MEDIA COMMUNITY RESEARCH: THE SEARCH FOR THEORETICAL SOUND MODELS

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Abstract. *This article focuses on three forms: public television, public radio and public networks. The illustration, taken from one theoretical point of view, gives the type of model construction that can be achieved. In conclusion, the media community is invited to accept the challenge associated with the general mandate of sociologists to contribute to the theory, in this case by building theoretical sound models for understanding the place of the media community in society.*

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Before proceeding further, it is necessary to provide a certain degree of clarity regarding the community media. The term, admittedly, is very broad. First of all, this applies to a variety of mediated forms of communication: electronic media, such as radio and television, electronic media, such as newspapers and magazines, and initiatives in the field of electronic networks, which cover the characteristics of both traditional print and electronic media. Three of these forms are singled out for consideration: public television, public radio and public networks.

A distinctive feature of public television is that programs are "made by local residents as opposed to professional broadcasters" (Lewis 1976, 61). Community members, often in alliance with the station's professional staff, are responsible for the ideas and development of the final programming. Community members participate in all aspects of the station's activities and exercise control over day-to-day and long-term policy issues. Unlike public access stations, public television stations usually strive to create a coherent and coordinated common programming package that reflects, represents and engages community members.

Public radio has a similar character and has different names depending on the region. In Latin America it is known as popular or educational radio; in Africa it is known as rural or artisanal radio, in some parts of Europe it is known as free or associative radio. In a word, public radio is intended to serve the local population, encourage expression and participation in order to "give a voice to those who have no voice" (Girard 1992,13). Due to significantly lower financial investments and operational costs compared to public television, public radio is widely used in development projects and among support groups.

Many of the above principles and functions can also be found in public networks, often referred to as "public education networks" (PEN), public access networks, civic networks, toll-free networks and digital cities. These networks, according to one definition, are "a locally based, locally managed communication and information system designed to improve the community and enrich life" (Hallman, quoted from Hecht, 1999). Such public networks are developing rapidly in North America and Europe, and public television stations often form alliances with these locally oriented electronic networks.

There are many other terms in vogue: alternative media, civic media, radical media and others (see further: Atton 2002; Downing 2001; Rodriguez 2001). Despite the academic interest, the article will not compare these alternatives or try to develop a vocabulary for small media. For the purposes of this essay, I am mainly interested in electronic forms of public media aimed at a geographically located audience. This means that I am interested in the small-scale media described above, such as public radio and television, as well as locality-oriented electronic networks. I am aware that this focus excludes many public media outlets focused on communities of interest, such as the Nancy Bame (1999) study of serial fans and other initiatives focused on specific target groups, such as gay media. This limitation is a matter of convenience for my purpose, later in this essay, to illustrate a theoretical perspective and a research question.

Some of the general characteristics covering the aforementioned forms of public media deserve mention. Perhaps the most important characteristic is the overall goals of these mass media: to provide news and information relevant to the needs of community members, to involve these members in public discussions and to promote their social and political "empowerment". Ownership and control of public media is often shared by local residents, municipal authorities and public organizations. The content is focused on the local market and is produced. Non-professionals and volunteers participate in the production of this content, content distribution can be carried out through the air, cable television infrastructure or electronic networks such as the Internet. The audience of such mass media is mainly located in a relatively small, well-defined geographic region, although some public networks attract a large and physically dispersed audience. Finally, the financing of these media is essentially non-profit, although the overall budget may include corporate sponsorship, advertising and government subsidies.

This list of characteristics is open for discussion. It is obvious that public media differ in the degree to which they share each of these characteristics. However, it is of central importance that these mass media "from and to" for members of the community use the jargon of the 1970s. These media are also interested in contributing to some form of action or community development - in a word, to contribute to social change.

