

Relevant Theory and Research - Sociology

2.1 Civil Society

Civil society refers to a segment of society apart from commerce and government occupied by individuals and groups in public life outside the home, encompassing their cultural, ethical, political, and/or religious interests (Powell 2007, O'Connell 1999, McDonald 1997, Zaleski 2006). Individuals commonly pursue these interests through a variety of voluntary activities in conjunction with community groups, labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and numerous other structures. Individuals and the groups that comprise civil society connect through their public and private networks of social values and institutions. Participation in community media then, can be understood as a component of civil society, and thus it is important to devote some attention to this concept.

Theoretical conceptualizations of civil society can be difficult and ambiguous, as Cohen and Arato (1992, 27) contend “there is no sufficiently complex theory that is available today”. The realm of civil society is a concept said to have originated in the texts of Aristotle as the term “*koinōnía politikē*”, which describes a portion of society, apart from government, consisting of a community of citizens with shared interests (Davis 1996), larger than the privacy of family and the ethos of the workplace. Emmanuel Kant (1792) positioned the concept as the free exercise of reason by individuals in opposition to the monarchies of medieval times, and in the period of the enlightenment, John Locke built upon his colleague Thomas Hobbes' societal "social contract" to delineate civil society from the state in a peaceful coexistence (O'Brien 1999). Upon the industrial revolution and the rise of modernity, the romanticist Wilhelm Freidrick Hegel (1896) introduced his “*bürgerliche gesellschaft*” concept of a free civilian society, which effectively launched wide debates about the nature and role of civil society in the modern European nation-state. Among the most important theoretical debates spawned by Hegel centers around the tension between culture and politics as primary and legitimate roles for civil society. Following Hegel in the 19th century, the romanticist Alexis de Tocqueville emphasized the primacy of culture (Maker 1994), whereas in the 20th century, Antonio Gramsci (1971, 477) took a strong position on the political aspect of civil society as “the site of hegemonic struggle, resistance to repressive regimes and corporate power, and a facility for social transformation”. This duality of purpose between culture and politics forms a foundation for further discussions about the role of civil society in today's post-modern democracies, and the communities within.

Many current scholars focus on the role of civil society in the reproduction of culture and development of communities (Putnam et al 1994, Perlas 2013, Kaufman and Dilla-Alfonso

1997). Civil society for these theorists is bound together by nature and social connections that often take the form of cultural representations, transmitting values and behaviors among participant individuals and groups. Culture as a concept in this context can take many forms, reflected in the various participants and organizations that comprise civil society. Agnes Heller (2001, 141) writes: "Civil society consists thus of a mosaic of identities and non-identities, of a mosaic of groups of cultural memory formation". Beyond the representation of identities, culture is often rooted in the interests of citizens and delivered by components of civil society. For example, Bruce Sievers (2009) argues that not-for-profit arts groups situated in civil society "advance pluralism, promote voluntary action, accommodate diversity, and champion individual visions of the public good".

The primary role of civil society to other scholars is to counter the political power and dominance of elites in government and commerce (Godwin 1971, Barber 1984, Mueller et al 2007, Chomsky 1996). Dominant themes in this view include the marginalization of civil society in the political sphere, and the exclusion of civil society from the decision-making process. In turn, a politically active civil society seeks proportional representation in politics that restores citizens' legitimate role in decision-making, and a transfer of power from governments and commercial interests. Ramirez (2007, 38) argues that these demands require "the initiatives of grassroots organizations, of local popular movements that endeavour to counteract extreme forms of social exclusion and open up new spaces for democratic participation". Extreme forms of repression can often result in radical forms of civil society taking aggressive actions in pursuit of their ideological agendas. These radical forms seek to alter social structures and change value systems imposed by perceived political hegemony, using whatever tactics necessary to effect results (Markowitz 2003). Adrian Little (2002, 103) also cites economic factors as an important basis for radical civil society activity: "where radical democrats have tended to focus on a differentiated space for political engagement...we should do the same for economic and non-economic activities and, in so doing, construct an alternative political economy to the hegemony of market discourses". An ideological civil society however, does not exist solely in tension with the state and/or commercial interests and can actually strengthen citizens' respect for these societal institutions through its watchdog role, promoting active citizenship within a cooperative political environment (Diamond 2004).

