

COMMUNITY ARTS AND MUSIC, COMMUNITY MEDIA

Cultural Politics and Policy in Britain Since the 1960s

George McKay

The process of communication is in fact the process of community.

—Raymond Williams (quoted in Everitt, 1997, p. 80)

This chapter considers ways in which “community” has been understood and constructed in arts and media movements concerned with a progressive social change agenda in Britain since the counterculture of the 1960s and early 1970s. This will help us understand what the meanings of the term *community* are in today’s cultural economy. Kevin Howley (2005) writes of having once “disappeared down . . . [a] rabbit hole” in his efforts at definition, pointing out that “the difficulties associated with adequately defining the term ‘community’ have confounded the study of community media” (p. 5). This is not, though, unique to community media—as Anthony Everitt (1997) has pointed out, in the arts world from the 1970s on, “the word ‘community’ became increasingly problematic” (p. 85). By the mid-1990s, even the specific constituency of *community* musicians, at a conference hosted by Community Music East, and titled *The Voice in Community Music Seminar*, could come to

no consensus on the definition of “the community,” or indeed, who should define it. . . . Boundaries are contestable and difficult to set. . . . Generally, people thought it better to resist such definitions as they could become straitjackets. (p. 85)

The introductory sentences to Petra Kuppers and Gwen Robertson's (2007) *The Community Performance Reader* confess, "A sentence that starts 'Community performance is . . .' should, arguably, begin this book. Trying to finish that sentence, however, is no easy matter" (p. 1). For other community artists, the term's definitional looseness has been viewed less as a constriction and more as a strategic opportunity—so Anne Cahill (1998) in the context of community music in Australia has sought to uncover and exploit any "advantage in the fuzziness" of definitions of "community" (p. 6).

Let us revisit the question of "community"—and to make it less complex, my view will be taken from those working in the fields of community arts, music, and media over the decades, that is, from the ways in which workers and participants in these movements, primarily in Britain, have themselves understood and employed, and possibly strategically redefined, the term. This, I think, will be useful—not least as, a couple of pages after his lagomorphic experience, Howley (2005) writes of community media as "efforts to *reclaim* [italics added] the media" (p. 20), while Everitt (1997) has described community music as a sociocultural project aimed at "the *re-creation* [italics added] of community" (chap. 4;). Such "re-"s as these may suggest a Golden Age, or a nostalgia, but they also signal for us the essential requirement to look back, to historicize.

The chapter originates with a concern that the contemporary use of "community" masks a depoliticization of once radical projects or a dilution of their legacy. In exploring connections between community media and social change, I have been interested in ways in which the alternative media movement from the 1960s on has maintained a presence within—or been erased from—the rise of community media. Many community media organizations do articulate their roles in ways that might have sounded familiar to some of their alternative media antecedents. For instance, the director of the Hereford-based Rural Media Company, Nic Millington, explains the

rationale of its activities as being “personal empowerment [of its users] *and social change* [italics added]” (quoted in Waltz, 2005, p. 33). The adequacy of the critical position—or suspicion—of depoliticization is interrogated by looking at issues including the following: community arts and music, community media post-1997 in Britain, and interrogating “community” in the context of soft capital. It should be clear that my approach to this media topic is not via media history, policy, or institutions, but instead springs from an interest in the cultural politics and history of community arts and music. From this perspective, I hope to identify and explore what I think of with only some awkwardness as the *nonmedia side* of community media. I am not so concerned with community media as a contemporary practice and form of organization of media production and consumption; rather, I am interested in viewing it in relation to other forms of cultural and countercultural work that have been (or claimed to be) located in the community.

