ASPECTS RELATED TO COMMUNITY MEDIA AND ITS TERMINOLOGY

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Abstract

The community media theory has been expanding during the past 15 years, but not without its faults. One of those faults is an inconsistency in using a differentiating terminology. This inconsistent nomenclature often causes greater confusion down the road, especially when dealing with multiple authors. Furthermore, the meaning oftentimes differs from author to author even when using the same word. The point of this paper is to bring clarity to this issue by showcasing the way and the reasoning with which different authors treat different nomenclatures.

Keywords: alternative media, citizens' media, community media, critic media, radical media

1. Introduction to community media

Community media, also called a 'third sector' of media (next to public and commercial media), are a unique part of legitimized media systems in specific countries, which do have the supporting legislature. Unfortunately, the leading authors in community media theory still cannot come to a consensus regarding nomenclature. This causes inconsistencies in naming the various aspects of this media segment. As an example, take a closer look at 'community media' and all the possible synonyms, that have popped up since the inception of the sector - alternative media, critical media, activist media, grassroots media, or citizen media, just to name a few. Some of these names just carry specific characteristics of community media, therefore they are narrowing the meaning of community media, but all of them are often used interchangeably. Community media belong neither into the commercial media segment, whose main goal is to achieve profit, nor are they shared between all citizens evenly, just like public media. Community media *de facto* do not exist in countries such as Slovakia, as they are not included in the Act No. 532/2010 on Radio and Television of Slovakia and the Act No. 308/2000 on Broadcasting and Retransmission, which only allow the existence of a public and commercial sector. The basic premise of

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community media in the context of a global audience set is the fact, that the global audience is not formed exclusively by homogeneous recipients. There are multiple homogenous subsets in the audience itself - which we call communities - which are defined by being connected by a specific trait (e.g. a creed, work segment, similar hobbies, similar health disabilities, etc.). These are conscious criteria, hence the person is a part of the community by his choice, not by some external factor. McQuail defines this audience as bounded, interactive and within a normative regulation [1]. The fragmentation of the mass itself opens opportunities to directly interact with the audience, therefore the medium is not separated from the lives of the audience as is the case for commercial media. Community media are created from the incentive of the community members as a tool of communication between them. It enables sharing of information, one's ideologies, views, opinions, etc. This interdependence of medium and audience is characterised by Kidd with the words *of, by, for* [2]. This leads to the realisation, that community media are media about communities, created by communities and intended for these communities.

2. Terminology

The nomenclature differences in this type of media often originate in the authors' understanding of the third media sector, as well as the regional divides between the authors' home media jurisdictions. One of the reasons is also the historical aspect of the origins of specific names - in the very beginning, the term 'alternative media' was highly preferred over anything else, because there was a high demand for not only a definition of an alternative media stream, but also of alternative ideologies in general. The origins of community media date as far as the late 60s and the early 70s, during a period of a 'contraculture' [2], which went heavily against the mainstream culture, which of course, encompassed the mainstream media as well. Additionally, the whole idea of alternative - or community in this case - media was mainly used in conjunction with print media at the time. But as time went on and this media segment evolved further, new names were created for the purpose of describing this phenomenon, some of which are used to this this day, such as alternative media, community media, grassroots media, citizen media, rhisomatic media, critical media or activist media. This added to the general confusion, as not only did the nomenclature differ from a case to case, but the names also describe different aspects of these media, i.e. the relationship to the society, the origination of the name, etc.

On the other hand, McQuail and Traber stand out in the description of community media, because although they do acknowledge their existence, they decline to actually give community media a specific name. McQuail describes them with the use of the community theorem within the media, which is based upon the relationship of media and audiences, especially in the fields, in which their social identity and area of influence intertwine - i.e. the community itself [1, p. 196-197]. It is worth noting though that McQuail stipulated that this type of media does not have any future potential. The reason was because they build

upon a voluntarist principle, which does not have a global tradition. Obviously, this statement does not hold up in today's world.

Not too different from McQuail, Traber defines these media as a result from an uprising demand of democratization of public communication. He states, that mass media are more autocratic than democratic because they tend to discriminate specific types of content in favour of content which caters to the interest of 'the elites' [3]. To create a space for "peace, normality and harmonious relationships" [3, p. 70], a new kind of journalism, which would redefine news creation as we know it, is needed. Although he was rather reluctant to give the media of the third sector a specific name, he did write an article titled „*Alternative Journalism, Alternative Media*", meaning he was well aware, that some sort of nomenclature indeed existed.Afterwards, he started to differentiate between grassroots and advocacy media, both being subsets of alternative media [4].

