

## **Media at the Margins: Policy and Practice in American, Canadian, and British Community Television**

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This comparative study addresses the policies and practices of community television in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. In particular, I examine how community media organizations are transforming themselves to meet the demands of a digital world, and how these experiences are reflected in policy and regulation. Findings suggest that the policies governing community television do not correspond to what has been experienced by practitioners. Drawing from theories of the public sphere, the argument is made that policy does a disservice to community television by failing to acknowledge the importance of place, bodies, and practice. This is problematic, as it fails to distinguish community media from user-generated digital content.

Recent years have witnessed a tremendous degree of campaigning by community media organizations in Canada, the UK, and the United States. In Canada, January 2010 saw the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations (CACTUS) launch a nation-wide campaign to “put community back in community TV,” in anticipation of a review of community television by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC; Edwards, 2010). In the UK, the Community Media Association continues to lobby the BBC and the Office of Communications (OfCom) to recognize the value of community media. In the United States, 2009 represented a watershed moment, when Philadelphia witnessed the launch of its first community television station, ending a 27-year struggle for public access television in that city.

Community media are neglected aspects of our media landscape that represent the public’s only opportunity to use the infrastructure of mainstream media to produce and disseminate their own content and voices (Howley, 2005; Rodriguez, 2001). With the advent of user-generated digital media, however, the relevance of *community television* is being questioned; it is accused of becoming an anachronism in today’s contemporary mediascape (see Fuentes-Bautista, 2009; Timescape, 2009; Waldman, 2011). The anecdotes above illustrate an attempt to engage in this debate. Moreover, they join a conversation lamenting community television’s position at the margins of our local, national, and global mediascape (Howley, 2005; Rennie, 2006). They suggest community television continues to be both a “living organism,” and a site of contestation—an ongoing struggle over place, agency, representation, and

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identity (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 158). These areas of contestation find their fulcra in the four intersecting nodes of *policy*, *practice*, *publics*, and *place*, and it is within these spheres that this research is situated. This research seeks to address the experiences and challenges of community television in the United States, Canada, and the UK.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, this research asks the questions: How are these experiences reflected in regulation? And, how do these policies and practices compare across national boundaries, particularly when discussing digital media? Such questions take on new urgency as concern grows over the potential loss of diversity of voices brought on by corporate convergence (McChesney, 1999). This study is based on 10 in-depth interviews with community television practitioners, organizers, and advocates in Canada, the United States, and the UK. Given that the focus of this paper is on the intersection of practice and policy, these interviews were compared against a review of recent regulatory initiatives from the CRTC, FCC, and OfCom. These three countries, moreover, were not chosen randomly, but rather, because they are nations with advanced communications systems, and perhaps more important, because they share a regulatory commitment to serving that mercurial notion called “the public interest.”<sup>2</sup>

This comparison reveals a bifurcation whereby the policies governing community television do not correspond to what has been experienced by practitioners and advocates. While the practitioners I interviewed emphasized experience, practice, and physical place as salient attributes of community television, policies tend to internalize the value of community television as residing exclusively in *content*, and not in the places or publics formed in the creation of this content. I do not seek to refute this position. Giving voice to the voiceless is crucial in a mediascape dominated by hegemonic capitalist interests (Howley, 2005; Rodriguez, 2001). Nevertheless, content does not represent the total value of community television or community media more broadly. In contrast, findings suggest that the strength of community television lies, in part, in its relationship to physical *place* (Howley, 2010, p. 9)—that is to say, in its ability to bring community members together in time and space for the purposes of education, deliberation, networking, community building, and of course, media production. Put another way, the benefits of community television reside not only in its content, but in its practices. While ignored by policymakers, this is not a new observation. King and Mele, for instance, noted in 1999 how a rhetorical devotion to community television’s contributions to the deliberative ideation of the public sphere, “focus[es] too narrowly on the *content* of such programs and discount[s] critical possibilities inherent in the *production* of public access television,” (1999, p. 607). What sets this study apart is the addition of a critique of policy, as well as its expansion from the microcosm of one organization to a comparison of practice and policy among nation-states.

Policy has long centered on community television’s ability to foster freedom of expression and contribution to deliberation in our democracy. In doing so, it has created a discursive “community media public” based solely around content. Through this lens, community television has been called an “electronic public space” (Aufderheide, 1996) or an “electronic soap box” (Linder, 1999; United States,

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<sup>1</sup> I use “community television” to delineate the scope of this research. On occasion, “community media” is used to discuss the larger field or community media centers and organizations.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Telecommunications Act of 1996, the 1991 Canadian Broadcasting Act, and the UK Communications Act 2003 all reference broadcasting in the public interest.

