
BASIC PILLARS OF COMMUNITY MEDIA TYPOLOGY

Lucia Škripcová*

*University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Mass Media Communication, Nám. J. Herdu 2,
91701 Trnava, Slovak Republic*

(Received 2 July 2017, revised 25 July 2017)

Abstract

This article tackles the basic traits of an emerging community media typology, the relations between the various types of community media and the importance of creating such a typology. It offers a theoretical basis with an emphasis on the role of diversity within community media and depicts possible future trends within the presented community media types.

Keywords: community, media, diversity, typology

1. Introduction

Even though community media have been legitimately manifesting their various forms over the past years, they are still regarded as a novelty phenomenon by society as a whole. They are based on voluntary participation, non-profit, freedom of speech about any topic and/or form, and lastly on a more flexible horizontal managing structure. Their most important founding pillars are the freedom within each and every part of content creation, and the absence of any outside interference within the narrative about the community/minority in question. Additionally, this narrative is always done by the members of the community and never by an outside workforce. This is also one of the reasons for the unparalleled diversity of community media, which we encounter almost with each part of their existence.

If we consider the basic categorization of mass media, we could divide community media into four basic categories, i.e. print, radio, television and Internet. On the other hand, due to technological advancement in our society, today's categorization model wouldn't work, simply because community media combine these tools and use a joint method of outputting their content. It has become common practice for community radios to broadcast via Internet, especially in countries, which don't allow any form of community (television or radio) broadcasting. The alternative of using Internet for the community media is to pursue a commercial media form, which goes against the very foundations of community media themselves. Content management throughout multiple media

*E-mail: luciaskripcova@gmail.com

sources follows a common model of today's media – community televisions, radios and community print media, better known under the term 'zines', usually manage their content through social networks. This enables them (especially in the case of zines) to stay in touch with their community in an almost real-time setting and also helps with doing calls to action for content creation.

The other part of the equation of diversity is represented by the communities themselves. Whether it is their size, their internal hierarchy or the internal relationships, each change affects the existence of their community media. For example, it would be unwise for smaller communities to invest into expensive television broadcasting, while they could focus on smaller, less time-consuming content creation alternatives. As for the aforementioned relationships, we understand them as a form of social links based on the respective members' interests. This makes up the most influence in defining the identity of said community media. Lewis and Booth call this phenomenon a community of interest [1]. As for rigorously defining communities within the concepts of community creation, it is noteworthy to add that regional or local communes should not be regarded as a community per se. The reason being is that not every person actively participates or is naturally interested in the state of the region or city they live in. In most of the bigger cities, we even perceive these people living within a 'neighbourhood anonymity', where even though people occupy the same space (a street or a block in this case), they do not necessarily naturally seek for the company of other neighbours, or in some cases, they do not even know their neighbours at all. Downing concurs and adds that in this case, the term 'community' has been wrongly associated and leads to arbitrary confusion, as the term references both interest minorities and people living together in a specific area. This makes the term too broad and not rigorous enough, which can affect further work in this field negatively [2].

We can observe multiple local and regional media on an example case of Slovakia, as this is a country, where community media still have not been legislatively anchored. These local and regional media are usually financed by the cities or the higher governing bodies and they usually use editorial systems akin to those of commercial media, i.e. a vertical power hierarchy within the editorial office is present. This is in a direct opposition to community media, which manage their editorial work in a horizontal way. The respect of opinion diversity and the right to express oneself is of a paramount importance in community media. This affects not only the content itself but also creates a diverse managing environment for the media as well.

The last factor which affects the diversity is the focus and the content itself. It is obvious, that the content diversity is so vast, that trying to encompass it rigorously is almost impossible. This diversity stems from the interests of each community member, who although still has the defining mutual trait to other community members, can and will produce content which might not have anything in common with the aforementioned trait. It will always be something of that person's interest though. On the other hand, if we focus on basic

characteristics, it might be possible to define some sort of well-defined, basic set of community media typology.

2. Typology aspects

Freedom is the founding pillar of community media. Whether freedom of speech or freedom of opinion. For the sake of keeping these freedoms, the respective legislations, which allow community media, bend the statutory boundaries, so that community media can not only exist as a media form, but also can profitably finance themselves. This has a secondary effect though – this rule bending erases most ways to work out a typology for them and start grouping them together. Even though community media are not created by any theoretical concepts and they usually go out of their way to evade any known or common conceptions about media, a certain form of typology would not only ease the work with community media and be of value to scientific research and theory, but it would help them as well, especially in countries, whose statutes still do not foresee their existence. Slovakia serves as a good example for such country yet again, as legislatively it stands right before the inception of the whole community media segment. The contemporary status is best described as unfavourable, as although there have been some cases, in which people tried to create community media, these have been too few and far in between themselves. This is mostly because there is no real system in place, which would enable the media creators to cooperate, and also because these creators do not know how to ‘fit’ themselves into a certain category, which would in turn enable them to make their work with their content easier.