2.1. Community, citizens' and participatory media

The term 'community media' is the most widely used name encompassing all the media from the so-called 'third sector''. This stems from the interdependence of community and the media itself, which could not exist without a community to support it, regardless of its content or position. Howley states that this type of media provides the space for autonomy and identity in the "era marked by the unprecedented concentration of media ownership on the local and national levels" [5]. Additionally, Loeser says that the "access to the important and powerful radio spectrum is a basic tenant of a free and open society" [6]. Rennie defines two characteristics of community media - the non-profit clause and the participation of community members in the production process [7]. But regardless of the author the defining properties tend to be the same all over the board. One could even argue that in the case of Slovakia, and the absence of community media in that market, it is not the name that matters, but the fact that there is an outstanding demand for implementing them into the media system. The problem is, many terms have some negative association attached to them e.g. in form of extreme prejudicial views (radical media). On the other hand the term 'community media' is neutral and can describe the most variations of media within the bounds of the defined community media set.

Community media forms are similar to those of the mainstream media, whether public or commercial. Jankowski divides them into community radios, community televisions and community networks [8]. Community Networks are hybrid forms, which use internet for their broadcasting by using audio-visual broadcasting, pictures, texts, etc., making them similar to standard news sites.

This is not the first time that our language has to tackle the problem with high nomenclature variance. For example, the terms 'private media', 'commercial media' or 'licensed media' are all used in the Slovak language to describe the same media type. When we take the context of community media into consideration, we come to a conclusion as Rennie, who states, that although

academic texts tend to use different terms, e.g. 'alternative' or 'radical' media, it is because they 'deal with a specific area within community media rather than the broader public philosophies' [7, p. 17].

The term 'citizens' media' stands as a reference to the freedom of speech - specifically in the community context this means, that every community member is also a citizen of his country and therefore has the right to voice his opinions using whatever channel he desires, as long as he does not violate the rights of another. The term is widely used by Rodriguez, who uses it on the example of alternative media. According to her, the term 'alternative media' is a binary concept, because they are always an alternative to something mainstream, on the other hand, this is not mutually exclusive to other types of media. This is because every citizen has a right of free choice as to if and where to voice his opinion [9]. Despite the fact, that the usage of citizens' media is terminologically sound here, it does not imply the most important property - the entanglement with the community, which they serve. In the context of Rodriguez's definition, the community is not based upon the regional membership, but on a conscious participation, which causes the term 'citizens' media' to be prone to misinterpretation, as they can be misunderstood for regional or local media [10]. The other issue with the usage of citizens' media is the confusion it causes with citizen journalism. Citizen journalism, although using the same resources as community media for content creation - nonprofessional journalists – diverges from the other forms due to the possibility of spontaneous content creation (i.e. in the event that a citizen is a witness to a newsworthy event, he can „report" this event to the media). Furthermore, Ahva, Heikkilä and Kunelius refer to this as UGC – User-Generated Content [11]. The content is then showcased through mass media, or on personal blogs or through other news outlets and sometimes is done for monetary profit, advertising, etc. This is in direct contrast to community media content creators, which produce content, which is interesting or important for the community in question, in a planned manner. And they do it without being financially rewarded in any way.

From a terminological point of view, 'citizens' media' shares many properties with 'participatory media'. Participatory media define one of the base properties of community media, which is the option for community members to actively participate in the production of content. This term is usually used when the community bounds are explicitly known, like in a case of a prison radio, as presented by H. Andersen, which broadcasts content done voluntarily by the inmates, with the goal of having some form of contact with the outside world [12]. The option to participate in content creation is certainly very important with this kind of media, but it is not the only important thing to keep in mind when talking about its philosophy. Rennie argues that in addition to participation, access is the other feature needed for community media to function properly.

Access in this case means providing space for individuals and communities to voice their opinions and in the same time providing a platform, through which the members can access the community-made content [7, p. 3].

Participatory media do not fully encompass the idea of access though, as the name suggests that the content creation is not done by community members exclusively.

2.2. Alternative and critical media

'Alternative media' is the second most popular term to describe the third sector, followed by 'community media' itself. Primarily, it describes a binary concept with mainstream media content and production processes being on the other side of the fence. On the other hand, Kidd defends the usage of the term with the argument being that there simply is no better alternative as of yet. According to her, the word 'alternative' depicts the whole media spectrum which is oppressed or misinterpreted by the mainstream in the most accurate way [2]. Forde, referring to the work of Carpentier, Cammaerts and Carpentier, argues that, there 'is no one-size-fits-all definition' and that 'their work suggests a broadening of the definition of alternative media to include a wide spectrum or a range of media 'generally working to democratize information/communication' [13]. Furthermore Atton stipulates that having a name is insignificant, as the defining factor is the sociocultural context [14], which defines the way regional media systems work.