Community Arts and Media From the 1960s On

Primarily, I am concerned with the community arts movement of the 1960s on, the rise of community music in the 1980s and its continued presence in the 21st century, and the extraordinary explosion of what can legitimately be termed the community media *movement* from the 1990s on. The most obvious thread connecting these, of course, is the term, the claim, the desired object, the problem of “community” itself, and I aim to historicize “community” within the cultural production and participation of these movements. Also, though it needs contextualizing for each cultural practice as well as for each period, “community” is constructed differently through music than it is through media (of course); but, furthermore, it carries different meanings in the 1960s than it does in the 2000s. Both cultural and social contexts signify. In his influential book *The Politics of Performance*, Baz Kershaw (1992) has traced what he acknowledges as a “somewhat circuitous

route” of influence across the decades and across community cultural formations alike,

by creating “models for cultural action” within the counter-cultures, which then spread through their networks to influence cultural practices in other spheres, alternative theatre made significant contributions to the changing patterns of cultural production generally. Thus, mid-1970s experiments in participatory community theatre in part provided models for the community activist movement which in the 1980s influenced many local authorities to adopt culturally democratic policies. (p. 254)

Notwithstanding the qualifications and occasional hesitations in this provisional chart of influence—perhaps, textual symptoms of the uncertainty of the community arts movement during the “mean hard times” of the early 1990s in which Kershaw was writing—my argument is that it is possible to extend the trajectory into the later 1990s and beyond, within the different cultural contexts of community music and media. As a specific example to illustrate this from Britain, consider an organization such as the London Musicians’ Collective (LMC), founded in 1976 in a late gasp of the countercultural enthusiasm for improvised and experimental sonicities and performances, the anarchopolitics of mutual aid, and cultural activism—another strand of which was contemporaneously giving rise to a significant sector of the community music movement. The LMC grabbed the opportunity to move into community media as it developed in the late 1990s, to form Resonance FM, a groundbreaking Restricted Service License radio and Internet station playing and commissioning experimental music, sound art, and left-field documentaries (see Atton, 2004; McKay, 2005). A cultural curiosity and openness to collaboration characterized many who worked in community arts and experimentation, which also meant that, on a pragmatic level, when

new opportunities or technologies became available—in performance, music, or media, as well as in arts and education funding—these could be explored and exploited. Clive Bell (quoted in McKay, 2005) describes the cross-cultural mid-1970s context that saw the establishment of the LMC:

Improvisers were dipping their fingers into many of the pies of mixed media, dance, film, and performance art. And in fact at this time, just before punk and its DIY ethic erupted, there was a remarkable burst of energy in the underground arts scene. Dancers founded the X6 Dance Collective and the New Dance magazine at Butlers Wharf, while film makers the London Film Makers Co-op[erative]. (p. 233)

In fact, the LMC could trace its provenance back to

the alternative culture of London in the latter part of the 1960s, intrinsic to a wider cultural explosion in the arts which was characterised by the music and happenings of the UFO club, and the diversity of theatre, performance and poetry readings. (Reynolds, 2007, p. 158)

That is, the counterculture included important innovations within the organization and production of media more widely than simply the generally acknowledged significance of the underground press of the time. In due course, the LMC's in-house magazine, *Resonance*, gave its title in turn to Resonance FM—a media development made possible not only by funding and policy shifts but also by the digital expertise of some of the experimental musicians as well as the flexibility of such

cultural workers to adapt. Here we need to acknowledge the savviness or survival instinct of the cultural worker at the margins when sensing a new funding pot. It is just such diachronic (sometimes micro-)narratives of cultural and social radicalism that matter, for they speak to us of ways in which notions and practices such as political idealism, the operation of culture for social change, subcultural contumacy not only survive but adapt and, perhaps, even thrive across decades and generations (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1. London Musicians' Collective's magazine, Resonance, Anniversary Edition, 2000: Bridging Radical Music (1970s), Print Media (1980s), Community Radio (2000s)

There are many precedents for the idea of community arts, but, as with other postwar areas of experimentation in life and culture, the events of one recent decade in particular do have to be acknowledged. According to Vicky White (quoted in Moser & McKay, 2005):

The 1960s could be regarded as the true beginning of the community arts movement and it sought to challenge the prevalent standards and assumptions about the value of art but found itself judged against them anyway . . . These pioneers wanted participation and relevance for the people as a whole. But they found themselves having to be judged within the standards set by larger organisations and funders within the dominant . . . The participants and instigators saw [the community arts movement] as *giving people a voice* as it was used not only for social means but also for political demonstrations. It saw itself as anti-institutional and it used arts to effect social change. (p. 63)