Whether representing culture or political ideology, active citizenship and democratic participation are basic requirements of all functioning democracies. The construction of civil society, comprised of individuals, groups and communities, is also an important frame through which to examine the concept. The integration of the individual with civil society was initially portrayed in Husserl's "life world", made up of systems which grow out of relationships among individuals (1970, 108). The concept of life world was adapted by Jürgen Habermas to

emphasize the social environment comprised of competencies and practices. In his theory of communicative action, Habermas (1987) positioned civil society as a central component of his non-economic public sphere where citizens could freely assemble, establish connections among communities, and have their voices heard. He states: "In communicative action participants are not primarily oriented to their own success; they pursue their goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions" (118). Within civil society, Habermas (ibid, 86) identifies avenues for development called "possibility spaces" that provide the fertile soil for development and advancement of the actors' utility. Here he seems to integrate the micro of the individual with the macro of the societal structured norm, to find a balance that can be seen in the social structures and processes that define civil society.

Scholars such as Bourdieu (1984), Giddens (1998) and Carey (1989) identified the role of mass communication in the reproduction of culture within civil society as a functioning component of democratic pluralism. Charles Husband (1998, 136) writes that media is "a core element in civil society and a fundamental prerequisite for the promotion of civic trust in multi-ethnic societies". Mainstream media in the form of commercial and public service broadcasting is a primary driver of cultural reproduction, but when individuals and groups are misrepresented or denied access, they can look to alternative media forms situated in civil society for the representation and transmission of their culture. Kevin Howley (2010, 5) writes: "through the production and dissemination of media texts that assert and affirm cultural identities, community media make visible cultural differences in discursive as well as social space".

Communities of identity, such as ethnic minorities and marginalized groups, comprise an important segment of civil society, and in turn a significant subset of community broadcasting participants. Positive representations of their culture facilitated by community broadcasting can lead to social inclusion and opportunities for positive participation in society for themselves and their communities (Perkins, 2010). The Alliance des Radios Communautaires du Canada (ARC) (2015) says about community radio "Its airwaves reflect the cultural reality: songs, music, writing of the French-speaking population it serves. Community radio stations are the best standard-bearers of our culture". In this context of participatory democracy, community broadcasting can be seen to reconnect local populations with the civic and cultural life of their communities (Howley 2000).

When examining broadcast mass media for political discourse in democratic societies, scholars commonly focus primarily on public service and commercial broadcasters (Zaller 1999). While civil society is regularly seen as included in this discourse, other scholars argue that civil society is actually misrepresented and often marginalized by these forums (McChesney and Nichols

2002, Coyer et al 2007). In addition, mainstream media is often seen as unduly influenced by commercial and political interests; compromising their legitimacy as a true pluralistic forum (Stetka 2012b). Civil society-based individuals, groups and organizations then turn to alternative media forms to provide a voice in democratic discourse, and as a counterbalance to the dominant media power of government and commercial elites. Social, environmental, economic and political justice for all citizens are among the many political issues addressed by alternative media (Atton 2002). As a subset of alternative media, transmission of political representations is a common component of community broadcasting, where members of civil society promote their agendas and advocate for various social movements.

This political orientation of community broadcasting is commonly combined with cultural pursuits to form a "mixed model" which is ubiquitous throughout the world. A more strident political version of this model can often be found where ideological opposition to government is more prevalent, and participants' basis for civil society takes a more oppositional political form. That dynamic is reflected in community broadcasters with a strong ideological approach, such as Radio Vallekas (2015) in Madrid, founded on a commitment to: "Garantizar el ejercicio directo del derecho a la comunicación a toda la ciudadanía." ("Guarantee the right to communicate for all citizens"). The extreme version of politically-oriented community broadcasting arose from this oppositional model as part of the radical media movement. The scholar John Downing (2001, v) describes radical media as: "generally small-scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, and perspectives". Radical media in the community broadcasting context transmits political representations through radio and television programs produced locally by participants, and/or distributed internationally in conjunction with transnational networks for journalism and political activism.

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2.2 The Public Sphere

In the middle of the 20th century, new technologies such as radio and film were gaining mass audiences, extending the ubiquitous reach of newspapers, to form what Horkheimer and Adorno (1992) named the “culture industries”. They theorized that the rise of large cultural industry players had created a structured, supply-driven system that: “integrates its consumers from above” and was negating the opportunities for individuals and small groups of producers to comprise “a more diverse and pluralistic platform for societal understanding” (Adorno 1991, 99). The phenomenon of “media” evolved to gain acceptance in the collective consciousness of western societies, but also retained the components of social and cultural activities (Briggs and Burke 2009). Horkheimer and Adorno also recommended that sociology needed to take a deeper look at how individuals and structures interact, and that researching the development of public policy should include not just an examination of the actors' behavior, but also an exploration of the value systems upon which the actions were based. Jürgen Habermas was a student and protege of Horkheimer and Adorno at the Frankfurt School. He published his 1961 habilitation thesis *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, a landmark work that explores themes of democracy, social developments, civil society and the role of media. It also generated numerous critiques and further discussions on these subjects that still resonate today and form a theoretical foundation for this research project.