1984a, p. 4667)—a vehicle for citizens to discuss, share, and deliberate matters most important to them. While praiseworthy, such a myopic reliance on content reduces community television purely to output. Policy rhetoric rests on the normative assumption that equates the value of community television with a disembodied, Habermasean public sphere (1974) at the expense of the corporeal, the experiential, and the practical. This is problematic, as it fails to distinguish community media from YouTube or any other user-generated digital platform. This perspective needs to be expanded to understand the totality of values and strengths engendered within these media practices, and I suggest that policy does a disservice to community television by failing to acknowledge the importance of place, bodies, and practice. This critique of regulatory obliqueness and the disembodied public sphere of community television policy is framed through the discussion of three themes. Drawing from Castells' (2000, pp. 18–20) and Giddens' (1991, p. 18) differentiation between "place" (territorially bounded localities) and "space" (dislocated and disembodied relationships), these themes are labeled: *place*, *space*, and *interface*. *Place* refers to the community, locality, and physical presence of community television organizations. *Space* refers to the relationships between community television and dominant institutions. Here, I discuss the difficulties in creating spaces and publics of attention and recognition. *Interface* refers to the changing nature of the relationship between community television and technology, particularly as organizations struggle with the adoption of digital media.

### **Community Television/Community Media**

Scholarship on community media has been on the rise in recent years, with a number of conferences, journals, and manuscripts devoted to the topic (Jankowski, 2003). While positive, such a resurgence suggests there is still much to be learned. This could stem from the observation that community media is amorphous, as the practices are globally dispersed and locally situated, and also incorporate any combination of media and people (Rennie, 2006). Studies, for example, have focused on community radio, television, and newsletters in North America (Howley, 2005; King & Mele, 1999; Linder, 1999); community television and radio in Australia (Rennie, 2006); Latino/a radio in the United States; community reporting in Nicaragua; video production among Columbian women (Rodriguez, 2001); and radio among Bolivian tin miners (Huesca, 1995). Such examples demonstrate that, while a central tenet of community media is its situatedness, it is not exclusive to any global milieu, or reliant on any one medium. Community media is what the community needs it to be. The most challenging aspect is definitional (Rennie, 2006, p. 22). Rodriguez, for instance, argues that we need to abandon the label "community media" (or "alternative media") and assume the moniker of "citizens' media," as it better embodies the qualities of collectivity, "contesting social codes," and empowerment (2001, p. 20). Adding to this difficulty is the observation that community media is not a stable, complete, or hermetic system. It is amorphous, mercurial, and more often than not, ephemeral (*ibid.*). Out of the myriad definitions posited (see Buckley et al., 2008, p. 206; Lewis & Booth, 1989, p. 9; Rennie, 2006, p. 4; Rodriguez, 2001), the most comprehensive comes from Howley, who defines community media as:

Grassroots or locally oriented media access initiatives predicated on a profound sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream media form and content, dedicated to the principles of free expression and participatory democracy, and committed to enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity. (2005, p. 2)

This highlights the fundamental characteristics of community media as suggested by Nossek: *participation, access, and self-management* (2003, p. 308). As this research suggests, *location* or *place* is yet another salient attribute. Howley, for instance, notes how reports of the obsolescence of place and community within the discourse of globalization have been greatly exaggerated (2010, p. 8). In contrast, he argues that "place still has enormous relevance to human experience," and that community media become the locus where the "relationship between place and identity" can be experienced (*ibid.*, p. 9). All of this is to say that community media is intricately tied to the notion of place, and that this "sense of place" remains a seminal aspect of the human condition (*ibid.*).

What these disparate elements then point to is an understanding of community media as being less about content than about modes of production (King & Mele, 1999). This process-oriented approach has much in common with Couldry's (2004) call for a "media as practice" approach to communications research. Couldry seeks to "treat[] media as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media," (*ibid.*, p. 117). In doing so, this approach "decentre[s] media research from the study of media texts or production structures (important though these are) and . . . redirect[s] it onto the study of open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media," (*ibid.*). This notion of media practice is adaptable to a study of community media, as it lends credence to the argument that the physical locale of community media is often regarded as one of relationship building and empowerment, rather than simply content production (Higgins, 1999; Howley, 2005; Rodriguez, 2001). Indeed, it is an example of what "people [are] *doing* in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts" (Couldry, 2004, p. 119).

There is disagreement, however, as to the next phase for academic inquiry. Rennie argues that a policy approach is needed, so as to "get away from notions of community media as something resistant to government and the economy" (2006, p. 6). Conversely, Jankowski argues for the need to supplement policy analysis—something he sees as existing in abundance—with theoretical and empirical model building (2003, p. 10). In agreement with Rennie, however, my research has also observed a paucity of critical scholarship on community media policy (see also Howley, 2010). Two further gaps appear in our knowledge of community media. First, scholars such as Rodriguez (2001), Howley (2005), and Huesca (1995) remind us power does not exist in binary—those with and those without. Rather, we need to move away from this reductionist notion and see it more along a spectrum. The authors intimate the need for a more nuanced hermeneutic of community media and power. Second, while we are confronted with a number of insightful case studies, and derived from them, a number of theoretical explanations championing the importance of community media as a democratic process, few studies have used these case studies to compare community media at the level of the nation-state. What I suggest is an alternative path scholars could follow to continue expanding our knowledge of community media—one that merges Rennie's (2006) assertion for policy critique, and Jankowski's (2003) argument for mid-level, empirical, and theoretical model-building. I accomplish this through presenting a critique of policy and putting forward an empirically-based argument centered around the concepts of place, practice, and publics.

