**Fragility and Empowerment: Community Television in the Digital Era**

Abstract

The advent of new television technologies has significantly restructured the context within which community television producers operate. The advent of digital technologies has undercut ‘spectrum scarcity’ arguments for limiting access to distribution platforms. Digitisation has opened up new paths to reach audiences. It has also, however, seen a decline in some of the regulatory structures that provided some protection to non-commercial providers in previous eras of spectrum scarcity. And the rise of the prosumer has, in its focus on production by individuals, weakened some of the underpinnings (economic and ideological) for community-based production, with consequent challenges for the sustainability of these (often precarious) projects. In this article, we tease out the implications of digitisation for community television operators, exploring the state of the sector in the Global North, and compare ‘traditional’ community tv channels, with ‘newer’ channels that have emerged in the digital context in the last two decades. Our study explores the opportunities and challenges facing the sector following the transition to digital models.

Keywords: community television, participation, public access, community development

**Introduction**

The advent of new television technologies, as Amanda Lotz notes, “allows new audience behaviors and new norms in making television.” It has also significantly restructured the context within which community television producers operate. As Ellie Rennie noted in her 2006 exploration of community media, ‘spectrum scarcity’ was frequently deployed in the pre-digital era as a rationale for excluding or marginalising community media. The advent of digital technologies undercuts such arguments, and Rennie posited that “community media may therefore be better accommodated in the new media environment” (5). The advent of new platforms and the weakening of traditional gatekeeping institutions has indeed offered new opportunities for this sector, but those opportunities are – as Zeynep Tufekci puts it in exploring the social movements of the Arab Spring that make use of some of these same affordances – “a story of intertwined fragility and empowerment”. Digitisation has opened up new paths to reach audiences, including both increased channel availability (on cable and satellite networks) and also non-linear internet-based providers such as YouTube. It has also, however, seen a decline in some of the regulatory structures that provided some protection to non-commercial providers in previous eras of spectrum scarcity. And the rise of the prosumer has, in its focus on production by individuals, weakened some of the underpinnings (economic and ideological) for community-based production, with consequent challenges for the sustainability of these (often precarious) projects (Ó Baoill and Scifo, 2019).

In this article, we will tease out the implications of digitisation for community television operators, exploring the state of the sector in the Global North through the use of a number of case studies, and compare ‘traditional’ community tv channels with a history of aerial and cable broadcasting spanning with their origins in the 1970s and 1980s, with ‘newer’ channels that have emerged in the digital context in the last two decades. Our case studies are focused in the countries Hallin and Mancini have identified as embodying the ‘liberal’ or ‘North Atlantic’ model, which also broadly approximate a primarily anglophone setting. A 2012 review of community television across the US, Canada, and the UK noted the experience of the sector as “both a ‘living organism,’ and a site of contestation” (Ali, 1119), and argued that public policies “fail to incorporate the salient aspects of place and the ‘experience of media production,’ favouring instead the end result - the product, the program, the content” (Ali, 1127). Our study builds on such insights to explore the opportunities and challenges facing the sector following the transition to digital models.

**Background**

Television, note Dowling et al in their classic 1969 critique of Irish public service television, is “in the mind of the technologist, the businessman and the politician, too dangerous a set of instruments to be left in the hands of the technically non-expert” (241). They were concerned by what we might describe, in Habermasian terms, as the colonisation of communication spaces - the manner in which expert-dominated, rule-based, systems controlled tools of communication, to the exclusion of a range of experiences and voices. Community-based media projects constitute a range of solutions to this perceived problem.

Long-time community media activist Jack Byrne suggests that the term ‘community’ can be understood as operating on three complementary levels: descriptive; value; active. That is, ‘community’ refers to a particular community, to a certain ethical approach to human interaction (e.g. “solidarity, participation, and non-discrimination” (37)), and is linked to notions of community empowerment, the belief that community media can and should afford “people the power to inform themselves and to organise for agreed collective actions” (37). The impulse to organise spaces for learning and discussion, as part of broadly political emancipatory projects, fits within a historical arc that Williams has termed the ‘long revolution’ and in relation to which E.P. Thompson has noted the long history of a number of ‘reading publics’ “differentiated [among other factors] in the relation between the writer and the audience” (Thompson, 178) - a differentiation we can see repeated in the approach to reconceptualising the producer/audience distinction in the community media sector.