A creation of a typology would also help the public to understand the topic of community media, because it has become apparent, that the public does not always have the required skillset to understand the inherent meaning of the terms community and alternative media. The contemporary association with the term ‘alternative’ nowadays is with ‘alternative fact producing media’, which commonly produce and defend half-truths, or just flat-out lies, as opposed to term alternative media, defined by Atton [3]. These two types of perception have nothing in common. For further reading refer to the previous work of the author, which deals with the aspects related to community media terminology in depth [4].

Typology for community media would help statutory bodies as well, as it would help to define the boundaries of freedom for community media. It is foolish to believe, that extremist media, which agitate violence and hate would not immediately jump unto this opportunity to legitimize themselves. On the other hand, a typology should not be used as a tool to exert pressure between the existing community media and to hinder existence of community media in the case in which we could not exactly classify certain media within the typology. A typology should, first and foremost, provide options and a platform for cooperation between the media and the regulatory organs in order to provide sensible moderation of community media [5].

While there are surely multiple authors who typified community media, we chose Mistrík's typology, because it has a fair representation of various community media types. It is as follows:

1. philosophical-ideological;
2. professional;
3. psychological-biological;
4. communities consisting of people with health impairment;
5. communities of socially disadvantaged groups;
6. cultural and art activity based communities;
7. national heritage;
8. geographical, regional and language communities [6].

Besides the last category, which encompasses regional location of communities, all other categories have a sound logical structure. There are inherent problems even in these categories though. For example, Christian media would be categorized under philosophical-ideological media, but that would mean that they would be 'competing' within the same category, as e.g. political media, societal media, or critical media [6]. Their basic reference is the unhappiness with the current state of society or politics. Their existence creates an alternative to the mainstream media, because they often take a different opinion in contrast to the majority. This is also one of the reasons why authors usually evade using the term 'alternative media' and try to use or come up with different terminology for them. On the other hand, Christianity-based media don't have a goal in pressuring societal changes or changes in the mainstream majority, quite the contrary. Christianity is in some cases the majority religion within certain regions. But within the context of mass media, Christianity always was a minor force. Additionally, if we take a look at the proposed categories, there simply is no other category Christian (or religious media for that matter) media fit in, which means that we have to take special cases like this into consideration when creating some form of coherent typology. Christian media are a very special case within the community media landscape, because it is exactly Christian media which have the best prerequisites on starting their respective community media in countries, where the legislative process of legitimizing community media is only beginning or has yet to begin, as the Christian communities within Europe are one of the biggest there are. Surugiu provides enough ground in her work to warrant a contemporary growth of a 'free spiritual marketplace' within religious, or Christian in this case, media [7].

It becomes clear now, that creating a rigorous typology, so that there is a bijective relation between communities and types is impossible. This is because drawing clear boundaries between separate community media is not feasible. This means that even if we set boundaries within a new form of typology, they will have to be observed with time and amended accordingly, when needed.

3. Community

The basic classification of which media can be considered a community one was created by Carpentier, Cammaerts and Bailey in their work *Four approaches to alternative media*. They laid out a methodology on how to categorize definitive traits of media within the commercial and community spectrum. They also define dominant traits present in every community medium. It might seem arbitrary to concern ourselves with this in the context of typology, but the problem is that no community medium is created on a singular basis. While some community media are created as a pastime activity of the community, others might have a important informative character, or have an agitative motivation. The diversity of forms is as wide as the diversity of communities and their media. We can also use *Four approaches* to identify community media, which have to exist within a commercial law form, because the statutes of their country have not yet legalized community media forms. And of course there are extreme examples of community media, which are illegal, also because the country's legislature can't foresee every form of community media possible. These cases, where media with some ties to communities are not working within the confines of typical community media, can only be judged by the groundwork laid down in *Four approaches*. The basic approaches defined by the work are as follows:

1. serving the community,
2. alternative media as an alternative to mainstream media,
3. linking alternative media to civil society,
4. alternative media as rhizome [8].

In the context of typology the most important approach is the first one. The community itself is not just the most important factor making up community media, it also serves other roles, such as managing community media, observing, controlling, creating content and financing. As the community is the main stakeholder for community media, it is imperative that the medium takes it as its most important focus to appease and to work for the community which created it and finances it. We therefore deduce, that if we are able to categorize the community itself, due to the tight bond between the community and the medium, categorizing the community medium will be an inductive, logical step, which will not require further in-depth research. We further add that the community and the media type should be the same. Exceptions exist, but only in very specific mixed forms, where for example there are two zines coexisting in a single magazine printout. The reason behind this case might simply be a cost reduction goal. But even in cases like these, the communities have to have some sort of positive relationship with each other, which indicates that they have some trait in common, putting them together in a single community set.

Defining the goals and focuses of communities should not pose a problem afterwards, as most communities represent themselves via self-identification, i.e. external symbols like the focus or the name of the community medium, a community manifest, or in some cases an obligatory media focus written down

in the broadcasting license. This poses a problem with print zines for obvious reasons.

