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Community Journalism as an International Phenomenon

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It likely won't come as a surprise that, in the burgeoning field of international communications, community journalism has been largely excluded from the discussion. Nicholas W. Jankowski, noted scholar of community media, observed that a great deal of work has been devoted to studying the global transformation of the media landscape, but "the evidence presented is restricted to national and international media systems; no attention is paid to regional and local media systems" (Jankowski, 2002, p. 3). This chapter reviews research being done by scholars who are working toward a more global understanding of community journalism, and concludes by suggesting some directions that could be explored to build a more international approach to the study of community journalism.

❖ OVERVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

Broadly, international communications could be seen as the desire to explain mass communication in a global context by looking for larger theoretical models that explain media systems at national and international levels. It also includes comparative analysis that is driven by a desire to look for country-level and cultural differences in mass communication (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). As such, it feels almost counterintuitive to attempt to position the inherently "local" concept of community journalism in a discussion of international communications. However, the question to consider is whether what Artz and Kamalipour (2007) referred to as transnational media forces are having the same effect on community media that has been observed in national and regional media.

The study of international communications evolved from what many consider a normative approach with a largely Western bias to current attempts that explore media differences, especially in light of increasing globalization and homogenization (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Artz and Kamalipour (2007) made the distinction between international and transnational media organizations, explaining that international organizations are media outlets based in one country that reach out to global audiences, and transnational media, in contrast, are organizations that work independent of any particular country and instead serve a global class of citizens. The result, Artz and Kamalipour noted, has been that "the deterritorialization of media production and distribution has ruptured media national characteristics. The transnational media represent the class interests, class perspectives, and class ideology of the transnational capitalist class, albeit smoothly marketed in a diversity of cultural forms" (p. 151).

It seems as if many scholars rarely find anything meritorious as they explore the global media landscape. The oft-cited Hallin and Mancini (2004) described the phenomenon that appears to be most important to community journalism: driven by technology and increased mobility, global media are homogenizing mass communication, erasing cultural differences, and overtaking culture-specific media. The questions being asked in international communications—through survey research, content analysis, and other empirical approaches—is whether cultural differences remain or whether global media are imposing their values on the world in hegemonic fashion.

Yet there is little research as to how that phenomenon is manifest in community journalism around the world, and consideration of that can be done only in a largely speculative way. It doesn't take much to imagine how a hegemonic global media system would threaten the subcultural focus of various community journalism enterprises. However, there is also the possibility that community media could be insulated from such a global wave of homogenization, and may even flourish. As Lyombe Eko (2002) observed in his analysis of media in Africa, the decentralization, openness, redundancy, simplicity, ubiquity, and statelessness of the Internet lends itself "to innovation even in circumstances of hegemony and asymmetrical power relations as in sub-Saharan Africa. Africans have shown they can bridge the digital divide through localization and domestication of the Internet" (p. 25). Much as community media in North America appear to have weathered the economic turmoil of the global recession of 2008–2010, there is the possibility that community media around the world have operated—perhaps even thrived—under the radar of the global media machine. That possibility begs serious inquiry.

❖ DEFINING COMMUNITY JOURNALISM FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDY

An important question to consider relates to the external validity of the work presented so far in this book. It's the old apples-to-apples question: Does this concept called *community journalism*, developed largely by studying "small" news media outlets (mostly in the U.S., Canada, and Australia) explain something similar in all countries and cultures? When we make generalizations about "community journalism," do we risk diluting the very aspect of community journalism that makes it distinct—its cultural relativism? Furthermore, how do differences in cultural settings affect the journalism-community relationship?