If we can trace a long varied history of community and activist media, it is also true that these outlets are “typically small-scale, genderally underfunded” (Downing, xi) and frequently opportunistic in their use of communication technologies, regulatory affordances, and forms (Ó Baoill, 2014). Downing identifies two broad tendencies in the sector, which different projects can emphasise to different degrees: to “express opposition” from below; and to ‘build support, solidarity, and networking laterally” (xi). Scholars and activists have differed in the characteristics and factors they have foregrounded and advocated for, with a range of nomenclatures that reflect this. Clemencia Rodriquez, with her concept of citizens’ media, draws on Mouffe to argue for projects that contribute to group identity and organising among minority populations. Many of the projects Rodriguez identifies place a significant emphasis on participation as part of fostering an active citizenry. Sandoval and Fuchs, on the other hand, have argued for the primacy of effective mobilisation - which relies on organisation and resources - as alternative media “need to gain public attention if they want to be successful in raising awareness and mobilizing social struggle”. What the various models have in common is an understanding of the social context within which (and for which) media is produced.

As noted above, activist media projects are frequently opportunistic in their approach to media technologies, and we can see some of this in the history of community television. Deirdre Boyle suggests that it was “the arrival of lightweight, affordable consumer video equipment” that made possible the emergence of what she terms ‘guerrilla television’ from the mid-1960s onward, as part of the broader alternative and underground media sectors (xiii). The development of cable access systems - which drastically expanded the number of channels that could be offered in a particular geographic area - was another significant enabling technology. As video technologies became even more accessible and affordable in the 1980s, however, the dominant narrative, in the United States and often elsewhere, is one of co-option and diffusion, as simultaneously video recording was reframed and marketed as “a medium for nostalgia, sentiment, and private memories, but not for public discourse” (Boyle, 204-5), while the features of guerilla television (of the 1960s and 1970s) were appropriated, in various forms, by professional producers (Boyle, 205). It is also, of course, true that television has significant barriers to entry (in terms of economics, but also aesthetics/technical skill) that we don’t see in other platforms commonly leveraged for community/activist projects, which poses challenges for sustainability, and reinforces the need for internal structures that foster engagement, training, and collaboration, if broad community engagement is a goal. Community and activist media projects are often, as Downing notes, temporary or short-lived (xi), and Howley has noted that in the case of community television, many of the ‘video underground’ projects Boyle explores were short-lived, though other, more community-oriented collectives survived (Howley, 136-7).

The affordances offered by new technologies - and the emergence of new forms of community media to leverage such affordances - can be seen again later, as the internet came to prominence. As Carpentier notes, “community media organisations migrated to the internet, using a mélange of technologies, or simply started as online-only community media organisations, while still remaining community media organisations” (Carpentier, 2019). We will see later how this has shaped the contemporary experience of community television, in all its diversity.

**Origins**

**USA**

Community video in the United States spans a number of philosophies and approaches. As Howley notes, “the community television movement draws upon a variety of traditions, including social justice and media reform movements, documentary production, avant-garde aesthetics, indigenous cultural traditions, as well as the goals and objectives of participatory and development communication” (136).

While early producers used a variety of approaches to reach audiences - including public and private viewings, and sometimes even direct mailing to targeted recipients - the 1969 FCC ruling “that CATV [Cable Access Television] systems with 3,500 or more subscribers had to provide a certain amount of locally originated programming” provided a boost in actually reaching (potential) viewers (Boyle, 97). CATV systems had originated in the 1950s as a means to bring television reception to remote rural areas, where broadcast signals could not easily be received. Erecting tall, well-placed, antennae to receive signals, the CATV systems then relayed the signals to local subscribers (Boyle, 96). The function of CATV providers changed from re-distribution to origination, thanks to a mixture of new technologies, the FCC mandate, and an “image as a local provider of services to discrete communities” (Stein, 301). The FCC mandate provided an early advantage for rural community producers, later extended to urban settings when the FCC lifted the ban on secondary cable provision. By 1971, public access channels had been established in New York (Castellanos et al, 158).