Media Community Research over the past two and a half decades, many of the above-listed issues have dominated the research agenda of the electronic communities, and a significant part of these studies have been conducted on behalf of government agencies dealing with media policy issues. The main collection of empirical studies for the development of electronic community media in Europe (Jankowski, Pren and Stappers, 1992) consists of materials largely based on such studies. This development of events is not necessarily fatal, but the alliance with political institutions imposes an additional burden on researchers, ensuring that investigations are of a conceptual nature and, ultimately, contribute to a theoretical understanding of the place of public media in society.

Having looked again at the collection of studies in preparation (Jankowski et al. 1992), these chapters based on political research, in general, could not "rise" above the main mandate of providing data that are considered functional for assessing too-often restrictive policy parameters: the degree of use of mass media and communication activities of the station with common goals. This work usually reflects some degree of fidelity to a theoretical structure or generally accepted normative value (for example, by contributing to public discourse, group identity and personal possibilities), but rarely goes beyond the scope of agreement with the presented theory or concept.

The development of the theory, not to mention the contribution to the construction of the model, is limited in the chapters of this collection.

This situation served as an incentive for the preparation of a sequel to this anthology, recently published (Jankowski and Prehn 2002). In this book, special attention is paid to the development of theoretical perspectives that have inspired the empirical study of public media. Participants were asked to clearly substantiate their research in a conceptual framework. As a result, most of the chapters in this volume,

The media community in the information age has a more academic taste than those in its predecessor, The Voice of the People.

It is impossible to imagine the theoretical perspectives in detail, which serve as the basis for each of the 19 chapters in this volume. Using large brushstrokes, the perspectives used are related to two main theoretical areas: those related to democracy and the public sphere, and those related to forms of cultural and ethnic identity. A wide range of concepts take place in these areas: community development and actions, components of the public sphere, issues related to the democratic process and forms of democratic participation, social capital, individual and collective development and cultural expression.

Theoretical model of building and community of mass media The most valuable, from a theoretical point of view, is Hollander's (2002) attempt to construct a model that combines many of the frequently noted factors influencing the nature and extent of citizens' use of public media. This model is based on two traditions within sociology: the German concern for the local public sphere, the offentlichkeit locale, and the American-based formulation of co-society. The combination of these concepts served as the basis for a new term: community communication, referring to the structure of communication within a geographically limited or independent of the community space.

This exercise was combined with a study of a number of empirical studies conducted by Stamm (1985) on public relations created by local newspapers. Stamm was concerned about the relationship between the structure of the community and communication links, and his work led to the creation of a dynamic model involving the change of relations over time. Inspired by this work, Hollander developed a model concerning community characteristics, community landscape, individual characteristics, and community media use. This model, shown in Figure 1, has gone through several versions and, quite recently, functioned as a theoretical basis for the proposed study of community networks (Jankowski, Van Seim and Hollander 2001).

However, there are problems with the model. Firstly, the measurement time is not reflected in the figure, although the stated intention is to write relationships through this measurement. Secondly, the proposed causal relationships may not be dominant at any time; it is unclear from the model when a relationship can be in one direction and when it can function in the opposite direction. Thirdly, it is unclear what contribution each of the clusters of factors makes and whether intermediate variables can work in the model. Finally, there may be partial overlaps between some of the clusters, especially between the media space and the characteristics of the community; neither the model nor the explanatory texts in publications devoted to this model (Hollander 2002; Jankowski, Van Seim and Hollander 2001; Jankowski 2002a) consider this possibility.

Before this initiative acquires the status of a reliable theoretical sound model. Nevertheless, this model illustrates the kind of scientific work that is extremely necessary in the field of public