### Policies and Publics

Despite Canada, the United States, and the UK having distinctive media systems, *community television* generally follows the same framework. That is to say, a public access model, whereby community members are able to produce and broadcast their own programs using equipment and training provided by the station. The majority of community television stations in Canada and the United States are distributed through cable systems, while in the UK, where cable penetration is relatively low, organizations have either been able to secure a coveted terrestrial broadcast license ("Restricted Service License") or take advantage of Internet broadcasting (Timescape, 2009).

The United States is perhaps most infamous with respect to public access television—a country where free expression takes precedent, where community television stations are first-come-first-served, and where the popular film *Wayne's World* holds key representational space. While there has yet to be a census of public access stations, recent estimates place the number at around 3,000—making them rather ubiquitous entities among American communities (Goldfarb, 2008, p. 1). Traditionally, public access has been regulated at the municipal level, where the municipality grants a franchise to a cable operator in exchange for certain benefits—such as public, educational, and governmental ("PEG") access channels. Non-profit organizations, municipalities, or cable operators typically run these channels. Public channels stand for open public access, educational channels tend to air lectures and classes, and government channels air city council meetings and other government information—although these boundaries are often blurred (Linder, 1999, p. xxv). Surprisingly, the United States lacks a coherent community television policy. Rather, community television regulation is dispersed amongst a myriad of congressional legislation and FCC regulations, most of which generally address the distribution of cable systems.<sup>3</sup> Like much policy in the United States, community television has also been shaped by a number of Supreme Court cases (i.e., *Denver Area v. FCC*, 1996). These discrete rulings and regulations typically focus on elements such as franchise fees, rollout, and in the case of the 1992 Cable Act, content regulation and First Amendment implications (as was argued in *Denver Area v. FCC*). There has been little discussion of place, physicality, or publics. Rather, recent policy tends to follow the trajectory laid out in a congressional report on the 1984 Cable Act:

A requirement of reasonable third-party access to cable systems will mean a wide diversity of information sources for the public—the fundamental goal of the First Amendment—without the need to regulate the content of programming provided over cable. . . . Public access channels are often the video equivalent of the speaker's soapbox or the electronic parallel to the printed leaflet. They provide groups and individuals who generally have not had access to the electronic media with the opportunity to become sources of information in the electronic marketplace of ideas. (United States, 1984a, p. 4667)

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<sup>3</sup> See United States, 1984b, 1992, 1996; FCC, 2006, 2007.

Note here the reliance on the tropes of the First Amendment, orality, and the marketplace of ideas—which connote content and dissemination, but focus little on modes or practices of production (King & Mele, 1999).

The more recent issue of statewide franchising has further pushed policy toward a disembodied space. Finding strong support in the lobbying efforts of telecommunication providers amongst state legislatures, this provision “allows new providers (i.e., phone companies such as AT&T and Verizon) to bypass municipal franchises and apply for a statewide franchise permit,” (Goldfarb, 2008, p. 5). Distancing franchise authority from the municipality allows these companies to usurp local authority, avoid individual franchise fees, and leave many PEG organizations without sustainable funding. Despite vehement protest by PEG advocates, over 20 states have enacted such legislation, resulting in the reported closure of dozens stations, and the reduction of services at dozens more (Goldfarb, 2008, pp.5–8; Linder & Kenton, 2010, p. 12; Waldman, 2011, p. 300, quoting reports by American Community Media). Statewide franchising is thus a further example of the *lacuna* between the practices, policies, and places of community television.

Canadian community television policy is much more explicit than U.S. policy, having been enshrined as one of three components of the Canadian broadcasting system (in addition to private and public broadcasting) in the 1991 *Broadcasting Act* (Canada, 1991, §3.1.b.). This provides the CRTC latitude to regulate the service as it sees fit. Once the birthplace of community television (Howley, 2005, p. 52), Canada’s community television greatly resembled its American counterpart (cable-based, privileging access and participation) until 1997, when deregulation permitted cable operators to eliminate public participation and consolidate stations (Timescape, 2009). To correct this imbalance, recent years have witnessed a plethora of regulatory interventions in community television.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in 2002 and again in 2010, the CRTC reversed many of these destructive allotments. In particular, the 2002 decision mandated for the first time, a quota for programming produced by members of the public (rather than cable employees) (CRTC, 2002, para. 55; CRTC, 2010, para. 10). This quota was set at 30% of weekly programming for community channels run by cable companies in 2002, and was increased to 50% in a subsequent 2010 decision to become effective in 2014 (CRTC, 2010, para. 10). Nevertheless, the focus remains on the creation and dissemination of content, rather than the provision of places for production and gathering. For instance, it was noted in 2002 and reaffirmed in 2010 that the main objectives of community television are to “ensure the creation and exhibition of more locally produced, locally reflective community programming; and to foster a great diversity of voices and alternative choices by facilitating new entrants at the local level” (CRTC, 2010, p. xiii).

There are, of course, exceptions to this generalization. For instance, the 2010 *Community Television Policy* encourages licensees of community-based television to, “Facilitate citizen access to the production of programming, and, provide training to those within the community wishing to participate in the production of programming” (ibid.). Despite this, we continue to see a favoring of content over practices in Canadian community television regulation. That is to say, we see a focus on the disembodied

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<sup>4</sup> See CRTC, 2002, 2009, 2010.

voice of the participant, rather than any concern for the democratic value of the practice and place of community television.