Throughout the 1970s, the history of community providers was linked to that of the emerging public television sector, though there were concerns over the reticence of public stations to contract with independent producers. As a result of the efforts of media activists and independent producers, the Carter presidential administration supported legislation that became the 1978 Public Telecommunications Finance Act, which directed the CPB (which administers federal funding for the public broadcasting sector) to “earmark ‘a significant amount’ for producers working outside public broadcasting’s established institutions” (Ledbetter, 162). Over time, however, the public sector came to rely more on professional content providers - including imported content from outlets like the BBC - to the exclusion of amateur and community providers. This content was less likely to raise concerns among politicians, or the increasingly influential commercial sponsors - and as Ledbetter notes, “programs that have already run their course on British television are discounted accordingly” (147), an important consideration for the perennially underfunded PBS system.

The same time period had also seen a range of regulatory approaches from the FCC, first recommending in 1969 that cable operators should “set up public access channels in order to provide a platform for members of the community to share their message and to offer spaces for communication that were not controlled by the cable operator” (Molstad, 2-3), later mandating such channels on many systems (in a 1972 report, though somewhat watered down in 1976). In 1979, however, the Supreme Court ruled the FCC mandate as outside the authority of the agency, with a 1984 Act of Congress explicitly providing local ‘franchising authorities’ with the power to require PEG (Public, Educational, and Government) channels as part of any franchising agreement (Molstad, 3-4). As Stein notes, this has meant that “the continued existence of access television has been precarious and has depended on grassroots politicking within individual communities” (Stein, 303).

Although sidelined, video activism continued through the 1980s in the United States, and toward the latter end of that decade, was integral to a number of news events, most notably the filming of the “savage police beating [of] Rodney King” (Boyle, 206). Boyle notes the generational transition from pioneers of the 1960s and 1970s to a new cohort in the late 1980s, with “politically astute veteran videomakers like DeeDee Halleck” of Paper Tiger Television offering something of a bridge. New York’s Paper Tiger began in 1981, initially as a programme on local public access, progressing to become a larger video production collective, and spawning Deep Dish TV, “the first national public-access series of community-made programs on issues such as labor, housing, the farming crisis, and racism” (Boyle, 207-8), which was distributed via leased satellite time.

Among those organisations that did successfully navigate the shifting political, economic, and technological sands, Kevin Howley documents the work of DCTV, Downtown Community Television (DCTV), a New York-based community television project founded in the early 1970s. Crucially, Howley situates the work of the project “as part of the long tradition of cultural politics in the Lower East Side” (Howley, 142). Howley also argues that “DCTV’s willingness and ability to negotiate the demands and constraints and later commercial television allowed the organisation to subsidise its community organizing efforts and video arts training” (137).

**Canada**

Community media has been explicitly “enshrined as one of three components of the Canadian broadcasting system” (Ali, 1124) since 1991, and has its earlier origins “within the National Film Board’s Challenge for Change project as a radical experiment in the democratisation of mass media in the late 1960s” (Lithgow, 125). However, as Ali notes, formal recognition has not prevented radical changes in regulation and structure over that period, including in 1997 when “deregulation permitted cable operators to eliminate public participation and consolidate stations” (1124) as part of regulatory shift that - responding to new modalities - was intended to create a platform-neutral regulatory approach (Armstrong, 129). Those changes - which removed the requirement for many cable systems that they operate an access channel, and strengthened their  ability to control those channels and the funds allocated to them - met with significant resistance from activists associated with the sector (Skinner, 2015, 201-202), and led indirectly to further, more favorable, regulations in 2002 and 2010. (Ali, 2012, 1124)

**United Kingdom**

In Britain, community cable television experiments started more as a side-effect of policies for cable television and the regionalisation of broadcasting rather than as a result of explicit governmental policy (Hollander 1992).

By the early 1970s, cheaper and simpler broadcast production tools, together with interest in alternative media and community arts and politics, attracted an increasing number of practitioners to community and small-scale media. Advocates and activists started to exchange their experiences and bring back to their own countries examples of best practices that had been successful elsewhere. Negrine’s work (1977) on cable and communication access, based on data collected between 1972 and 1975, examined community television as a participative tool, but, reflecting on the the closure of *Greenwich Cablevision*, which had been launched as an experimental community cable channel in 1972 (Nigg and Wade, 1980), it stated that it reflected ‘the economic background to the experiment and the need to find alternative sources of finance to fund novel and financially unprofitable forms of broadcasting’ (Negrine, 1977), something that will remain a challenge also three decades later.