media research. Similar efforts can and should be accompanied by other theoretical perspectives known in this field.
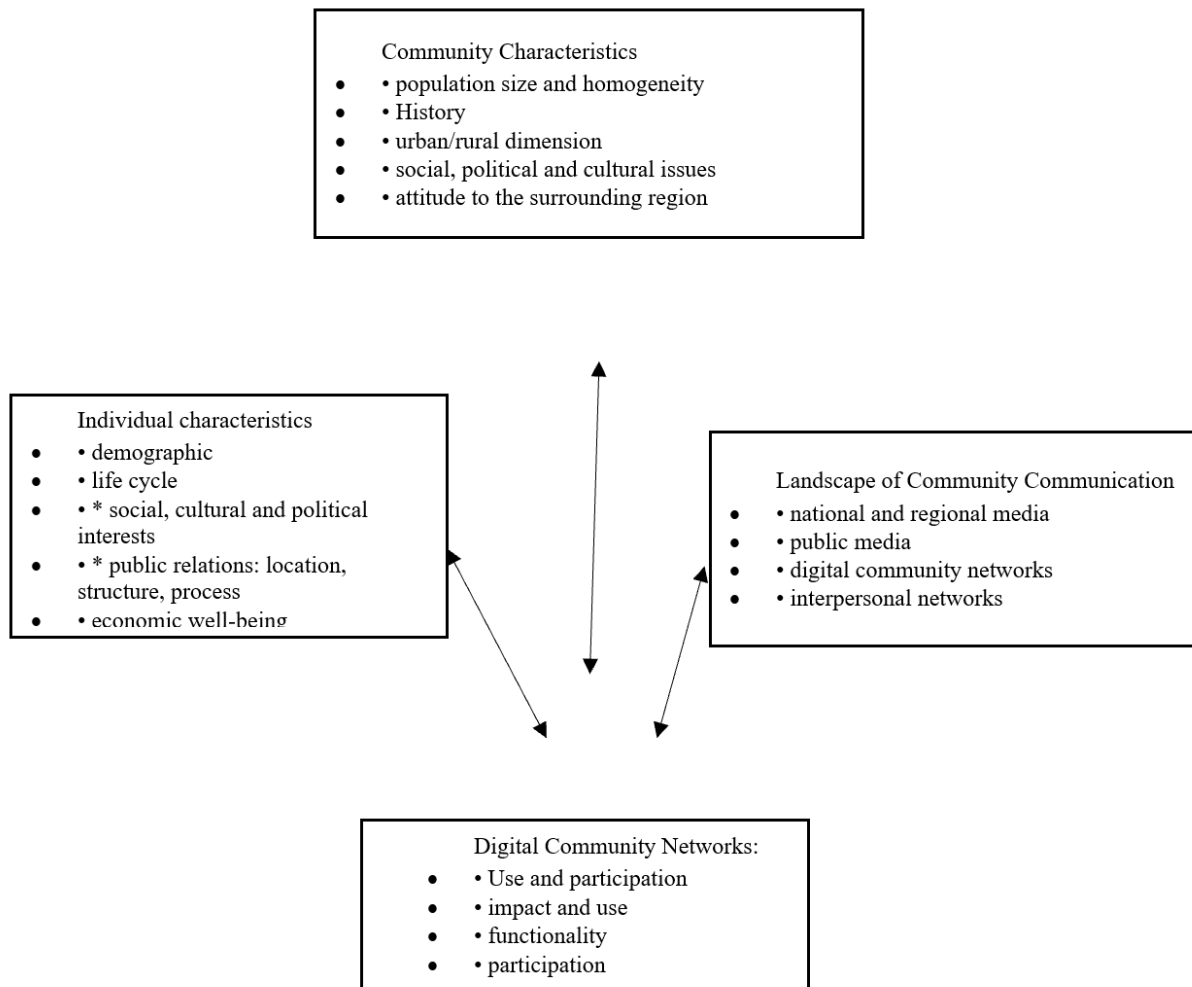
Community Characteristics
- • population size and homogeneity
- • History
- • urban/rural dimension
- • social, political and cultural issues
- • attitude to the surrounding region

Individual characteristics
- • demographic
- • life cycle
- • * social, cultural and political interests
- • * public relations: location, structure, process
- • economic well-being

Landscape of Community Communication
- • national and regional media
- • public media
- • digital community networks
- • interpersonal networks

Digital Community Networks:
- • Use and participation
- • impact and use
- • functionality
- • participation

Figure 1: Components of the communication community and digital community networks (Jankowski 2002a, 44).