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere argues that a participatory bourgeois public sphere of real discourse among equals, was eventually transformed into a site of spectator politics manipulated by elites who took control of the medium (Habermas 1989, 159). For Habermas, the public sphere initially merged the private concerns of literate individuals regarding family and social integration with the larger public concerns of society. These concerns were presented in spaces reserved for open discourse among citizens intended to identify and prioritize interests for the common good. Individuals could inform and influence public opinion, even if it was in opposition to the current political status quo. Habermas stated: "The public sphere as a functional element in the political realm was given the normative status of an organ for the self-articulation of civil society with a state authority corresponding to its needs" (74).

Populating this public sphere were the citizens who, through their participation, seek communication, representation, and association. They participate as individuals initially, but also constituting groups that, aggregating around shared issues and/or interests, become “publics” (Newman and Clarke 2009). Enabled by the democratic revolutions of the late 18th century, participation in these public meetings became protected by law, representing early examples of free speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press (Antonio and Keller

1992). These protections facilitated the role of the public sphere as a secure place for individuals and groups to discuss issues of common interest and organize against what they viewed as the sources of social and political oppression.

According to Habermas, the degradation of the public sphere began in the late 19th century concurrent with the societal transition to a system marked by merging economic and political forces, the decline of the individual, and the manipulation of the culture industries. In this new environment, public opinion became the province of newspapers with large circulations controlled by powerful corporations seeking to direct the masses away from participatory discourse, and towards a passive consumption of information, opinion and culture. In this new 20th century dynamic of mass media as the public sphere, citizens become mere spectators, reverting from participants in discursive activity into commodities of a consumption society, reminiscent of their original feudal status in the Middle Ages. He also noted the problem was exacerbated with the development of the newly powerful broadcast media:

"With the arrival of new media [radio and television] the form of communication as such has changed; they have had an impact, therefore, more penetrating (in the strict sense of the word) than was ever possible for the press...They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under tutelage, which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree" (Habermas 1989, 170).

Despite his somewhat dire view of the state of post-modern society and the re-feudalization of its public sphere, Habermas did not end the volume in a defeatist manner. He instead responded by postulating on some tentative solutions to the revitalization of the degraded public sphere. Early in his text, he described the evolution of the public sphere and participatory democracy as existing first in the exchange of texts and discussions of culture, then later including political content, distributed to the public via pamphlets and newsletters. He wrote: "The public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters; through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society" (Habermas 1989, 31). Proposing a solution to the degradation of the public sphere, he suggests a return to that original form, ostensibly after the reform of current mass media structures and environments. He hoped it would enable true discourse in a "critical process of public communication through the very organizations that mediatize it" and foster "a critical publicity brought to life within intraorganizational public spheres" (232).

Because of its iconic stature, Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has come under considerable scrutiny by media scholars. Critics argue that the theory has flaws, chiefly concerning the questions of how his idea can be applied universally in democratic societies (Burnett and Jaeger 2008). They contend, for example, that even the idealized version of the public sphere described by Habermas excludes large portions of society, such as women and marginalized groups (Fraser 1992). Others argue that he mistakenly limits public discourse to a single sphere when in fact many spheres (and counter publics) of discourse can be identified (Thompson 1995, Hauser 1999). Michael Edwards (2004) asserts that public spheres are present at different levels in most societies, varying according to societal and political influences. He says "a single, unified public sphere would be impossible at any significant scale" (57). Habermas himself questioned the overarching primacy of the concept, suggesting a more fragmented form for discussions of social cultural and political representations not effectively propagated in society by the mainstream media, conceding that he presents a "stylized picture of the liberal elements of the bourgeois public sphere" (1992, xix).