British practitioners took their inspiration from North American and Western European examples of the community media sector, through publications, participation at international gatherings and growing network activities.For example, Canadian community television, and global networks established in Montreal in 1983 (Lewis, 1984) had an important role in setting the debate of practitioners in the UK. A precious archive of community video materials of this period is the London Community Video Archive (LCVA) where a selection of videos from 1970 to 1985 has been archived and digitised ‘thus recovering and reviving this history so that it can be used as a resource for contemporary debates and activism’, including.’20 oral history interviews with a representative sample of people active in Community Video’ in London area (LCVA, n.d).

By the early 1990s, a series of technological developments gradually changed the media context, embedding the potential new risks of ‘digital divides’, even though the growth of the Internet and community communication networks brought new people into the community media sector and created the possibility of Internet TV broadcasts and converged platforms, the Community Radio Association (CRA), in that context, needed to rethink its action and among its members there was the feeling of a growing need for a national body not only for radio, but also for video, film, television, and the Internet (Buckley, 2007). Strategically, the CRA changed its name to Community Media Association (CMA) in 1997. This involved opening its membership base to community television stations and an increasing number of web-based practitioners and projects. This was reflected in the approval of a Community Media Charter in Edinburgh on 25 October 1997 (CMA, 1997) and a development of this document then became the Community Media Manifesto (CMA, 2001). The name change was timely given that the 1996 Broadcasting Act (UK Parliament, 1996) did bring some good news for the community media sector, with the introduction of restricted service television licenses (RSL’s), a broadcast licence for a limited time during a year.

After 18 years of Conservative Party rule (1979-1997), on 2 May 1997 the Labour Party won a landslide election, led by Tony Blair. Rennie argues that the CMA managed to make ‘the most of Blair government’s community rhetoric’ (2006,p 151). In 1999 the New Labour government launched the Information and Communications Technology Learning Centres initiative and the CMA successfully argued for an integrated approach to ICT learning (Buckley, 2007). By 2003, the scenario included a growing number of community media centres that were equipped with multimedia workstations, broadband internet, digital editing software and digital radio studios for audio/video production and live broadcasting. Also, ‘many community groups were successful in getting funding and this also helped to create further awareness of the presence of the sector’, with the CMA also arguing that ‘these multimedia centres had to involve disadvantaged communities to stimulate creativity as well as productivity’ (ibid., 2007).

In 1999, the Davies Committee on the future funding of the BBC, also requested that any additional revenue given to the BBC (as a result of a supplement on the licence fee), be used to develop digital services in an increasingly converging media sector. The CMA used the consultation promoted by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to make the case for a Community Media fund, to support local public service broadcasting initiatives outside of the BBC system. The suggested share for a subvention was 1% of the licence fee, approximately £20 million of funding at that time.Reflecting the new multimedia nature of the organisation, the CMA proposed that the funding should be made available to any possible platform, radio, television and internet projects (CMA, 1999).Community media activists also highlighted the potential uses of community television for regeneration together with radio and internet-based projects. The CMA had a ‘convergent’ approach within the framework of the forthcoming Communications Act to the role of community media in the information society and as a tool to exercise the right to communicate (Select Committee on Culture Media and Sport, 2001).

Nevertheless, by 2009 the media regulator (Office for Communications, Ofcom) acknowledged that ‘Local television has been a long-standing feature of the broadcast ecology in North America and some countries in continental Europe, but has barely taken off in the UK’ (104) also due to ‘More active intervention by local, regional and central governments in some other countries, making possible the development of local services that would not have been viable on a strictly commercial basis’. (ibid.). Therefore, as Ali has highlighted, ‘the challenge in the UK is how to operationalize this support (...) infrastructure remains a barrier  (...)  we have witnessed a number of community television organizations transition or start-up online” (2012, p. 1225). Indeed, the Ofcom report had acknowledged that ‘remain a number of funding challenges. These include the often short-term nature of grants, issues of independence from funding organisations (e.g.local authorities), and reduced funding availability, as grant-giving organisations face challenging funding settlements’ (2009, p. 129). Although a report on local and community television (Hewson, 2005), listed eight RSL services labelling themselves as community television, only one of them, *Northern Visions Television* (NVTV) in Belfast, did have the ‘typical’ ethos of non-profit and public access. To date, NVTV remains the only existing channel that broadcasts since 2014 on *Freeview*, the open-access Digital Terrestrial Television service (NVTV, n.d.),

As in other countries discussed in this article, perhaps, a key issues, that had been highlighted by Ali is that community television is perceived by the majority of the public, policymakers and regulators that it is no different from any user-generated digital platform’ often leading ‘to further calls for defunding or increased barriers to access and infrastructure capital’ (2012, p. 1126).