While possessing a much weaker community television system than Canada and the United States, regulators and legislators in the UK have begun to acknowledge the participatory value of community media. This, for instance, is demonstrated by the inclusion of community broadcasting in the 2003 *Communications Act* (Timescape, 2009; UK, 2003, §262, 359). Nevertheless, the landscape of community television remains bleak. Many explanations have been given for the lack of local and community television, including the failure of cable to take hold, a lack of funding, and the failure of the licensing regime (OfCom, 2009, pp. 104, 128; Timescape, 2009). The future is thus uncertain for community television, with only four restricted service license (RSL) holders in operation as of 2009 (compared with 3,000+ community stations in the United States and 139 in Canada; CRTC, 2009; OfCom, 2009, p. 21; Timescape, 2009). Of these four stations, moreover, only Belfast's NvTv is predicated upon notions of public access (OfCom, 2009, p. 37; Timescape, 2009).<sup>5</sup> The challenges for all organizations remain securing the necessities of survival: favorable regulation and funding (Timescape, 2009). It has been suggested, therefore, that one should look to community radio for indices of potential regulation for television (OfCom, 2009). For instance, OfCom noted:

In addition providing unique content, community radio stations deliver wide benefits to people in the areas in which they broadcast. This includes offering training and work experience opportunities, contributions to local education and providing a voice to those, such as older people or speakers of minority languages, who may find it harder to access the media. (2010, sec. 2.2)

While the democratic value of community radio in the UK is acknowledged, community television still remains nascent, if not stillborn. That said, a recent OfCom report noted community media (or "ultra-local media") has the potential to:

Deliver media literacy in a range of forms, including content creation, critical appreciation, public service announcements, the skills to interrogate public data in order to make better-informed decisions about where—and how—to live, and the ability to hold local public bodies more effectively to account. (2009, pp. 127–128)

Unlike Canada and the United States, the challenge in the UK is how to operationalize this support. As was previously noted, infrastructure remains a barrier; hence we have witnessed a number of community television organizations transition or start-up online, to accommodate the "low overhead" costs of operating placelessly (Timescape, 2009). This dislocated form of community television, however, may not take full advantage of the embodied opportunities presented by community radio. For the moment, all three countries face challenges with respect to place and bodies in their respective policy and regulatory decisions. That places, practices, and embodied publics are not acknowledged does, indeed,

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<sup>5</sup> An unlicensed community station (Channel 7) is also operating through cable in Immingham (Timescape, 2009; OfCom, 2009, p. 43)

suggest that community television is no different from any user-generated digital platform. This could then lead to further calls for defunding or increased barriers to access and infrastructure capital.

### Publics and Practices

What these aforementioned policies do reflect is a Habermasian public sphere (Habermas, 1974). That is, one where voice, deliberation, and ideological space for discussion are privileged at the expense of place, practice, and bodies. In his formidable work, Habermas envisions the bourgeois public sphere as that which mediates the spheres of society and state (ibid., p. 50). That is to say, a group of citizens (i.e., bourgeois, white, male) coming together to discuss "objects connected to the activity of the state," (ibid., p. 49). Discussion is the operative word here, as for Habermas, "a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body," (ibid.). In Kulynych's words, the Habermasian public sphere equates democracy with participation, and participation as "discursive participation; it is communication governed by rational, communicatively achieved argument and negotiation," (1997, p. 320). Physical presence in a "concrete locale" is unnecessary for such active participation in, and contribution to, the public sphere (ibid., p. 322). While Habermas notes that such discussions often took place in the salons or cafés of 18th- and 19th-century European capitals, many have critiqued Habermas for his failure to recognize the importance of place and bodies (Kohn, 2000; Kulynych, 1997; Warner, 1993). Warner argues that this conceptualization of the public sphere permitted self-abstraction of only the privileged elite, leaving minorities and the underprivileged embodied, but voiceless (1993, p. 240). While it is argued that user-generated media rectify such imbalance between the powerful and the powerless (Bruns, 2008), what separates community television from this cacophony is not only the addition of voices to the marketplace of ideas, but rather its practices, places, and publics (see Aufderheide, 1996, p. 127).

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with deliberation, only that its articulation as the *sine qua non* of democracy is incomplete (Kohn 2000; Schudson, 1997). Kohn, for one, argues that deliberative democracy invites participation only from the elite, and as such, abstracts minority voices (2000, p. 426). It is not only that discussion reigns supreme in the disembodied public sphere, but that the notion of place is often rendered irrelevant. Policy mimics such an approach, granting salience to content, but not practice. In contrast, community television is able to encourage equal participation, or as King and Mele observe, the "different *experiences of production* [are] both meaningful to the individual volunteers and important to the constitution of the public sphere" (1999, p. 621). This closely resembles Friedland's conceptualization of a "communicatively integrated community," where the interactions of place (community), participation, deliberation, and communication (media) are seen as necessary components of a functioning democracy (2001, p. 359).