Another important societal dynamic that critics contend Habermas' original work generally ignores is the division of class, and the resulting divisions in spaces for discussion represented by alternative public spheres (Garnham 1986). Habermas' original conceptualization of the bourgeois public sphere afforded access to citizens as equal parties. However, he acknowledged in his preface the existence of an alternative sphere - the plebian public sphere - that arose as a counter public to the literary public sphere in the late 19th century period of the French revolution. While holding similar philosophies of access and participation as their literary contemporaries, the plebian public sphere was the product of an underclass of workers and peasants. Habermas wrote in his later critique that "from the beginning a dominant bourgeois public collides with a plebeian one" (1992, 430), and that the original work "underestimated the significance of oppositional and non-bourgeois public spheres".

That class division is further exemplified by the concept of the "proletariat public sphere". Following the 19th century transformation of Europe into a more consumer-centric society, the upward mobility of participants from business and government created a new more exclusive bourgeois class. These new more powerful individuals then proceeded to co-opt the phenomenon for their commercial and political interests. That led to the development in the 20th century industrial age of another alternative counter public, labeled in the Marxist context as the "proletariat public sphere" (Knodler-Bunte 1975). This form arose among groups of workers, anarchists and Marxists in the political spectrum, and progressed to be a formidable site for discourse counter to the dominant narrative of wealthy oligarchs and the corporations they controlled. Scholars have identified a similar dynamic in the formation of alternative public spheres by other societal groups seeking sites for discourse and inclusion. Nancy Fraser (1992,

123) argues that minority groups: "have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics or subaltern counterpublics engaging in parallel discursive arenas in order to invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs". However, this dynamic has created publics that are: "differentially empowered or segmented" leading to: "the weak character of some public spheres in late capitalist societies that denudes public opinion of practical force" (ibid, 137).

Alternative media often provide the frameworks for citizens' participation in a public sphere of democratic processes, not just as a receiver of media outputs, but through the production and delivery of their own opinions (Langlois and DuBois 2005). In alternative media, citizens can actualize their political power and protect themselves from dominant powerful political forces by mitigating the inherent imbalance of societal power relations (Held 1996). The critical theorist Foucault (1980) recognized the significance of discursive activities in developing and producing ideas in a political sphere where power could be generated in a multidirectional fashion, countering the hegemonic stature and top-down structure of mainstream media. Indeed, this meaning also applies to media organizations and their philosophy of external interrelation in the democratic media and political environments, as this interrelatedness contributes to the dialogue necessary for an open and functional democracy (Dahl 2001). The interactive approach to political action is also noted by Sandoval and Fuchs (2009, 4), who assert "rooted in social political and historical contexts, the interrelations between individual media actors and media structures constitute the societal impacts of the media system".

The concept of media power is also illustrated in the debate over media ownership. When communities are mere users, but not owners of the platform, they have limited control over the ultimate role the medium plays in society. For many alternative media advocates, this system is merely an endorsement of Habermas' contention that the public sphere, while initially providing a real opportunity for citizens' participation, is subsequently co-opted by the acquisition and concentration of ownership by power elites. In addition, negative stereotypical misrepresentations by dominant mainstream media can be especially damaging to many marginalized segments of society, causing deep feelings of resentment towards otherwise recognized and respected societal institutions. According to the American civil rights activist Malcolm X (1963) "The media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, because they control the minds of the masses".

The function of community broadcasting as an independent site for political engagement and action is an important one for the organizational development behind ideology. These alternative broadcasters can be seen as "discursive spaces", according to the political scientist

Susan Herbst (1994, 4). She writes: "Within marginal publics, community building is critical. Political groups create parallel public spaces where they develop political community and mobilize political resources". Both internal and external development of communication and collaboration in the organizational context of community broadcasting are seen as effective platforms to build media power. Indeed, the media power of community broadcasting is generated by individuals and communities with strong ideological agendas constructing and elaborating narratives in a genuine public sphere of democratic discourse (Price 2007).

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2.3 Community

Understanding the nature of communities and their corresponding media structures is an important subject for scholars who explore the concepts of access, participation, identity, and community development. Early theoretical examination of the term 'community' is most associated with Ferdinand Tönnies (1887), the German sociologist who authored the iconic text *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, in which he compared the meaning of community in the description of a small village 'Gemeinschaft', versus a worldwide organizational network or 'Gesellschaft'. The Chicago School of sociologists in the 20th century is generally credited with initially investigating the phenomenon of community in the context of urban studies. Louis Wirth (1964) identified communities' contributions to culture and inclusiveness in his book *On Cities and Social Life*, and later William Foote Whyte (1993) explored the concept in his book *Street Corner Society*, describing the social structure of an Italian slum. Other sociologists to examine the concept include (Williams 1973, Putnam 2000, and Bartle 2003), while other scholars seek to explain the subject through various frames including organizational communication (MacMillan and Chavis 1986), community development (McKnight 1989 and Bhattacharyya 2004), and mass media (Lewis 1993, Carpentier et al 2003, Howley 2005).