**Ireland**

Like many European countries, broadcasting in Ireland was restricted to state-run operations for much of the twentieth century, with independent broadcasting not being licensed until the late 1980s. From the 1970s onward, however, there was significant growth in pirate (unlicensed) radio stations, driven in part by the availability of less expensive transmission equipment (particularly on FM), and in part by socio-cultural changes. Rapid cultural changes were coupled with what Brian Farrell termed a failure to “develop more effective feedback mechanisms and access that might refresh the dominant one-way flow and allow audience and readers to talk back” (Farrell, 121). Pirate radio was accompanied by a smaller number of experiments with television, but these were limited in scope and longevity, due largely to the cost and complexity associated with the medium (Farrell, 119; Mulryan, 86-87).

Gillan (2010) traces a succession of community-based projects, from the 1960s onwards, organised largely around the dual poles of Irish language activism and “the community organising that evolved from urban resettlement strategies” (165). While most projects were pirate operations, limited in duration, and motivated by “enthusiasts experimenting with the technology or the possibility of ... a form of community expression”, Gillan documents the history of one project (Ballyfermot Community Association Television, BCATV) which secured a broadcast license as early as 1974 (well before the licensing of commercial broadcasting from the late 1980s onward), and was integrated into broader structures for community development and organising (167-169). Titley (2010) describes both community radio and television in Ireland as originating in “adult education, anti-poverty networks and local activist groups” (36).

As early as the 1980s, activists for the minority Irish-speaking population explored the possibility of launching their own pirate operation, though it was not until 1987 that a short-term station was established, inspired by a visit to a project on the Faroe Islands. While the station - based in a rural area, and with a limited range - lasted only four days, it was significant in changing public perceptions about the viability of Irish language broadcasting, leading later to the establishment of a state-supported professionally-operated station, Teilifis na Gaeilge (Watson, 84-87).

Notably, that station (later renamed TG4) was developed around a hybrid model - based in a rural Irish-speaking area, but explicitly targeting itself not only towards those communities where the language was still dominant, but towards the much larger population that had some level of bilingualism. The station was also developed on a publishing model, where most content was produced on contract by independent (commercial) providers, in contrast to the in-house production dominant in Irish broadcasting. This last feature offered synergies with government goals of developing the independent audiovisual sector. It also meant, however, that the channel had limited capacity to support content, or public engagement, that could not be captured by a commercial production contract. Gillan argues that by being framed within a language rights framework, the station was separated from the broader concerns over community sustainability (of which language was but one element, if integral) that had motivated the earlier community activists (171).

Many community media groups have relied on state-funded ‘community employment projects’, a form of labour activation programme intended to provide skills and experience to the long-term unemployed. Gillan identifies several elements of unsustainability implicit to this model - the first is the obvious point that such schemes are intended to prepare workers to enter the workforce, and so the very experience and skill development fostered by these schemes is continually lost to the project (7); second, the supply of available participants is inversely proportional to the overall health of the labour market (178); and third, from the late-90s onward (as the so-called ‘Celtic Tiger’ emerged) there was opposition from proponents of a dominant a free-market ideology (182). This was reflected in a focus on competitive short-term project funding, rather than stable programmatic support; and on a belief from government that community media should either be funded by community development organisations as a form of service provider, or through cross-subsidy from undertaking commercial work (184). This was reflected in 2001 legislation that was “designed to introduce digital broadcasting, reform the State Broadcaster and essentially privatise the broadcasting sector” (Gillan, 2010b, 131).

**Structural Changes**

Comstock and Butler note that (in the context of federal US regulation) “the underlying premise of cable regulation is that the facility owner in general may control the content and who may offer services that are transmitted over its cable facilities” (284). This approach differs, as the authors note, from the ‘common carrier’ approach that has been used in relation to telecommunications facilities. In addition, as Putnam notes, legislation allows for local or federal regulations “requiring channels be set aside for the purpose of public access” (195) and for the imposition of charges on cable franchisees to support the operation of such channels.