Paralleling this debate, content—a disembodied voice in the airwaves—is an insufficient descriptor for community television. Without the recognition of practice and place, community television policy has created what Turner has called a "demotic" public. That is to say, "There is not necessary connection between, on the one hand, a broadening demographic in the pattern of access to media representation and, on the other hand, a democratic politics" (2010, p. 17). Without acknowledging a connection to place, community television is seen, through the lens of policy, as another contributor to an unending



stream of voices, devoid of the empowerment capabilities highlighted by scholars (Higgins, 1999; King & Mele, 1999). Invoking another critic, policy has created what Fraser calls a “weak public”—deliberative, but unable to operationalize (1992, p. 134). Rather, in the bringing together of people in space and time, community television forms “strong publics”—“publics whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making,” (ibid., p. 143). While such decision-making is localized at the community level, it nonetheless grants a certain degree of agency to community media organizations.

To recap, I have analyzed relevant community television regulation and legislation in the United States, Canada, and the UK, and found them wanting. More specifically, I argue that they fail to incorporate the salient aspects of place and the “experience of media production,” favoring instead the end result—the product, the program, the content (King & Mele, 1999, p. 614). I argue that policy needs to conceive of community television in a more holistic fashion, taking into account the notions of publics, practices, and places. The following sections underscore this argument, using evidence from interviews with community television practitioners, advocates, and organizers.

### **Place**

Of primary importance is the notion of place, and respondents advocated strongly for the situatedness of their community media practices. Situatedness here refers to both the physical infrastructure of the organization and the notion that public participation itself is a seminal characteristic. Public participation was called by one interviewee the “lifeblood” of community television, and the “cornerstone of the access system,” suggesting the importance of this quality (personal communication, 11/9/10). The strongest reactions came from American respondents, whose public access television has traditionally been associated with notions of public participation, community reflection, and democratic practices (Linder, 1999). For respondents, community television is an arena in which a “community can speak to itself instead of being spoken to” (personal communication, 11/3/10). This is certainly warranted, given that many media outlets have gravitated away from “local accountability reporting” (Waldman, 2011). According to a recent congressional research report, community television is “used by 1.2 million volunteers and 250,000 community organizations,” producing “20,000 hours of new programs per week”—statistics suggesting that these organizations are certainly in use (Goldfarb, 2008, p. 2). The notion of place, however, speaks to larger issues than just the dissemination of content. It speaks to enhancing diversity, facilitating conversation and discussion, empowering participants through media and digital literacy training, and fostering public participation. This last quality is especially salient among marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities, the LGBT community, youth, and the elderly. Representatives from the lobbying organization American Community Television (ACT) also noted the transformation from “public access television stations” to “community media centers.” This is an effort to remain relevant and provide resources such as training facilities, media literacy, and production classes. This also reflects a move from the seemingly pejorative notion of “public access television” to the more positive, “community media” (Ali, in press).

In addition to defining their practice as “community media,” media literacy is a central tenet for practitioners, who maintain that their primary goal is the training of participants. ACT’s executive director, Bunnie Riedel, also notes that such hands-on production and skills training can allow participants to

develop the critical skills necessary to decode the onslaught of media texts presented to Americans on a daily basis (personal communication, 11/3/10). Nantz Rickard of DCTV noted that one of DCTV's most successful endeavors targets youth in the Washington, DC, area through a "Youth Training Institute." This "institute" includes a television program (YAP-TV), a "training aspect, of running people through how to use the equipment, how create stories with it" through a partnership with the Smithsonian Institute, and an art and media literacy program. They also hold an internship program and other "experiential" programs, so that "youth can come to us after school and participate regularly, learning not just how to use the media and the tools, but to be part of how the community interacts with us" (personal communication, 11/9/10). Such opportunity for diversity speaks to the potential of community media centers to physically bring people together, and it also represents evidence many advocates use to defend their practice against detractors who argue that community-participatory media should only exist in the virtual domains of YouTube (see Fuentes-Bautista, 2009; Linder & Kenton, 2010, p. 7).

Contrary to the case of the United States, the Canadian public has largely been ignored or even barred from participating in community television since the late 1990s. Jim Macgregor observed how Winnipeg community television has taken a circuitous path with respect to place and publics. Community television began in Winnipeg as something dedicated to public participation and access. During these early decades, Videon Cable-11 operated with few censoring guidelines, and Macgregor could recall only a handful of instances where a producer was cautioned or a disclaimer aired. This ethos of democratic video production began to wane in the mid-1990s, finding its apex during the 1997 Winnipeg flood. During this "flood of the century," Videon took on a new role in regards to place, one that saw it divorce itself from the participating public and embody the conventions of mainstream broadcasting. Management committed to covering the flood in its entirety, with over 180 volunteers, including anchors and reporters, working 24 hours a day. This transition to a new genre of community television saw the channel dedicate itself to "professional" community coverage. It soon became the template for all Videon programming. Reflecting an implicit binary, this is an interesting divergence from the American experience, where direct operation of community television stations by cable companies is generally taboo. Nonetheless, with the recent round of CRTC (2010) regulations requiring quotas for public participation, Shaw-TV (as it is now known) is working toward re-integrating the public into its operations. Macgregor is quick to add that this will not be a "regression to the 1970s," but a new model, one balancing community-initiated with company-initiated programming (personal communication, 11/21/10).

