

# Community Broadcasting: Publics, Participants and Policies

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## 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 groups. 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 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 2000, Coyer et al 2007). In addition, mainstream media is often seen as compromised by commercial and political interests compromising their legitimacy as a true pluralistic forum, for example in the post-authoritarian states of Central/Eastern Europe (Stetka 2012b, Doliwa and Rankovic 2014). 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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