Media activists argue that the ongoing travails of the US public television system - “a shadow of public broadcasting abroad, forever hobbled by congressional threats to ‘zero out’ its budget” (Goodman, 263) - are mirrored by a public access sector “under attack from cable companies, who want to defund and shutter them” (Goodman, 263). Putnam (207) points to a 2019 FCC regulation that weakens the funding model of public access channels by allowing franchisees to set in-kind support (such as equipment or services) provided by them against the financial levies intended to support these channels, and notes concerns that these developments will “harm the channels' economic viability” (Putnam, 207).

Alternative media providers frequently operate in a precarious space, and while PEG franchisees can have some stability from franchise levies, the producers who provide the content lack such supports. A case in point is Paper Tiger Television, a long-running video collective based in New York City. Established in 1981 (Freedman, 2004, 352), the collective survived when many contemporary groups did not. However, longevity is no guarantee of future survival, and the organisation’s projects have often been tenuously financed (see, eg. Halleck, 2002, 171).

Alongside concerns about the ongoing financial stability of the sector are questions about the manner in which public access can be relied on as a form of ‘public forum’, given evolving legal precedents. A 2019 Supreme Court case ruled, in dismissing a case taken by veteran community media activist, and one of the founders of Paper Tiger Television, Dee Dee Halleck, that the operators of public access channels are not ‘state actors’, and do not need to be neutral in their provision of access to airtime. This decision means that such channels are not to be seen as public fora, but rather that those granted such franchises are “not bound by the First Amendment's speech strictures” (Putnam, 204), and can thus “engage in viewpoint discrimination” (Putnam, 208) on their channels. Putnam and others have thus cautioned that this has the potential to “stifle the voices of those who come first” (208). In addition, the very existence of public access channels has been under attack. Cable providers have opposed the bandwidth and other resources they provide to support such channels, and have pointed to the growth of internet distribution to argue that these resources “might be better used to bring new products to communities” (Haugsted). In the case of AT&T, the Alliance for Community Media, which advocates for public access television, has criticised it for “providing an “inferior” platform” for public access channels. The U-Verse system allocates all PEG (public, educational, and government) channels a single channel number, with viewers then navigating to individual channels using a secondary menu, something thought likely to deter casual viewers (Spangler, 2018). From being a ‘low digit’ channel that people would often scroll past (and perhaps stop at) in the analogue era, it is now something you need to search out.

As with the United States, Canadian community television has faced significant structural challenges, with cable providers gaining greater control over cable channels (with a dilution of access and funding requirements) as part of the neoliberal re-regulatory process associated with the ‘preparation’ for digitalisation in the late 1990s and early 2000s. However, in Canada there have been some (minor) regulatory gains - for a sector that while enshrined in law has historically been viewed as politically weak (Lithgow, 126) - which some scholars have associated with the emergence of visible and vocal advocates like CACTUS (Skinner, 202; Ali, 2012, 1130). However, while observers like Lithgow identify the heterogeneity of production practices that make up the contemporary sector, numerous scholars identify significant limitations to the enabling structures and the underlying goals that shape the sector. As mentioned previously, the 1997 regulatory changes shifted power (and resources) back to the cable operators, and while more recent changes have involved some gains, the underlying focus on content - as opposed to the ecosystem within which community-based content is developed - have constrained the growth and development of the sector, an issue identified in Ali in his 2012 review of the sector (1124).

As with other jurisdictions, the (pending) transition to digital provided the impetus for regulatory changes. With the transition to digital cable systems, capacity in Irish systems increased, and with it the potential for space being made available for community operators. This resulted in the sector being addressed as part of two broader sets of legislative provisions: the 2001 Broadcasting Act, which provided for the introduction of digitalisation, and also made provision in law for community television for the first time (Gillan, 2010b, 131); the 2009 Act, which made further changes to the regulatory landscape as part of the continued process of digitalisation, including including a reference to ‘social impact’ as a goal for community media, which improved on the focus on access present from 2001, but which has been criticised by O’Brien and Gaynor (2012, 10) as privileging a depoliticised measure of benefit that strips out the commitment to “promoting social change” that is part of the AMARC community charter for Europe that had been used initially by the regulator from 1995.