What this new generation of socially committed community artists viewed as more traditional questions of cultural value were “sidestepped by an emphasis on process rather than

product. To offer a 'product' was to enter the capitalist world of production and to accept the very notion of professionalism which it was the community artist's task to subvert" (Everitt, 1997, p. 83) (Figure 3.2) In part because of such a critical stance toward established arts organizations, as well as strands of elitism and self-interest from the latter, there was a certain amount of mutual distrust, even antagonism, between cultural or countercultural workers and some funding bodies. Despite this, in Kershaw's (1992) view,

By 1970 the key ideological, organisational and aesthetic features of the . . . community theatre movement were relatively easy to detect. Whether organised for touring or resident projects, the groups worked outside the existing theatre system in venues where their counter-cultural message would be welcomed. Relationships between performers and audience, and between companies and communities, were characterised by a new directness. This aimed to both demystify the art form, especially to strip it of its mystique of professionalism, and to promote greater equality between the stage and the auditorium. (p. 103)

Figure 3.2. Community Music East 1989 to 1993 Report, Showing George McKay on Bass, Running a Workshop

Yet for all their radicalism from the 1970s on, community arts generally relied on local and national government or arts organizations and sympathetic charities for funding. In the 1980s, for example, a national scheme called the Community Programme was a government initiative aimed at reducing (many said massaging) registered unemployment figures by establishing projects across the community. (This could include anything from teaching water safety in schools, to improvised music in youth centers, to providing gardening and landscape services in neglected parks or for

families on benefit.) Like me, Dave Price was a community musician then:

In 1989, community music often defined itself in oppositional terms. We didn't quite know what we were, but we were sure that we were *not* formalized education, nor were we anything to do with the dominant ideology. Indeed some of us (somewhat grandiosely, it must be admitted) saw ourselves as acting in open defiance of the [right wing, conservative] Thatcher administration . . . How things have changed . . . It is a remarkable transformation . . . [caused significantly by] the willingness of the 1997-elected Labour Government to establish a dialogue with artists, educators and social scientists in addressing . . . "social exclusion." (quoted in Moser & McKay, 2005, p. 67)

The centrality of arts within the community was then recognized by the 1997 and subsequent Labour administrations as part of the equation seeking to address issues of social exclusion and urban regeneration, as a report to the Social Exclusion Unit for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport articulated in 1999: "Arts . . . are not just an 'add-on' to regeneration work. They are fundamental to community involvement and ownership of any regeneration initiative when they offer means of positive engagement in tune with local interests" (quoted in Moser & McKay, 2005, p. 67). Of course, there are more negative readings of such arts-oriented regeneration policies, whereby "cultural strategies work as a 'carnival mask,' . . . and conceal—and even increase—the growing social inequality, polarization, and conflict within cities" (Stanziola, 1999, p. 6). Nonetheless, in Britain, this new language of community arts has indeed translated into concrete action so that in the past few years, the quantity of community music and community media activity across the country has developed impressively, with significant investment and

support, and the recognition of the need for a network and infrastructure. It is in this context that Everitt (1997) speaks of “the subsidy revolution” (chap. 8).

The Congregationist Imperative

Most community arts define “community” by their very act of constructing it in the moment of performance: the community comes together, is invented or strengthened temporarily, as a special group event, in the form of the performers (choir, big band, theatre ensemble) and (usually) of the audience. Kuppers and Robertson’s (2007) definition has a very simple starting point: “the audience—the community” (p. 2). The spectated performance (rather than, say, a studio-based music recording) takes place in a particular group location: a village hall, a town square, a procession along a promenade, an ad hoc theatre. The artistic project itself—song cycle, play, or other event—combines with the performance in a bringing and coming together of people in a local space, often within a narrative of site specificity. This is the *congregationist imperative* of community arts as opposed to the more mediated “non-social form[s] of participation” (Everitt, 1997, p. 24). (I am conscious here of trying to avoid reaffirming what Shirley A. White [1994] has memorably called “participatory euphoria” [p. 18].) The sense of locality is often emphasized in the narrative or subject materials of the event being centered on the local environment itself—so a community play set in a particular village will tell the story of that village. Kershaw (1992) outlines some of the other “interactive techniques” employed in the congregationist imperative, including those

drawn from popular historical genres such as pantomime and music hall; through techniques derived from the popular media of comic-strips, film animation, cinema and television which encouraged more active approaches to the reading of

performance; through the adaptation of environmental forms such as fun-fairs and festivals to produce the sensory, wrap-around effects of psychedelic spectacles; through the physical participation of the audience in the action of the show, reminiscent of the techniques of “primitive” rituals. (p. 103)