In contrast to the U.S. "public-participatory model," and the Canadian "hybrid model," the British case represents a rather dislocated alternative to notions of place. Since local television is relatively nonexistent, many organizations (i.e., Southwark-TV and MonTV) have migrated to the Internet for distribution (OfCom, 2009, p. 43). For Southwark-TV, the Internet reduces overhead, allowing the organization to devote more resources to video production and training. Operating under the positioning statement, "Web, Event, TV" Southwark-TV, and its parent, the Community TV Trust, aim to incorporate media with local life by showcasing community initiatives and events, along with school and youth-produced projects. It is not, itself, a television station, but rather, a resource for community members who wish to produce their own local media (C. Haydon, personal communication, 11/3/10). Given its online presence, founder Chris Haydon was adamant that, while the organization itself does not operate as a hub, it tries to create hubs in schools, community centers, and the like, and it focuses its energies on

creating “shared public spaces” and places for physical meetings (personal communication, 11/3/10). Haydon has a great fondness for the democratizing potential of the Internet, but he admits the situatedness of community media is the crucial factor:

But the thing that I like most, actually, even pretty much above the wonder of the web as the great solution for delivering this stuff, is bringing people together physically. . . . Some will be 12-years old and some will be 50 and have no experience whatsoever. And each will be as proud, or as frightened, or as timid, or as rewarded to have feedback. To feel somebody understands. And this is somebody who is in effect a neighbour, who lives in their area. . . . So that mix of media, that overlap of media and local life, the mix of media practice and putting on local events to bring that overlap into life. So that media sharing isn't a virtual experience, there are other important dimensions. . . . At the end of the day, media is just something that happens between people. (personal communication, 11/3/10)

Southwark-TV thus represents a disembodied place for community television, one without a central locus, but that nevertheless speaks to the central tenets of community media in giving voice to the voiceless and place to the placeless. Such a telling should not suggest an idyllic situation whereby community television organizations are free to control their own destinies. Rather, these media institutions continue to be plagued by a constant lack of funding, regulatory invisibility, and public irrelevance (see Timescape, 2009). What these examples do illustrate is that, regardless of organizational, funding, or content models, community television remains firmly rooted in a notion of place (see Howley, 2010). The station, community media center, or impromptu screening room becomes the location from which actors are able to create a public of participants.

### **Space**

The concept of space suggests the difficulties in forming publics that are not situated within this aforementioned locus of place. For instance, respondents noted the difficulties in forming alliances with regulators and policymakers, with cable operators, and even with the general public. This last aspect is most troubling to respondents. As a member of OfCom noted, “discoverability—people knowing that services exist, and, even if they know that it exists, understanding what the content is”—is a considerable challenge for community media practitioners in the UK (D. Radcliffe, personal communication, 12/14/10). Similarly, in Canada, the challenge lies in building public awareness:

[The] vast majority of Canadians don't even know this stuff exists. There is a blackout in terms of public awareness that they have these rights and can go to a cable company and demand these resources and a cable company can't say no in terms of programming if they don't like it. (M. Lithgow, personal communication, 11/10/10)

As a result, “community television became increasingly irrelevant for most Canadians,” (ibid.). John Rocco of ACT also observed how one of his largest challenges as a community media executive and

national lobbyist is convincing the public of the value of community television (personal communication, 11/8/10).

In essence, the notion of “space” refers quite literally to carving out spaces of attention, recognition, visibility, and relationships in an over-saturated and over-stimulated mediascape. Space also refers to the ability to form a public or publics of supporters that are not immediately affiliated with the community media center at the grassroots level. Other difficulties in forming publics of supporters have occurred at the national policy level, where community media organizations struggle to create impact. While respondents from ACT noted success in forming relationships with regulators and members of Congress, they remain hard-pressed to battle against cable and telecommunication companies. Riedel argues that community television still lacks the regulatory mechanisms to contest poor treatment by cable companies. She contends that, rather than a comfortable rapport existing between community television, cable operators, and municipal governments, “cable operators are the foxes watching the hen house,” forming beneficial relationships with municipal councilors and waiting to revoke community television’s claim on channels. From her perspective, “It’s this knee-jerk reaction towards marginalization. And I think the other big challenge is finally being able to have a seat at the table. My joke is that access is always the red-headed step sister” (personal communication, 11/3/10).

American lobbying groups have had slightly more success than their Canadian or British counterparts in bringing community television to the attention of regulators. Still, though, in Canada, indicators suggest that this declaration may need reevaluation, since CACTUS was influential in pressuring the CRTC to enact definitions, access quotas, and cable company financial transparency rules (CRTC, 2010). While largely successful in this campaign, however, some express doubt as to the visibility of community television lobbying in Canada. In an extensive report submitted to the CRTC, for instance, Timescape Productions observed that, unlike the United States, Canada lacks an umbrella organization to lobby on behalf of community television on a nationwide scale (2009, pp. 22, 151). This is not insignificant, as it speaks to the aforementioned notion of “discoverability”—the ability to form publics of attention and support that are so crucial in matters of policy and regulation.