The first step toward answering those questions is, once again, developing consistent definitions for the concepts in play, particularly the term *community media*. Almost instinctively, U.S. scholars see community media as meaning newspapers, magazines, radio/television stations, and websites serving specific geographic regions or niche audiences. However, in a global context, the term does not have universal application. In their discussion of community journalism, for

example, Moore and Gillis (2005) contrasted community media with community journalism, arguing that the latter defines a "process" of doing journalism that is similar to the advocacy style of journalism espoused by scholars of civic or public journalism such as Jay Rosen. Things get more complicated when the term *community media* is brought in. Jankowski, one of the most cited scholars in electronically mediated community journalism, used "community media" as an all-encompassing term to refer to "a diverse range of mediated forms of communication: print media such as newspapers and magazines, electronic media such as radio and television, and electronic network initiatives that embrace characteristics of both traditional print and electronic media" (2002, p. 6). He pointed to U.S. scholars such as Janowitz (1952) and Stamm (1985) as the foundational works for the study of community press, but focused his own efforts on community radio, television, and other electronic media. Fuller's (2007) definition of community media did not seem as inclusive; she used "community media" to define electronic media that is operated by citizens, has roots in social justice movements of the 1960s in North America, and has begun to take hold in developing nations through the support of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

If those distinctions between the concepts of community journalism and community media meant only differences in the type of media channel, it would be one thing, but those differences may also speak to differences in the roles those media play in their communities— differences based on those media's organizational structures, community relationships, and what they consider to be news values.

Development journalism is another term that appears often in community journalism research. Usually that concept defines a style of journalism that is sponsored by NGOs and used in developing nations. Although it has been critiqued by some as being largely a propaganda tool for government-driven work, others have found development journalism to embody many of the ideals valued in community journalism while operating in economic systems that simply could not support commercially driven media. For example, Banjade (2006) conducted a qualitative analysis of a community newspaper started by an NGO in Nepal and found that the newspaper was actually much more concerned with presenting what might be described as "hyperlocal journalism," driven by the voices of community members more than by the agendas of policymakers.

❖   COMMUNITY PRESS AROUND THE WORLD

For the most part, research into the community press has been conducted at the country level with almost no attempt to build theory that explains cross-cultural variations in community journalism, let alone to position community journalism in the current global landscape. Much of that research seems to follow the line of research already delineated in earlier chapters of this book, often involving qualitative assessments of independent rural newspapers.

Perhaps some of the earliest attempts at any cross-cultural comparisons were conducted by Crispin C. Maslog, a community journalist turned scholar from the Philippines who eventually went on to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota and authored numerous books and articles on community journalism in the 1980s and 1990s. Using titles such as *The Dragon Slayers of the Countryside* (1989), Maslog produced qualitative narratives that told the stories of courageous independent community newspapers in the Philippines and Southeast Asia. In one of his key works, *Five Successful Asian Community Newspapers* (1985), a UNESCO-funded study of five newspapers from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, Maslog observed how community newspapers there were driven by a common desire to serve the local community and to champion issues important to those regions. His work has since transitioned toward a greater interest in citizen-driven development journalism.

Another pioneering group in exploring the concept of community journalism in a global context is The International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors (ISWNE), which published its first journal volume, *Grassroots Editor*, in January 1960, with one of its tenets being the forging of an alliance of small-town journalists interested in helping avoid a nuclear holocaust ("A Challenge to Editors," 1960). The name used to describe the community journalist in that journal was the "grassroots editor" (Waring, 1960, p. 5). The grassroots editor lived in a "village, a small city, or a metropolis" and yet shared the common trait of a "nearness to his people" (p. 5). "People," in that sense, was defined by Waring as a well-defined community tied together by geographic boundaries or common cultural bonds, such as ethnicity or religious affiliation. Waring described grassroots editors as having a close relationship with their communities' leaders, with the newspapers acting as social centers and communication tools for

civic leaders. Still, Waring emphasized the importance of journalistic independence—a value he argued must be upheld even at the risk of community backlash. Even in 1960, Waring worried that grassroots journalism would be silenced by the growth of corporate-owned media. Independence may have been admired, but Howard Rusk Long (1977) later noted that only a small group of journalists could be said to truly champion its cause.