There are currently two licensed community channels in Ireland, in the largest cities of Dublin and Cork (Titley, 2010, 36), with a third, based in the commuter town of Navan, no longer in operation. While Titley saw the advent of “internet television and the cable/digital spectrum” as making possible “the sustainable development of community television” (36), the sector has since faced significant challenges which have hampered its development and growth. Prominent in the challenges the channels face is the lack of a sustainable funding mechanism to support the infrastructural needs of community media outlets. Instead, community media has leveraged the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland’s ‘Sound & Vision’ scheme - which funds discrete pieces of content following an open competition model - to underwrite the ongoing needs of the sector, something which has had a particularly onerous impact on community media producers who seek not only to report on, but also to engage with and support the development of, volunteer organisations within local communities (Gillan, 2010b, 132).

**Changing technologies, changing spaces**

The development of digital media tools and platforms over the past number of decades has been leveraged by social and political activists. Amy Goodman - whose daily news programme Democracy Now! has expanded from its original roots in community radio to now streaming video online and elsewhere - traces the development of digital independent media from indymedia.org, which “days after going live [in 1999] was getting more hits than CNN.com” to Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in 2011, where “live video streams of OWS advanced independent media strategy by making the unfiltered activity of the occupation available in real time to a global audience” (Goodman, 260). One of the most prominent vehicles for Goodman’s programme is Free Speech TV, a US-based progressive independent news network which since 1995 has utilised satellite, digital cable, and a plethora of platforms to distribute its content (Free Speech). In Australia, although video access centres emerged in the 1980s, and the campaign for community television by 1992, it was not until 2004 that community channels were licensed, facilitated by new digital technologies (Rennie(b), 21-24).

However, the very accessibility of digital tools has created fresh challenges for community media - paralleling, in ways, the expansion of access to video in the 1980s. New tools can “allow individuals to create media in their own homes” (Castellanos et al, 157) and to distribute that content online, through sites like YouTube and platforms like Periscope, TikTok, and others. Thus, one of the challenges for community-based media is to articulate and sustain relevance in the face of changing socio-technical conditions. Numerous scholars (Tufekci, Barlow & Clarke, Castells) have pointed to the manner in which new communication technologies have been leveraged by activists, both to reach audiences and to support new forms of flat, loose, structures, both in partnership with existing media-centric organisations and independently. Video becomes part of a panoply of resources, with Thorson et al. describing how videos are used as “communicative resources within ‘ad hoc publics’, widely distributed conversations, and information-sharing streams that emerge through usage practices within Twitter” (426). The architecture and function of these interlocking platforms has an impact on the ways in which video is used. Thorson et al. note both that most YouTube videos cross-promoted with protest-related hashtags on Twitter are shared only once, with most sharing happening shortly after the video is initially uploaded, but also that there is a practice of “YouTube archeology” (438) with some Twitter content mining older footage and content available on YouTube. These platforms therefore facilitate an active engagement with current and archival content that is not readily achievable in a traditional public access context.

The affordances of online video distribution have, of course, been leveraged by what Castells terms the ‘networked movements’ represented by Occupy Wall Street.  One prominent use has been in live streaming, with Castells noting that “livestreams are ephemeral, but they are essential during moments of police repression” (176). The use of the term ‘essential’ is interesting, both because of what it says about the perceived interconnectedness of the social movements and digital media tools, and also because of Castells’ observation that livestreaming is actually controversial within these movements, for a range of reasons from concerns about producers “gravitating toward sensationalism”, to worries that those producers will act as self-appointed spokespeople for the movement, to concerns that footage might be used by police and others to suppress protest (176). Davis (2015), in exploring the use of live-streaming by ‘Dream Defenders’’ (advocates for undocumented migrants who arrived in the US as children) notes how livesreaming can “engage the broader public, in real time” (135). Castells also documents the use of YouTube and other video hosting services to support “a constant practice of storytelling” that is part of the strategic arsenal of such movements (177-178).

