Community media as rhizome: Expanding the research agenda

Nico Carpentier[*]

Uppsala University, Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Charles University in Prague

Published more than a decade ago, the article 'Community media: Muting the democratic media discourse?' (Carpentier, Lie and Servaes, 2003) attempted to chart the different approaches used to understand community and alternative media.[1] The outcome was a typology of four approaches (Figure 1), where the first two approaches are strongly media centred. Built on community media (Approach 1) and alternative media (Approach 2) theory, these two models capture the more traditional ways of understanding community media. The first approach uses a more essentialist theoretical framework, stressing the importance of the community media organisation serving a community, while alternative media models focus on the relationship between alternative and mainstream media, putting more emphasis on the discursive relation of interdependency between two opposing sets of identities.

Figure 1: The four theoretical approaches towards community media

	Media centred	Society centred
Autonomous identity of CM (Essentialist)	*Approach I:* Serving the community	
		Approach III: Part of civil society
Identity of CM in relation to other identities (Relationalist)	*Approach II:* An alternative to mainstream	*Approach IV:* Rhizome

Source: Carpentier et al., 2003: 53

These two traditional models for theorising the identity of community media organisations are complemented by two more society-centred approaches.[2] The third approach defines community media as part of civil society. The more relationist aspects of civil society theory, combined with Downing and colleagues' (2001) and Rodriguez's (2001) critiques of alternative media, are then radicalised and unified in the fourth approach, which builds on the Deleuzian (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) metaphor of community media as rhizome.

One of the main ideas behind this typology was that we should not fetishise the many labels attributed to community media, and isolate the different theoretical approaches that these labels represent, but instead combine and respectfully integrate the different approaches to reach a more thorough understanding of community media practices and theories. This synthetic strategy is not aimed at nullifying diversity, but rather wants to reach exactly the opposite objective: to fully recognise the diversity that characterises community media, by

[*] Email: nico.carpentier@im.uu.se

acknowledging the presence of these four approaches in community media practice (and theory) as they are materialised in always specific equilibria between the four approaches.

It is particularly the fourth approach – the rhizomatic – that explicitly articulates this diversity, contingency and fluidity as key characteristics of community media, which is one of the reasons why it merits our special attention in this short article. The rhizomatic approach to community media uses Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) metaphor to rearticulate the alternative media and civil society approaches, without giving up on the concept of alternativity. In its original conception, the rhizome is defined in close relation with the alternative, as the rhizome is non-linear, anarchic and nomadic: 'Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point' (1987: 19).

Through the uncelebratory use of this concept in community media studies, we can shift away more thoroughly from the focus on particular – dare I say isolated – community media organisations. This rhizomatic approach to community media allows us to see how community media are part of fluid civil society networks, and how they are connected with other (non-media) civil society organisations and social movements. Chidgey, Gunnarsson Payne and Zobl's (2009: 487) rhizomatic analysis of the *Plotki Femzine* nicely illustrates the existence of these linkages:

> through collaborative acts of discussion, experimental art, autobiographical essays, and critical fiction, the *Femzine* project brings together women living and working in CEE countries to create an emerging space for feminist discussions and an articulation of feminist identities and connections (emphasis in original).

It is this embeddedness in a fluid civil society, in combination with their oppositional relationship towards the state and the market (as alternatives to mainstream public and commercial media), that make community media highly elusive and fluid. Both the many connections that community media have, and their structural adjustability, remain too often under-researched, showing the need for more non-media centric research into community media.

The same needs apply in relation to the two other defining components of the rhizomatic approach: community media's role as crossroads of civil society and their linkages with state and market. Community media are not 'mere' actors in the rhizomatic networks, but play a catalytic role in functioning as a crossroads – they are places and spaces where people from different types of organisations, social movements and struggles can meet and collaborate. In an earlier research project (Santana and Carpentier, 2010), focusing on two Belgian community radio stations, a remarkably high number of connections with (mainly) civil society were shown to exist, which provides a promising first look into the size of these rhizomes, and the intensity of these connections.

These networks do not stop at the edge of civil society, though; like rhizomes, community media can cut across borders and build linkages between pre-existing gaps: 'a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 7). Community media (and other civil organisations) establish these kinds of linkages with (segments of) the state and the market without necessarily losing their proper identity, and without becoming incorporated and/or assimilated. They are, in other words, not merely counter-hegemonic, but engage with the market and state. In this sense, they are trans-hegemonic. Through these linkages, they can play a potentially deterritorialising role – to use one of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts – destabilising the rigidities and certainties of public and market media organisations. Again, how this is discursively and materially played out, deserves more of our attention.

Notes

[1]   For reasons of convenience, the community media label is used in this article, as 'community/alternative/civil society/rhizomatic media' would only increase the word count and decrease the text's legibility.

[2]   The object of this analysis – community media organisations – of course complicates an unequivocal society-centred approach. Instead, this type of approach should be interpreted as the radical societal contextualisation of community media.

References

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