For example, work on the contribution of public media to the public or opposing public sphere could also benefit from efforts to build empirical studies that use operational versions of this concept as starting points. Schneider (1996; 1997), for example, has prepared one of the few studies that attempts to do this, using what he considers to be the four main components of the Habermas public sphere concept. Although not everyone can agree with Schneider's choice of the four components or with the operations he developed (for example, Dahlberg 2000; 2001), his research links empirical research with a theoretical concept that is central for the purposes of public media. By the way, Schneider does not reintegrate his empirical results into a model linking components, as Hollander did in another theoretical setting; such model construction remains an important task in this theoretical field.

Such model-building initiatives are strongly needed with other theoretical perspectives known in public media studies. For example, media access is a point of view that is usually applied to public media research, but it is a point of view where little has been achieved in terms of theory building and model building. At best, the scholarship offered a link between access and related concepts such as participation (e.g. Jankowski 1995; Barlow 2002). Although it is certainly commendable that an analysis is being carried out showing the place of access to public media in

political debates, as Rennie did in this thematic issue, I would say that such a contribution cannot replace the theoretical work that is defended by this article. Rather, policy analysis could be strengthened by providing a rationale in a solid theoretical framework aimed at building a model.

The same argument applies to concerns about changes in the media landscape, whether in Denmark, as reported by Jauert and Prehn in this issue, or in Indonesia, as outlined by Gazelles later in these countries. Theoretical reflection and the construction of a model of activity, admittedly, is the focus of attention of many scientists engaged in political research. This situation is another reason to make an effort and transform what, in my opinion, is an undesirable situation for media studies in the community.

On the way to a research program. At the beginning of this essay, it is announced that I will propose a research program related to public media. Elsewhere (Jankowski 2002, 360), that five main themes dominate most of the research conducted in relation to the media of communication: democratic processes, cultural identity, conceptual community and the perspective of actions for communication. A diagram of the general areas in which research is being conducted is also presented; see figure 2 below.

However useful these distinctions may be, they do little to help us determine where the weight of research exists and where there may be gaps in our knowledge. Earlier in this essay, in fact, I claim that the main drawback in media research is insufficient theoretical justification and model construction.

The typology of the topic can be detected. Rather, the problem is to link a comprehensive research question with the perspective and the proposed model.

To illustrate this task, returning to the model of the use of mass media in the community, initiated by Hollander (2002). In developing this model, he collaborated with Colleague Martina van Seim and myself in developing a research project on community networks that were then being built in the Netherlands. In the text describing this project (Jankowski et al. 2001), we explore in detail how the model should have been applied to study two emerging community networks. The central question of the study related to fashion and this particular object of research was later formulated as follows:

To what extent and in what way are aspects of the community structure, individual characteristics and media resource related to the use by local residents of participation in digital community networks? (Yankovsky 2002a, 45)

It is clear that this question applies only to the construction of the model shown in Figure 1, and does not apply to other perspectives or models. Nevertheless, it illustrates a question that can be used in empirical research in order to develop and refine the proposed model. We also develop in the same text the specifics of the research plan - a longitudinal study that includes several methods of data collection in the form of a case study - and the main methodological principles that guide the proposed work - in fact, the merging of interests in promoting social theory with normative concern for supporting social change.

Other media community researchers may choose other principles and different projects. They will undoubtedly create other research questions than the one shown above. However, I hope that all media researchers will take seriously their responsibilities as sociologists to contribute to our collective theoretical understanding of small media. This mandate entails, in my opinion, something more than just a union from a theoretical point of view; it also requires the refinement of concepts and the generation of models related to these concepts. Thus, the articles in the issue

of the journal should be considered as a contribution to this mandate, to this desire for a theoretical understanding of public media.

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