The desire for community through culture and congregation is also evident in Britain in the phenomenal success and expansion of festival culture in recent years: Commonly understood as a sociocultural practice of the transatlantic 1960s, pop festivals have absolutely thrived as a seasonal experience of British youth and weekend counterculturalists to the extent that in the 2000s festival culture is debatably more widespread (if by and large less edgy and socially radical) than at any previous time in its half-century history (see McKay, 2000, 2004). Instances of congregationalism such as community arts and pop festival culture are partly about place but in their contemporary manifestations are also sociocultural responses to the perceived atomizing effects of the technologies of the digital era. They work in part by blurring the distinction between participant and observer—communities performing themselves (rather than sitting watching professional actors playing their life roles or histories), musicians playing and learning with and from each other (the workshop as social music making), festivalgoers being their own story (the crowd and temporary community of audience rather than bands on stage as the pivotal festival experience).

Other cultural workers view the notion of locating cultural practice within a specific community as itself inherently restricting, as one closing down as many options as it may open up. Working from an elite music education institution in London, and in the context of orchestral music, Peter Renshaw (quoted in Everitt, 1997) warns against fetishizing place:

Community music is much too rooted in locality, to place in a narrow sense. . . .

This means that it doesn't really "empower," for it locks people into their cultural relativity, even if it does politically "empower." There is little sense of wider standards. (p. 85)

Such critiques can be extended from debates about cultural values into a social or world view—where the privileged "local" or community orientation is from another, more critical perspective parochial or even functionally exclusive. (Social phenomena such as xenophobia and nationalism are often cited in debates about the reactionary potential of "community"; see Delanty, 2007.) As Chris Atton (2004) has noted in another countercultural context (following John Downing), there can be the danger of "the 'locked circuit' of alternative-media participation, in which activists 'colonise' the alternative media, closing off access to both non-activist sources and non-activist audiences" (p. 52). This is more than the familiar accusation of the "alternative ghetto" (see Atton, 2002, pp. 33–35), or of niche interest groups preaching to the converted, since it suggests an active exclusivity and silence on the part of the countercultural sector that so often claims to be precisely giving voice.

To what extent is the congregationist imperative central to community *media*, though? By extension, are we looking at a different understanding in the context of media, rather than theatre or music, of what "community" means and how it is constructed? Even—Do community media in some formal ways actually work *against* the congregationist imperative and undermine the (potentially, whether problematically or radically) nostalgic reclamation of community that earlier (or other) community movements may be predicated on? Of course, media scholars have explored widely ways in which dispersed or apparently individuating media forms, such as broadcasting or the Internet, have successfully constructed or reformatted community in their audiences—the

viewing public, local radio, the chat room, or social networking, for instance. Other work has focused on communities of interest, rather than ones spatially defined. Furthermore, community media, too, can claim a similar sociocultural tactic as community arts and festivals—a certain blurring of categories between production and consumption. Indeed, Howley (2005) argues that this is central to community media’s political impact: “By collapsing the distinction between media producers and media consumers . . . community media provide empirical evidence that local populations do indeed exercise considerable power at precisely the lasting and organizational levels” (p. 3). But what I have argued here is that there is an important initial distinction around the social act of congregation to be made within this specific context of community arts in relation to community media, even if it is a distinction made to be subsequently problematized. Where the production and dissemination of community arts and music are compellingly congregationist, community media and their various technologies do not rely on that same simple tactic. This matters precisely because of that same primary word, *community*, and what it might be claiming—that is, how the secondary words (*community arts*, *community music*, *community media*) change the meaning and the experience of community.