A perusal of the *Grassroots Editor*'s indices from 1960 to 1970 shows that it provided a central location from which to read examples of great community journalism, from editors such as civil rights advocate Hazel Brannon Smith of the Lexington, Missouri, *Advertiser*, and Henry Beetle Hough, editor of Martha's Vineyard's *Vineyard Gazette*. It was also a place where the challenges of community journalism in different countries were explored. With titles such as "Mexico's Crusading Weekly Newspapers," "The Press and Its Problems in Tanganyika," and "Latin America's Fading Hometown Weeklies," the journal explored issues facing journalists in specific countries, but also included writing about more general topics such as ethical standards, community involvement, and how to deal with community backlash on controversial issues. The journal remains a place where both scholars and practitioners can read about commonalities and differences of the community press around the globe. Today, ISWNE has members throughout not only the U.S., but also Canada and Great Britain (at this writing, the president of ISWNE is a weekly newspaper editor in northwestern England).

From an international perspective, there exist many studies focusing on community journalism, but those studies are limited to country-level explorations often done within those nations (and as such are essentially domestic studies). For example, a team of scholars at Rhodes University conducted a detailed case study of six independently owned community newspapers in South Africa (Milne, Rau, Du Toit, & Mdlongwa, 2006). They found that those newspapers shared common values, such as a desire not just to produce a local news product but also to be active members of their communities, to provide a voice for the voiceless, to serve a role in their democracy, and to bridge cultural divides. The team also found that those news organizations faced similar challenges, including the difficulties of independent ownership and the hardship of selling advertising space to companies hesitant to invest with organizations that were small or owned by

marginalized groups. They also found that community newspapers shared a hesitancy to report on contentious issues in their communities, preferring to see their role as community builders.

Australian scholar Kathryn Bowd (2003) has done similar work in her home country, comparing community journalism (or "country journalism") to both metropolitan journalism and development journalism. Bowd has suggested that the emphasis on "local" and the community relationship may mean that community journalism has more in common with what she calls non-Western forms of journalism than with conventional journalism. Bowd (2006) went a step further in explicating community journalism at an international level with a comparison of community journalism in Singapore and in Australia. She noted that in spite of different perceptions of community in those two cultural settings, the journalists shared an emphasis on local news—an emphasis which, she argued, may insulate journalism from the force of globalization.

❖   THE "COMMUNITY MEDIA" DISTINCTION

In part driven by the support and efforts of NGOs such as Internews Network (Fairbairn, 2009) as well as European scholars concerned about the loss of national identity as the European Union grows, there is a much richer body of research exploring international ideas related to electronically driven versions of community media—perhaps none more important than Jankowski's work. In a collected volume exploring community media in the current era, Jankowski (2003) and other scholars defined community media on an international level, presented case studies of community media in different cultural settings, and set the agenda for future research.

Jankowski defined the characteristics of community media as (a) empowerment of the politically disenfranchised, (b) shared, local ownership, (c) local content, (d) nonprofessional and volunteer ownership, (e) electronic distribution, (f) geographic distribution, and (g) noncommercial finance structure, although they might also include sponsorship, advertising, and so forth. That definition offers one of the key distinctions between the traditional, commercially driven community press of the United States and the social movement style of journalism that seems to dominate radio and television.

In the introduction to a recent edited volume that includes case studies of community media internationally, Fuller (2007) drew on a similar set of criteria to define community media, and went further to define community media in opposition to commercially driven models of media. Fuller did not draw on traditional community journalism research, focusing instead on a style of alternative media that is citizen driven and focuses on providing a means by which marginalized groups can participate in community discourse and create their own community identity.