The idea of community as an ambiguous and multi-faceted concept presents a challenge in identifying and defining the term clearly (Cohen 1985). Morris and Morten echo Tönnies when they compare community to the larger frame of society, which is "a colder, unattached and more fragmented way of living devoid of cooperation and social cohesion" (1998:23). The phenomenon of community is often described as a subset of society defined by geography, identity, interest, social class, economic status, and/or by completely external forces and events. Indeed, community is not necessarily a static or easily identifiable entity, but more of an aggregation of its component parts (Gordon 2009). The term "knowable communities" was coined by Raymond Williams (1973,163) in his work discussing the development of more complex societies of modernity, where he described community as a collection of connections and relationships that further define social divisions and identities.

Those connections Williams refers to are described by sociologists when explaining the elements and patterns of social interaction and social networks. Social interaction requires a process and nodes of connections, described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as the rhizomatic effect that forms "connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (7). The term 'social network' is a theoretical construct used to describe relationships among individuals, groups, and communities in relatively small scale adaptations, as opposed to large-scale applications such as

online communities or even entire societies. Actor-network theory is used by Bruno LaTour (2005) and his colleagues to explore how rhizomes that form communities grow through activities leveraging both material and semiotic networks to create meaning. Building upon the works of Talcott Parsons (2007) and Peter Blau (1960), Charles Tilly (1973) described communities as aggregations of social networks formed around themes such as culture and politics. Intentionally-built communities access networks to assemble members with shared interests, identities or concerns including social, environmental, economic and political issues. These practices and dynamics are important for understanding the importance of community development in the process of communicative action (Markova 1997).

Location is a frame by which communities are often identified. Originating in anthropological studies, a community of location typically requires physical boundaries to delineate the community identity, for example a settlement, village, or city. Milioni (2009) describes community as “social integration defined by geographical proximity” (411). Communities of location are readily identified and comprehended by typical citizens, who can physically seek out cooperation and collaboration with their neighbors without extensive need for external tools. These spatial situations are fertile environments for social interaction, and the subsequent construction of multiple social groupings as communities through cooperative efforts develop a synergy and the resulting social capital for their common good. This can be seen in Oldenburg's (1989,16) "third place" that is "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realm of home and work”.

Cohen (1985) suggests that culture, in addition to location, forms the basis and boundaries for many communities, noting that residents establish their membership in a community through self-identification. Compared to location, intricate relationships of interest or identity are more difficult to recognize across the barriers and obstructions of modern day society (Williams 1973). This constructivist approach, relating social representations to community building, is grounded in social practices and group dynamics. Hernando Rojas writes in his examination of community engagement "Communication mediates the relationship between community integration and civic participation...in an intervening process between structural location and belonging" (4). Jankowski (2002) identifies communities of interest: “whereby members share some cultural, social or political interests independent of geographical proximity” (6).

Intentional communities are also a subject of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (1995), in which he emphasizes the importance of communities as represented in traditional civic, social and fraternal organizations. He argues that participation in community-based organizations and activities can facilitate building of social capital through interactions both among neighbors and

friends ("bonding capital"), as well as other citizens outside an actor's immediate sphere ("bridging capital"). However, just as networks can connect and construct communities, the failure of connections and networks can inhibit the establishment and sustainability of communities, and contribute to the social disconnection that many communities experience in the context of modern society. In many cases, individuals encounter challenges in developing relationships into stronger community groups, and entire community groups then struggle for networking success as they seek to connect in this complex environment.

Putnam describes the decline of physical intentional communities in the 1970s United States caused in part by the proliferation of highly-centralized mass media that reduce local interactions and discourse, noting that "Watching commercial entertainment TV is the only leisure activity where doing more of it is associated with lower social capital" (Putnam 2015). In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), and in the Harvard University Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement, Putnam and his colleagues explore potential remedies for the downward spiral of civic engagement, suggesting that more local interaction is key: "We need to look at front porches as crime fighting tools, treat picnics as public health efforts and see choral groups as occasions of democracy" (Feldstein 2000).

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