Yet today, it is in the localizing impulse, at the local level of organization and reportage, that community media practice is identifiable and efficacious. One of the shifts in our understanding of community has been as a result of globalization discourse, in which community is often presented as under threat, to the extent that, in Howley’s (2005) view, community media are “a dynamic response to the forces of globalization” (p. 33). Here, the developments of the media industries in recent decades have had an impact on notions of community that distinguish community media from community arts more generally in two important ways. First, the intense concentration of global media technologies into a relatively small number of very powerful

transnational corporations is an altogether more radical economic and cultural shift than has been seen across the music (some aspects of the pop industry notwithstanding) and arts worlds generally. Second, the media plays a more pivotal role in directly disseminating and shaping political discourse on a daily basis: With some exceptions, even at their most engaged, music and arts (community or otherwise) make interventions into agendas that are set elsewhere—sometimes *by* the media and always *through* it. I would argue that community arts and music can also be read as dynamic responses to globalization, of course—aspects of the sociocultural desire to (re)inscribe the local—though, perhaps, they were a little earlier than community media to the debating chamber or barricade, and perhaps, too, they were less complicit than media in causing the problem (if such it is) of globalization in the first place.

Other “Communities,” Other “Community Media”

There is something irresistible about “community,” for it can function as an ideologically blank template to be shaped from above as well as below, from right and left (and any “postideological” or third-way destabilization of such positions). It is a zone of contestation—never more apparent in a British political context than in the startling alternative use of “community” by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the late 1980s. Here “community” entered the political lexicon and produced a heated (and sometimes hated) response from left-wing activists and citizens alike. The introduction of new arrangements for collecting local council rates was formally termed by the government the “community charge.” Because of links between a new register for tax collection and the electoral register, and also drawing on British radical history—the uprising against a previous tax in 1381, activists called it the “poll tax.” Oppositional tactics to it included mass civil disobedience and boycott campaigns around the slogan “Can’t pay won’t pay” as well as a high-

visibility public riot in London in 1990. The abolition of the tax was announced the following year (a few months after Mrs. Thatcher had resigned her premiership). Such use of “community” was widely understood at the time as an instance of political doublespeak and has remained in the activist memory—like the Peasants’ Revolt of 600 years earlier, which was referenced by anti-poll tax campaigners. Also, though, activists themselves sought to reclaim the term from the right: In Scotland, the primary anarchist-influenced organization against the tax named itself Community Resistance (Burns, 1992, pp. 32–33), while in Trafalgar Square, London, one banner’s slogan instructed simply, “COMMUNITIES . . . CHARGE!” (Anonymous, 1990, p. 33). In this profound moment, the very notion of “community,” and indeed the actual term itself, was at the heart of the political struggle.

Other, less dramatic manifestations of community—now in the specific context of media—can further complicate the social activist impulse that we have identified as a core feature of the community arts movement historically and that is often claimed in the community media field, too. From the apparent soft sell of big business’s charity donations to the discourse of corporate social responsibility, we should ask questions about what might be termed *community capitalism* and the complicity of certain forms of media in it. This can be seen equally in local and global contexts. Locally, for example, a key Web site address—www.communitymedia.co.uk—is registered to, and is also the business place of, a British company called Community Media, which produces and sells marketing materials. These marketing “media” range from traditional ones such as bookmarks, beer mats, and coffee mugs to more contemporary versions such as mobile phone screensavers and packets of garden seeds. Boldly promising “a new marketing ethos,” the company’s original expertise was in working with public and voluntary sector organizations and campaigns, from literacy to health or policing and safety. A short company profile articulates its blend of idealism

and commerce:

Community Media was first established in 1995, as a one-man operation, run from home . . . Community Media has a talented, innovative and highly skilled design team that bring together all elements of design to create thought-provoking and visual designs. We also specialise in providing advertising, graphic design and print management for voluntary and private sector organisations and have built up a reputation for providing a quality, flexible and value for money service.