In many developing nations that have diverse language groups and lower literacy rates, it is radio that may do the work of defining community. In South Africa, for example, it's been said that there are more radios than there are mattresses. In her detailed analysis of the now-famous Bush Radio in Cape Town, scholar Tanja Bosch (2005) explored how a station designed to serve the impoverished Cape Flats community has evolved to build a larger community through a process she described as "rhizomatic." Countless fibrous networks, no one stronger than another, reach out and build community networks that bridge communities in a process akin to the "bridging capital" concept explicated by scholars such as Robert Putnam. Bush Radio has provided a voice for the residents of Cape Flats, but also has expanded the discussion and perhaps the community to include other residents of Cape Town. Community radio has served a similar function in other developing nations. As Bosch noted, the roots of community radio may go back decades, such as to the 1940s and 1950s in Central America when Bolivian miners used community radio as a mobilizing tool (O'Connor, 1990).

It's one thing to understand some of the common traits of community media, but Jankowski's desire has been to build a stronger theoretical understanding. He proposed that most of the research examining community media to date falls into four general themes: (a) democratic processes, (b) cultural identity, (c) the concept of "community," and (d) an "action perspective to communication" (Jankowski, 2003, p. 11). He encouraged scholars of community media to consider theoretical models that explain community media within the contexts of organizational structures, the media produced, the users of those media, and the environments or settings in which media operate (Jankowski, 2003).

❖ SETTING THE STAGE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH IN
   COMMUNITY JOURNALISM

For the study of community journalism as an international phenomenon, it's important to understand that the relationship between a community and a journalist occurs within the context of a larger cultural backdrop. For a long time, many scholars have studied the various phenomena that hold cultures together: Durkheim (1915/1965) saw society as constructed through shared cultural meaning, and Parsons (1951) used those ideas to build a functionalist model that saw society as a self-regulating system that maintains its own order, stability, and equilibrium. Weber (1958) suggested culture is created through an understanding of what's valued in a society.

What follows are some of the logical directions that cross-cultural comparisons of community journalism could take based on existing work in both international communications and comparative analysis being conducted in various social science disciplines.

The political scientist Ronald Inglehart (1997) has created the now-famous World Values Survey, which attempts to gauge social and cultural distinctions, based on surveying the residents of 78 countries. Inglehart believed that those results, when aggregated at the country level, reveal strong, predictable relationships among economic development, cultural change, and political change (1997). Inglehart's survey, first conducted in 1990 and at this writing now in its fourth wave, approaches culture from a sociopolitical angle: "Cultural elements tend to go together in coherent patterns" (Inglehart, 1997, p. 69). The World Values Survey has been used as the foundation for countless studies of religion, values, beliefs, and political institutions. There are endless opportunities to explore cross-cultural aspects of community journalism based on that exhaustive data set. For example, it's accepted that community journalism is shaped by the nature of the community in which it functions (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980), but perhaps that relationship explains what happens in a media system in only one cultural situation. The opportunity to test that theory in a comparative fashion based on differences in cultural settings—as measured by the World Values Survey—might proffer insight into the culturally specific factors that mediate the community journalism dynamic.

In the global marketplace, it's become understood that business practices deemed acceptable in one country could be viewed as outlandish in another country. Dutch writer Geert Hofstede's (1980) research stands as the foundational work in the field of cultural mapping. He began with surveys of IBM employees in 40 countries in the 1960s and 1970s and has since expanded his work to consider 74 countries. Hofstede suggested that there are four dimensions of culture: individualism-collectivism, power distance, masculinity-femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. That kind of comparative work should entice community journalism scholars to explore larger theoretical questions based on the media's cultural context and to begin to create cultural maps of community journalism.

Hofstede's mapping of value dimensions is very popular in social science research, but his scales are somewhat limited in their application, especially for scholars hoping to use more rigorous quantitative comparisons of culture. More recently, cross-cultural psychologist Shalom Schwartz (2004) has produced theory-driven work that "maps" the cultural nuances of countries that represent 75% of the world's population. Each culture is evaluated based on seven cultural-level values: egalitarianism, harmony, embeddedness, intellectual autonomy, affective autonomy, mastery, and hierarchy. Schwartz's work shows that individuals in different countries have distinctly different visions of society—and therefore of community—that offer important cautions to those who would ascribe universal definitions. They also offer an enticing opportunity to study the relationships between community and journalism at a cultural level. The implications of how those differences might affect conceptions of community and the journalists' role in a community are profound.