When compared with the United States and Canada, advocates in the UK have had least success. Haydon, for instance, noted how his organization is invested in lobbying OfCom, but acknowledges the difficulty in getting anything accomplished at the federal policy level (personal communication, 11/3/10). Additionally, the Community Media Association—the official organization of community media practitioners—has been involved in lobbying the BBC and OfCom. While community radio was officially sanctioned in 2004 with the *Community Radio Order*, little has been achieved with respect to television. For instance, while the 2009 “memorandum of understanding” with the BBC can certainly be read as an effort to carve out spaces of recognition, particularly in acknowledging the importance of community television, it has had minimal regulatory impact (see Community Media Association and BBC, 2009).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The UK has announced the creation of a new local television license and service, although it is uncertain whether any license holder will incorporate participatory media practices (see DCMS, 2011).

This section addressed the challenges of forming supportive publics of citizens, regulators, cable operators, and politicians. This disembodied and abstracted public—one completely divorced from the sanctuary of the community media center—cannot be described as a “weak public” (Fraser, 1992). Rather, it is a hypothetical public, one vital to the survival of community media, but yet to be fully realized.

### **Interface**

Indispensable to both place and space is the role technologies, and more specifically, digital media, play in mediating organizations, relationships, and campaigns. On the one hand, advents in user-generated digital media have allowed dissenters to argue community television is obsolete—a relic of the analog age—now that “anyone” can post video online. On the other hand, digital media has permitted organizations to expand their original purview and venture beyond the confines of cable television to reach broader audiences and engage in new forms of education (Fuentes-Bautista, 2009). Technology represents a dialectic position within community media discourse (see Ali, in press)—a tension certainly present in the statements of respondents. U.S. respondents remained hesitant to abandon television, while a Canadian respondent was mixed, and a British respondent was supportive. This last observation should not come as a surprise, as migration from television to Internet suggests “placelessness” (see Ali, in press) —a mode of dissemination no longer dependent upon infrastructure. This ethos resonates in the organizational structure of Community TV Trust, as it has abandoned reliance on television and embraced a purely online platform. For instance, Haydon observed:

[The] Web, magically and mystically, is the great answer to how do you deliver your local media that you produce. You don't need to reach in your television, you just need to get online. That has become ever easier, even here in the U.K., Web is the answer to getting you started, it costs next to nothing, and anyone can get to it, you can get your neighbour or the man three streets away. (personal communication, 11/3/10)

For Haydon, television has become “almost meaningless,” as practitioners can distribute their productions through online platforms. In contrast, Ian Morrison, founder of lobbying group Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, quoted Northrop Fry to describe his feelings toward online community television, asking, “where is here?” Morrison argues “the Internet works away from here”:

[The Internet] becomes distance free and is volume controlled so that while it can facilitate local communication, it also takes people's eyes and ears and attention away from local. . . . If there were to be a healthy community with democratic participation, by people who are informed and concerned about the things that are going on in their lives, community television would be a part of that. (personal communication, 11/2/10)

Morrison points to the first of two lines of defense against Internet migration. The first is in defense of television—a powerful tool for connecting locally-oriented people (Ali, in press; Fuentes-Bautista, 2009). The second is that of place and practice—a power inherent in the physical space occupied

by community media organizations (King & Mele, 1999).<sup>7</sup> In the first instance, Rocco argues that, as long as commercial networks remain wedded to broadcast and cable distribution, then so should community television (personal communication, 11/8/10). Similarly, Rickard argues that YouTube is itself a mainstream presence, and that its narrowcasting ethos speaks to the individual, rather than the community:

We must recognize that the platform for community media is a direct reflection of the value we place on civic engagement, community participation, and the ideals of a democratic system. These attributes of our communities are the cellular structure of our democratic organism, and are at least as important as the various commercial and economic limbs that underlie most content generated by and for the dominant Market Presence. (personal communication, 11/9/10)

Importantly, Rocco and Rickard do not eschew the necessity of digital media, but do question its omnipotence. Rickard's station, for instance, has just undergone extensive renovation to include digital and HD compatible equipment, and both respondents are interested in broadening where citizens can access community content.

The second line of argumentation stems from the Internet's potential to usurp the physical places currently inhabited by community media organizations. This is what Riedel suggested when arguing that internet-driven capabilities such as File Transfer Protocols, which would allow users to remotely upload content to a community media "server," are harmful as they abstract human interaction from the mode of production (personal communication, 11/3/10). Addressing this pressing issue, Rennie (2007) makes the important distinction between "amateur" and "community" media. While both give participants access to the means of cultural production, the difference lies in the role of the community media organization. As she writes, community media organizations "provide access to production and distribution (as do other user-generated new media) *but also allow for participation in the running of the organization and the development of technologies*" (ibid., p. 31, emphasis added). Community media promote community and publics of citizens through both product (content) and modes of production (practice). To many, the place(s) and relationships in which community media are produced are as important, if not more, than content.