The issue is that such a terminology does have a pre-included prejudice in the form of the idea, that mainstream media are dubious and misleading in their essence, hence making the existence of a third sector a necessity - in this case the sector is called alternative media. The problem is, that the main goal of alternative media is not the fight for the recipient and harsh critique of the mainstream media, but rather providing additional value in informing the recipient and let him have his free choice of preferred content and form of communication with the media.

Additionally, when we look on what the general consensus on 'alternative' media outlets from our region, we will have a completely different picture of what you would maybe expect after this argumentation - media, which are considered alternative are usually platforms with deliberately manipulated and misleading content, unchecked information, oftentimes denying axiomatic, medical, historical and other facts. Since there is heavy regulation in place to protect the recipient from such an influence in traditional media, most of these 'alternative media' sprawled on the internet, as there are no regulations in place there.

There is another almost interchangeable partner to alternative media - critical media. Fuchs puts them at the background of alternative media, with their divisive property being that "critical media show the suppressed possibilities of existence, antagonisms of reality, and potentials for change. It questions domination, expresses the standpoints of the oppressed and dominated groups and individuals and argues for the advancement of a co-operative society." [15] This terminology is based on a critical societal theorem, but the term itself puts critical media in a one-dimensional lane - their sole goal is to

criticise the mainstream media. In reality, this media type does not only do that though. In addition to sharing anti-systematic and anti-mainstream views, it also is used to voice unpopular opinions not found in mainstream media, as mainstream media do lack the needed space and desire to do that. But if this is the case, we can no longer define this as a general term, but only as a subset of critical media.

2.3. Radical and activist media

Radical media is another widely-used term for community media, often used interchangeably with other terms, or as a stand-alone wholly defining term of the third media sector. Furness even argues, that critical and alternative media are synonymous terms, as the defining properties match each other in both - expressing of opinions, which are too critical, confrontational and/or too political for mass media [16]. On the other hand, Downing argues, that using terms such as community, alternative, or grassroots media is confusing, because these terms tend to hide more than they reveal - they are defined by the things they exclude, i.e. mass media, rather than the things they actually bring together. This is why he suggests that the term 'radical media' fits the bill [17]. The issue with this name is, that in our western cultural context, the word 'radical' has an immense negative vibe to it, which would lead people to believe that the third sector media are only about supporting extremist and abrasive ideologies. Another issue comes up when one tries to look at the big picture - we arrive at the conclusion, that it simply is not possible to brand every community medium as 'radical' in character - defining, for example, fishermen community radios as 'radical' would be unreasonable at best.

Activist media is another term that tackles the exact same problem as radical media. As the name implies, the core of activist media is to start an initiative against a certain opinion, ideology [18], or view, which the media try to influence in a preplanned way. The scope of activist media is rather wide, spanning from humanitarian topics, through politics up to sexual orientation topics. One of the supporters of this terminology is B. Anderson, who does acknowledge that activist media are only a fraction of alternative media, with the main difference being the connection between the activism and the critical thinking education, both on the content and the production level. According to him, this is the only media type, who can successfully oppose the big players in the market [19]. What is noteworthy though, is that Anderson tends to use 'alternative media' in his works, because it is simply more popular. Alternative media also offers an immediate understanding of the topic, even though not every nonmainstream medium is ‚alternative' per se. On the other hand, Waltz states, that alternative and activist media may be two different terms, but they are certainly not mutually exclusive. She understands activist media as the type, which agitates its recipients to actively participate in social change. They represent all political philosophies, from extreme right to extreme left and can

also support mainstream events, such as elections or voluntary charity donations [20].

There are many more terms, like grassroots media or advocacy media, which are defined as two segments of alternative media (Traber), rhisomatic media (Deleuze and Guattari), independent media (Forde), oppositional media (Evans), progressive media, democratic media, or RB media (Tinka) [21].

3. Conclusions

The great divide in the community media terminology is one of the main problems of the segment. Another huge hurdle on the way is a lack of a binding typology. Creating one comes with problems of its own - we have to take a tremendous variety of topics, as well as all the possible relationships with the established media into account. But as we now know, the long evolution of dual systems in democratic countries has led to an almost homogenous harmonisation of their perception. Electronic media in the third sector are just the next logical step in media evolution, which is headed to more democratization of communication through media platforms. They also support individuality and help individuals to stand out of the homogenous recipient mass.

In our specific conditions only time can tell whether there are an outstanding demand and a possibility for implementation of community media into our media system and which terminology should be used in conjunction with the third sector. Until that time comes though, the consensus should settle on using 'community media' as the defining term, because it does not carry any prejudice with it, quite the contrary - it emphasises the focal point of the third sector, which is the work with the community itself.

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