4. Pillars of typology

If we consider the most common and popular community media within the confines of typology basics from Mistrík [6], we could postulate the following community media types:

1. religious
2. cultural and art,
3. youth,
4. educational and professional,
5. ideological-philosophical,
6. socially disadvantaged and health impaired,
7. activist/social change,
8. others.

The aim of having a set of religious media is pretty obvious - it is needed to provide a wide enough leeway for this segment, so it can encompass all possible religions, not just the major ones. Religious media intersect at times with educational media, as they tend to focus on all parts of human life connected to religion, even education and culture.

Cultural and art community media are one of the most common community media type in the world. Not only do they present culture and art, but most of the time, they create it as well, and they do that in a plethora of forms – music, art painting, graffiti, literary content etc. Many of these media try to invoke edification, but sometimes this borders education, when the authors bring new inputs from outside artists to the community, which furthers the community's views. As a prime example let us name the Slovak zine called *SpodNás*, which carries the title “Culture is the approach to the world” [9].

Youth community media are a specific category which has seen a popularity rise in the past years. Besides the fact, that these media provide content practically tailored to the interests of younger people, they also help with media literacy and competence development due to the participative nature of community media. For further reference, consult the paper *The place of community media within the development of media literacy* [10]. Young people, as the generation on the rise can make an opposition to the classic media work, not only through community content but also through invoked change within their country. That is why youth community media have much in common with educational and activist community media.

Educational and professional media are separated by only a marginal gap from the commercial ones. The biggest defining trait here is the community aspect, and the community-created content. Community media are created and thrive upon community initiative, but this initiative has rarely anything to do with a longing for education or for personal development. This is why it is highly possible, that this type of media will have many mutual traits with others,

most notably the youth media and communities of people with health impairments.

Ideological-philosophical media should focus on new societal movements, political trends and society criticism, according to Mistrík. In some cases these media can be considered borderline agitative.

Both the communities of socially disadvantaged people and the communities of people with health impairments tend to meet each other without the help of community media in community centres. They spend time together and try to help each other out. We also count in other social groups, such as groups of elderly people coming together in gatherings. Community media in this context have an important function of informing and educating their members.

Activist community media are trying to invoke a change in society. They position themselves critically towards the problems of today, which include societal, economic and environmental problems. We can find evidence of activist community existence basically throughout the whole history of humankind. We can also conclude that activist media pose as the best binary opponent to mainstream media, together with ideological-philosophical media.

Due to the vastness of communities in our world, it is impossible to encompass all of them in these 8 types, which is why we postulate the last type. The 'other' community media pose as a set of all the media which do not fit into any other type we have postulated thus far.

5. Conclusions

Freedom and diversity of community media is one of the most important traits and one of the creating factors of this media segment. To try and to define the confines of this freedom via some sort of rigid categorization would invariably lead to curtailing this freedom and could lead to a cessation of research of this field in the long run. Community media will not just stop to evolve freely, and that leaves us with the only option of adapting our understanding of them flexibly with the observation of their adaptation and evolution. This typology should provide a base theoretical concept, which enables us to further our work within this field and which provides us with the opportunity to research a certain factor or segment deeply, rather than just researching them holistically. As is the case with any typology, this one should be considered a constant work-in-progress, as it reflects community media as of today, and it is hard to say, if it will be valid with the coming years of their advancement. It is highly possible that future advancement will not only bring amendment to existing types, but also further additions to them. This paper did not try to categorize community media for all times, but rather only wanted to paint the picture of today's community media trends and it wanted to show future possibilities and possible iterations of future community media, without harkening the diversity of them.

Acknowledgement

The author is the beneficiary of the project FPPV 07-2017 *The introduction to community media typology*, funded by University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava.

References

- [1] P.M. Lewis and J. Booth, *The invisible medium: Public, Commercial and Community Radio*, MacMillan, London, 1989, 90.
- [2] J.D.H. Downing, *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements*, Sage Publications, London, 2001, 39.
- [3] C. Atton, *Alternative Media*, Sage Publications, London, 2002, 9.
- [4] L. Škripcová, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(5)** (2016) 155-162.
- [5] M. Mistrík, *Communication Today*, **5(1)** (2014) 4-9.
- [6] M. Mistrík, *Community Media in the Dual System*, Humanizačné aspekty elektronických médií, Faculty of Mass Media Communication, Trnava, 2014, 90.
- [7] R. Surugiu, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **8(4)** (2012) 205-213.
- [8] N. Carpentier, B. Cammaerts and O. Bailey, *Four approaches to alternative media, in Understanding alternative media*, Mc Graw Hill, Berkshire, 2007, 3-34.
- [9] ***, *Spodnás*, **2(1)** (2017) 1.
- [10] L. Škripcová, *The place of community media within the development of media literacy*, in *Developing Media Literacy in Public Education*, Corvinus University, Budapest, 2016, 110-118.