Contrarily, Macgregor observed how digital media have expanded freedom of expression and choice, and suggested that community television must "rise to that technology to survive and adapt" (personal communication, 11/21/10). He points to the need to follow the trends set by youth and is unsure a traditionally television-centered model is the way the community media world is headed. He tempers his call for a dislocated and disembodied space, however, by noting that the community television model will not die, but rather, must expand to become more accessible. For Macgregor, community television cannot hold on to a romanticized past, but rather, must continue to adapt:

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<sup>7</sup> See also Ali (in press) for an ethnographic study of how one American-based community television station negotiates the concepts of place, "placelessness," television and digital media/user-generated content.

I've seen an incredible evolution in terms of technology, in terms of how people receive information, in terms of how people spend their time in their day. They're not glued to their television anymore. . . . So, personally, I think the Internet has become the community channel, big time. But it's so big, so vast, that it has, in a lot of cases, excluded the little guy who just wants to do a show about speaking Yiddish or something. . . . It saddens me that that sort of change has taken place. And yet, it's also exciting. (personal communication 11/21/10)

Conversations about digital media and Internet migration complicate the reification of "place." If user-generated content is everywhere, what becomes of community television? Many have rightly argued that this is not an "either/or" scenario. Instead, digital media should be seen as a complement to, rather than as competition with, existing practices (Fuentes-Bautista, 2009; see also Ali, in press). This is particularly true of what community media advocates tell policymakers. For instance, Alliance for Communications Democracy informed the FCC of the vast amount of online content offered by PEG groups, arguing that PEG centers are "uniquely positioned to help residents to extend content created through PEG facilities using social media and Web-based resources" (Linder & Kenton, 2010, p. 16).

This article has presented three cases for the implementation of digital media within community television practices: Southwark-TV represents a purely online model; Shaw-TV represents a hybrid model; and PEGs represent a television-centered model, although PEG leaders recognize the need to incorporate digital media. All three, however, demonstrate that these organizations realize they must go beyond television production to remain relevant to their communities (Ali, in press; Fuentes-Bautista, 2009).

### Conclusion

In examining the tensions between policy, practice, place, and publics, I have discussed two intersecting visions for community television, both of which are necessary to secure its continuing survival. Not wrongly, a policy perspective focuses on the content of community television—its output—and its ability to contribute to the marketplace of ideas and deliberative democracy. I have critiqued this perspective for being too narrow, as it omits mention of places, infrastructure, and bodies. It fosters a Habermasian public sphere, one where deliberation and conversation are primary, and all else secondary. While this perspective serves to give community television *space* in the mediascape—i.e., channel capacity for community voices, (modest) funding, and recognition—what has been argued throughout this article is that it is equally important to give participants a *place* in the mediascape. That is to say, community television and community media *writ large* create publics both of deliberation and of *participation and practice*. This is accomplished through the primacy of the community media center, through educational classes for skills beyond those of television production (for instance, youth media literacy or basic computer skills), and through becoming a place where citizens can physically gather in space and time. This dynamic engenders the discussion of place, space, and interface. It is understating the problem, however, to believe community media organizations are fully in control of their own destinies—policy is critical in this regard, as is the formation of publics of attention, and visibility. The onus, moreover, does not reside exclusively with policymakers. In contrast, progress has been made to at least recognize the

existence of community television by policymakers. Nevertheless, a more robust definition within regulation and legislation, through the inclusion of place, practice, and embodied publics, will aid in fostering a practice increasingly central to a communicative democracy (see Friedland, 2001; Howley, 2005; Rennie, 2006).

Part of the onus thus falls upon community media organizations, themselves, to continue disseminating their message and building the aforementioned publics of attention and recognition. Such a task lies at the heart of Radcliffe's comment that "discoverability" is a central challenge for community media organizations. This concerns the notion of visibility—how to make the organization visible to the right people and recognizable to publics. Without this, the question must be asked: Does the mere fact that community television exists as an alternative to mainstream media and as a physical place signal a victory for the types of democratic practices described at the onset of this article? Indeed, as hyper-local, non-commercial entities, is the fact that they can, and do, carve a space and place for themselves in a world dominated by mainstream, commercial media, enough? Answering this question is not easy. I suggest, however, that practitioners may answer "yes." Not because they do not want to expand, but rather, because they "continue to fight for their lives" (Bolan, quoted in DeLong, 2010, para. 1). They are aware that mere survival in a hostile environment is not enough. Visibility and the forming of supportive publics beyond the community media center may be a step toward securing a more robust contribution, both to their communities and to the larger project of democracy.

This research has its limitations. With only 10 respondents, I have only begun to discuss the experiences of community television in these countries. Additionally, participant observation and textual analysis should be employed to triangulate findings. Despite these caveats, this research has consequences for both the academic and community media reader. First, it demonstrates the tensions between policy and practice within the discourse and experience of community television. Second, it demonstrates the importance of physical place to community television and offers a strong rebuttal to those who argue that community television is obsolete in an era of digital platforms. Rather, community television's contribution in the mediascape is perhaps even more necessary given our schizophrenic relationship to place and community (see Castells, 2000; Howley, 2010). In an era dominated by commercial media and the distant voices of the national and supranational, community television often remains the lone outlet for community expression. More than giving voice to the voiceless, community media organizations give place to the placeless, through an emphasis on educational classes, media literacy, production, and the bringing together of citizens in time and space.



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