions, such as grassroots media organizations, constitute “free spaces” inasmuch as these institutions, operating independently of either the state or the marketplace and rooted in the everyday lived experience of local communities, “are the foundation and wellspring for any sustained challenge” to the status quo (p. 268).

Significantly, Evans and Boyte (2000) call our attention to the ways in which these “free spaces” encourage community groups to “rework ideas and themes from the dominant culture in ways which bring forth hidden and potentially subversive elements” (p. 260). This insight is instructive inasmuch as it underscores the complex relationship between culture and politics. On the one hand, cultural texts and practices often work to reinforce and legitimate relations of domination and subordination. On the other hand, cultural expression can be emancipatory, even transformative, inasmuch as poetry, narrative, song, and visual arts offer a glimpse of alternative ways of being in the world.

Furthermore, cultural activity enables movement actors to construct relations of solidarity and affinity within and through collective visions of resistance and transformation. For example, James Lewes (2001) argues that the articles, editorials, and cartoons that appeared in the GI underground press during the Vietnam War



reveal how enlisted men “expressed and, thus, produced their relation to other social formations” (p. 137). Lewes focuses our attention on the discursive construction of GI activist identity vis-à-vis the military brass, politicians, and business leaders who supported the war effort. Significantly, the antiwar sentiments expressed in the GI press drew heavily on military culture to articulate collective identities of resistance to the Vietnam War and, more generally, to a military apparatus that denied enlisted men the very rights and liberties it claimed to be fighting for. Accordingly, Lewes contends, “the visions and representations published in the GI press ... [served] to centre and focus the [antiwar] movement” among enlisted men (p. 138).

These insights reflect a growing awareness of, and appreciation for, the relationship between [p. 237 ↓ ] collective action and cultural expression. And yet, despite the recognition that culture matters to social movements, there is relatively little work that examines the “cultural forms generated within movements” (Reed, 2005, p. xx). This seems at odds with the emphasis Melucci and other proponents of new social movement theory have placed on *symbolic challenges*—communicative strategies and tactics designed to reveal and resist the way in which systems of domination and oppression are legitimated and reinforced through language, discourse, and cultural expression. Indeed, these symbolic challenges are essential for projects aimed at social transformation inasmuch as they provide a “different way of perceiving and naming the world” (Melucci, quoted in Escobar, 1992, p. 407).

Intuitively, then, activists and scholars recognize the significance of Brecht's observation regarding the relationship between cultural expression and social transformation: “Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it” (quoted in Askew, 2002, p. 1). Still, as Reed (2005) argues, few analysts have looked at social movements as sites of cultural production and reception in their own right. Through a comparative analysis of progressive social movements of the late 20th century, Reed calls our attention to two distinct, but related, facets of contemporary social movements: the importance of “dramatic public actions” and “the rather undramatic, mundane daily acts of preparation” that produce these public displays (p. xv). Here, Reed's analysis foregrounds the importance of public forms of communication, the time and effort required to produce this work, and ways in which movement participants understand and make meaning from public performances, collaborative work practices, and the cultural forms produced by movement actors. If we apply these insights to community-

based media, we can begin to appreciate the critical role independent, alternative, and grassroots media play in facilitating cultural expression within and through social movements.

Having said this, it would be a mistake to think that cultural expression aimed at social change is necessarily or inevitably progressive. There are times when collective action, mobilized by grassroots media, becomes repressive, hostile, and violent. Indeed, as Jolyon Mitchell (2007) reminds us,

Some of the most chilling broadcasts in the history of radio emerged from Rwanda in the 1990s. Radio-TELEvision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), One Thousand Hills Free Radio, is frequently blamed for inciting the genocide that claimed over eight hundred thousand lives during a hundred days in 1994. (¶ 7)

This is but one dramatic and horrific instance, in which community-based media was used to mobilize people's fears, inflame ethnic hatred, and organize mass slaughter.

To summarize, then, this emphasis on place, culture, and collective action is especially relevant to community media studies. If, as new social movement theory suggests, collective action emerges out of everyday social interactions, then place becomes a strategic site for identity formation and movement building. Through the production, distribution, and reception of cultural texts embedded with oppositional discourse and resistant politics, community media reveal the importance of cultural expression to social movements.

In the chapters that follow, contributors explore the use of grassroots and community-based media in various social, cultural, and political struggles. As we shall see, grassroots media facilitate community organizing and are instrumental in mobilizing local people and resources. By the same token, community media are, in and of themselves, valuable resources that help nurture and support social, political, and aesthetic expressions of popular resistance. Although each chapter considers community activism in a distinct geographic and cultural setting, taken together they highlight the innovative uses of grassroots and community-based media to achieve political aims and support the struggle for social justice.

[p. 238 ↓ ]

In [Chapter 20](#), Mario Murillo argues that the indigenous movement in Colombia is at the vanguard of national struggles for social and economic justice. Drawing on in-depth interviews with movement leaders and participants, Murillo finds that indigenous radio serves two critical functions. First, radio is an invaluable resource for organizing and mobilizing indigenous peoples. Second, radio has proved to be an effective means of forging alliances between the indigenous movement and broader constituencies across Colombia. Murillo is quick to point out that the success of indigenous radio takes place against a background of armed conflict and political intimidation. Not unlike other forms of alternative media throughout the world, then, indigenous radio in Colombia supports democratic communication in an otherwise hostile sociopolitical climate.

Dandan Liu's contribution ([Chapter 21](#)) presents an intriguing case study of community activism and ethnic minority media. Specifically, Liu examines the interaction between community activists and local Chinese language media in a campaign to defeat a plan to build a new baseball stadium in Philadelphia's Chinatown. Liu's analysis reveals the complexity of urban politics and economic redevelopment schemes in a multicultural metropolis. Throughout, Liu observes the troubled relationship among minority groups, elected representatives, business interests, and local news organizations. Liu concludes that the campaign to stop the stadium did more than preserve Chinatown's physical and cultural integrity—it helped transform the image of this immigrant community throughout the entire city.

The next two chapters consider the relationship between grassroots media collectives and social movements. Claudia Magallanes-Blanco's contribution ([Chapter 22](#)) examines the history and practice of Colectivo Perfil Urban—a video collective based in Mexico City. Magallanes-Blanco's analysis underscores the relationship between the collective and the Popular Urban Movement that emerged in the aftermath of the earthquakes that struck Mexico City in 1985.

Magallanes-Blanco focuses her discussion on the production of *Los Más Pequeños*, a video featuring the voices and perspectives of members of the Popular Urban Movement. Throughout, Magallanes-Blanco illustrates the interaction between social movements and local forms of cultural expression.

Brian Woodman's (Chapter 23) historical case study of guerrilla video in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, considers the use of what was then a new technology—portable video—to support feminist causes and principles. Woodman traces the development of Iris video, a short-lived and little-known women's video collective. By recovering the history of Iris Video, Woodman examines the relationship between feminist video practice and the wider feminist movement. Woodman's analysis of the collective's organizational structure and philosophy reveals the interplay between culture, aesthetics, and movement politics. In the end, Woodman's contribution highlights the important, but largely overlooked, contributions women have made to alternative, grassroots, and community-based video practice.

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