Livestreams garner particular attention at times of conflict, but in some cases have a longer arc. In the case of Occupy Wall Street, a live stream from the occupation in Zuccotti Park in New York was like “the anti-Tivo [i.e. a Digital Video Recorder (DVR)]...the livestream provides a rare dose of linear time” (Marcus, 264) that includes long stretches of inaction between broadcasts of General Assembly meetings that Marcus describes as ‘C-SPAN for radicals’. While imagery (still or video) from clashes with police attracts most attention, Marcus argues that the livestream “decenters the big event in favor of the casual banality of everyday life in a democratic public space” (Marcus, 265). Marcus notes too that contemporary digital technologies facilitate this by allowing the work of video documentation, of “the immortalisation of the big event” (265), to be undertaken not by an official video team but by “thousands of citizen videographers” (265). Additionally, as Gould-Wartofsky notes, the livestreams formed part of a broader production ecology, a “complex chain of media production and consumption” (80), with raw content (including livestream footage and other video material) being created, distributed online, remixed and reshared, and some of it finding its way into the mainstream media system.

‘Tactical media’, a definition emerging form a series of events held at Next Five Minutes Festival in Amsterdam since 1993, has been also a vibrant area of activism, bringing together Internet activists with audio/radio and video activists, which as Garcia and Lovink outlined, are “ what happens when the cheap ‘do it yourself’ media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture” (Garcia and Lovink, 1997). However, as Stalder had already warned in 2008, public access TV (and community TV/video projects), was “threatened to become just another narrow-caster among a near infinite number of channels” and while the decreased cost of video production tools as made it easier for activists worldwide to record, edit and publish content, the “commercial capture of the infrastructure is creating new bottlenecks where censorship and control of media content can and does function efficiently.” Although Stalder’s words are now more than a decade old, they have still significance when reflecting on community television, and related policy, licensing and funding schemes, to make sure that they remain distinct, independent and a site of empowerment for local community groups, and offer bottom-up forms of participation.

**Conclusions**

Digitisation has, in many ways, offered new opportunities for participation and innovation, but have also destabilised some of the hard-won gains of previous generations in ways that are not always readily apparent. In exploring the history of community television, we can see parallels with earlier generations, along with the persistence of not just the challenges of the pre-digital era, but cycles of innovation that expose fresh points of weakness in the sector’s ecosystems. As new technologies emerge, and are pressed into the service of capital, activists explore their affordances and limitations, innovate and experiment, and develop structures and systems to leverage the opportunities offered by the new techno-social context. We can see in the neo-liberal ideologies that shaped legislative and regulatory changes at numerous periods - the late 1970s in the US, the late 1990s/early 2000s in various countries - the manner in which various strategies of regulatory arbitrage (Ó Baoill, 2014) are undercut by virtue of the fact that they are seen to rely on ancillary characteristics of the regulatory regime. Even when, as in Canada, there is explicit acknowledgement of the community sector, however, there is no guarantee that there will not be erosion of supports and commitments won through earlier periods of activism. McChesney has suggested (2007; 2013, 67) a path dependency model for understanding these processes of change, identifying various critical junctures at which radical change in the underlying logic of the media system can be redefined, with contestation between these periods operating largely within the systemic boundaries that have been previously established. Those same developments that open up new opportunities for production and participation can also be associated with structural changes that undercut the viability of community-focused production.

We can see this cycle repeat itself, as contemporary networked publics seek to leverage the affordances of social networking platforms and video distribution tools. While these services offer new opportunities for production (particularly mobile production) and distribution, and for new forms of archiving and what Thorson et al. (2013) call ‘video archaeology’, the underlying logic of many of these systems is predicated on the individual user - social engagement is facilitated only insofar as it adds to the value of the ‘audience commodity’ (Dolber, 2016). There are, therefore, a number of intertwined challenges for the contemporary community television sector. While production - as a technical process - is easier, and cheaper, than in the past, both the pre-production (and ongoing) work of organising in communities, and the ancillary task of reaching and sustaining audiences, are resource-intensive. Identifying the metrics by which success should be measured is a persistent challenge - and frustration - for the community television sector. Ali (2012) has previously noted the focus on content creation in the Canadian system, and similar critiques have been offered of funding systems in Ireland (Gillan, 2010). The community building role that many in the sector see as their primary purpose, or on the internal community-building that makes volunteer-led organisations sustainable, can be difficult (and expensive) to measure, so hours of content becomes the measure of success, and thus what is funded. Even where ‘social benefit’ is recognised as a goal, as in Ireland, this has not necessarily been reflected in how funding has been structured.

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