Another way to study community journalism as an international phenomenon is by examining its role within different political contexts. The great debate in political science is what matters more, institutions or culture? As scholar William Riker (1980) noted,

> it is of course true that this easy predictability is an illusion—but it is an illusion by which many scholars are hoodwinked because in quiet times the institutions are constant and only tastes are in dispute, while in turbulent times the institutions are in flux and only human greed seems constant. One fundamental and unresolved

problem of social science is to penetrate the illusion and to learn to take both values and institutions into account. (p. 432)

Putnam (2000) further argued that comparative work, to be effective, must understand the history, narrative, and context of a culture to avoid making broad generalizations. However, to have broader application, theory also must do more than explain one case. Nevertheless, institutions do matter in that they create the rules that constitute political behavior, as suggested by Carey (2000), who noted that institutions can be studied in two different ways: either by their historical origins or by the effects of different kinds of institutions.

Scholars in comparative political analysis spend a great deal of time looking for differences in political and civic life based on different aspects of political life. Economists and sociologists compare countries using different factors, such as health, wealth, and education levels. And, of course, community journalism cannot help but be influenced by the press freedoms journalists enjoy, which vary widely by nation, and even fluctuate within nations as political climates change. Some of those differences have been used to explore media differences across cultures, but generally in terms of the performance of large, national news media. The potential to apply those same concepts to a cross-cultural discussion of community journalism is wide open.

❖   CONCLUSION

As this chapter suggests, there are more questions than answers for scholars interested in exploring the concept of community journalism at the international level. Does the concept of community journalism vary from culture to culture? Does it even exist in some cultures? What impact is globalization having on community journalism? Does the homogenization of mass media that is seen in mainstream media portend similar results for community journalism?

Decades of research in international mass communication have all but ignored community journalism. That is not just a shame, but it is misleading and may deprive us of seeing truly important aspects of community journalism. Concepts of community must be embedded in culture, so how can those concepts be adequately explained if we are not comparing journalism within a culture to journalism practiced

outside of that culture? The task for scholars of community journalism is spelled out clearly by Jankowski (2003), who said he hopes

> that all community media researchers will take seriously their mandate as social scientists to contribute to our collective theoretical understanding of small-scale media. This mandate entails, in my estimation, more than mere alliance with a theoretical perspective; it also necessitates refinement of concepts and generation of models relating these concepts. (p. 12)

Examples of grassroots and community media can be found in many countries and cultures around the world. In developing nations in Africa, community journalism plays the role of assisting in the diffusion of health care information and in the reporting of news in countries ravaged by war, usually in situations where journalists often face great impediments to press freedoms (Dadge, 2006). In the eastern-European nations, the community press is exploring new terrain as it tries to help formerly communist countries transition toward democratic governance and discussions of national identity in the face of a homogenizing "European" identity (European Journalism Centre, n.d.). In China, where in recent years news media have seen lessened governmental restrictions, a fascinating transition may be occurring away from a highly regulated, national media toward a more locally autonomous system with less government control and a new possibility for community media. Those examples, among many, show the challenge of applying universal truths about community journalism to all cultures. Variations in language, faith, values, freedoms, wealth, ideology, and the other attributes of culture offer enticing opportunities to explore the relationship that exists between journalists and their communities, and show why research of such relationships cannot be limited to (let alone based on) one narrow, cultural viewpoint of what community journalism is. Community journalism scholars must expand their view or risk being excluded from the discussion.

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Studying the Global Community
of Community Journalists ●

Chad Stebbins

In 2008, the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors lost a member in Nebraska who couldn't afford to continue paying the $50 annual dues. The publisher/editor/ad manager of the 1,000-circulation weekly suggested that ISWNE was not providing enough material about "the money side" of running a community newspaper. He explained:

> While I found the editorial content helpful, I would have preferred to read more articles on what newspapers my size are doing to survive, maybe with some specific ideas or programs. I realize you're more geared toward editors, but in my situation it all fits together in the same puzzle.

He was right. Although ISWNE's mission is to encourage and promote wise and independent editorial comment, news content, and leadership in community newspapers throughout the world, we cannot forget that some of our members also are responsible for keeping their newspapers in business. We therefore dedicated the Spring 2009 issue of *Grassroots Editor*, ISWNE's quarterly journal, to examining how twelve struggling weeklies in rural parts of the United States and Canada were coping with the economic crisis of the late 2000s. To some extent, their rural isolation shielded them from several of the problems the mainstream press had been experiencing. As one editor so aptly put it, "While the rest of the nation is in a recession, we've been in a recession for the last 50 years, so it won't affect us as much."

Such weeklies, however, face their own set of challenges—declining population bases, a shortage of retail businesses in agrarian communities, staffing issues, and attempting to sell advertising and subscriptions on fledgling websites. A few of those papers have the smallest circulations in their states, yet they persevere even as large-city dailies shrink or even fold. The financial strategies of such weeklies deserve further study by the growing cadre of academicians who now specialize in community journalism.

U.S. journalism scholars also tend to ignore the vibrant community newspapers published by our neighbors to the north, in Canada, and across the Atlantic in the United Kingdom, where many ISWNE members work to provide quality journalism to rural communities. Consider this: Despite having a population only one tenth that of the United States, Canada boasts more than 700 weekly and twice-weekly newspapers (ComBase, 2010a). Interestingly, more than 80% utilize the tabloid format. Most weekly newspapers are printed on high-quality presses, due to the significant investment in improved printing facilities made by corporate ownership a few years ago (ComBase, 2010b). At the same time, about a quarter of Canada's community papers were still independently owned at this writing (Newspapers Canada, 2010).

Studies of the Canadian community-media scene could pay big dividends for researchers. Why, for example, do 83% of adults in Saskatchewan regularly read a community newspaper? Nationwide in Canada, 74% of adults read a community paper. Exclusive community newspaper readers also tend to be light TV watchers (the average watches television three hours or less per week). Comparative studies along the U.S.-Canadian border may help scholars in both countries better understand the commonalities and differences between those countries, and inspire similar studies in other border regions of the world.

But there is much more cross-cultural information to be gleaned from the community press by researchers than merely a comparison of statistics. Comparing social values as expressed via community media also is a worthwhile venture. Take as an example the following case. In 2009, a weekly editor in New Brunswick asked the ISWNE hotline service whether he should publish a letter to the editor bashing an area high school for holding an anti-harassment, anti-homophobia event. The letter writer condemned the school's staff and students for their public display of support for the gay and lesbian community. Of the 55 ISWNE members who responded, an overwhelming majority (mostly from the U.S.) agreed the letter should be published. The handful of Canadians who weighed in, however, were largely opposed to printing it. One wrote, "The letter writer's beliefs are his right, but he does not have the right to use the paper as a platform to promote intolerance against gay people." Others cited Canada's hate-crimes legislation as a reason to toss the letter in the recycling bin. The Canadian editor did end up publishing the letter, explaining that "it is, ultimately, fair comment on a public event and we just don't feel

comfortable stifling this writer's opinion when it isn't libelous, profane or an attempt to incite violence." Still, his Canadian peers disagreed, one even saying, "I just don't know why we justify hate as free speech."

Such comparisons of professional concerns and values among community newspaper editors in neighboring countries are worthy of further study, particularly given the important cultural roles community newspapers continue to have in many parts of the world.

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