(www.communitymedia.co.uk; accessed June 25, 2007)

A progressive agenda is acknowledged by the company through drawing attention to its work with the voluntary sector and local authorities, which functions also to distinguish its business activity from the more purely capitalistic end of the public relations and advertising industries. The purpose of the word “community” in the company title is to strengthen that difference and to further signal its general worthiness and ethical awareness. Community Media, the business, offers an illuminatingly ambivalent small-scale case study of ways in which “community” is employed in the negotiation of political positioning, in the context of both the social community itself (in this instance voluntary, local authority, implicitly socialist) and the commercial environment (deliberately *not* part of the cutthroat world of advertising executives).

There are also global perspectives to something as apparently rooted as community media. In Britain, a dedicated mainstream television facility was made available in 2000, initially as a rather modest opportunity to air material produced by voluntary, charity, and burgeoning community media organizations, “mainly showing charity advertisements and selling charity merchandise.” Largely funded by the government, the Community Channel was quite rapidly

capitalized on as a means by which the television industry could display its credentials for widening participation and for social inclusion. By 2004, all major British broadcasters had pledged to support it—including BBC and ITV and Channels Four and Five as well as Sky and Discovery. The joint declaration signed by these terrestrial and satellite broadcasters aimed “to make the Community Channel a key external TV partner in our efforts to bring news, information and enthusiasm about the work of the voluntary, charitable and community sectors to our viewers” (www.communitychannel.org). They were joined 2 years later by transnational media organizations, including MTV and Disney. The channel’s Web site explains to viewers that

Community Channel is TV that gives a damn. It makes you think again about the world around you, and inspires you to take action on the causes and issues that matter to you. Broadcasting original shows, the best of terrestrial TV and showcasing the work of new directors and community programme makers, Community Channel is the place for real-life stories. . . .

We receive free airtime from Sky, NTL, Telewest, and Freeview, and we thank them for their support. (www.communitychannel.org/content/view/814/12/; accessed June 25, 2007)

Fred Powell and Martin Geoghegan (2004) have identified the key responses to globalization available to organizations involved in community development as

first, a rejectionist stance, based on critical alternative models of development that seek to reclaim civil society for democracy; [and] second, a co-operative stance, following an integrationist model based on co-operation in the “New Economy”

that draws community development into a partnership with government and capital. (p. 4)

The Community Channel effectively tries to take both these stances at the same time. There is, if not an outright rejection, then certainly a critical alternative on offer, both in the claim that the channel broadcasts “TV that gives a damn” (note, too, the perhaps more powerful implication that programming on the other channels from its sponsoring broadcasters might well *not* “give a damn”), as well as its claim to transform its viewers into activist citizens focused on social “causes and issues.” At the same time, incorporating the discourse and practice of community media in a national and transnational media context, there is a clearly cooperative and integrationist model on offer. Placing community media directly and even critically in a global media context, as the Community Channel does, surely dramatizes for us the continuing stark yet crucial questions of power and access within the industry. It should also remind us of ways in which the notion of “community,” as understood by activists for social engagement and change, can be surprisingly easily co-opted and deconstructed. Readers will and must evaluate for themselves the extent to which such a pact is worth making, and what may be lost, in the chase for wider dissemination of community television programs.

Conclusion

I have suggested in this chapter the extent to which, historically, community arts and music and, more recently, community media, have existed in an ambivalent political space. We might simply term that awkward and energetic space of politics and culture “community” itself. By cultural and media community workers it is constructed pragmatically, if precariously—following funding

opportunities and in response to changes in governments and their policies—and idealistically, from alternative media and radical arts for social change projects and interventions. We have seen that it has also been constructed in a spirit of compromise, or indeed imposed as a label to mask ideologically contradictory positions. My fundamental point is that it is essential for media scholars to recognize in the term *community media* not only media issues, however important (or inflated) these may be. We must also critically acknowledge the full weight of “community” as a cluster of shorthand definitions, as a set of problems, yes, but as part of the wider and longer-lasting movement for liberation and radical social change manifested in much community arts and community music practice over the decades. Community media is part of this trajectory, even if it also has its own specificities, not least of which may be a more complex set of negotiations around questions of globalization in the media industry generally. However, as Gay Hawkins (quoted in Cahill, 1998) has written (of the experience of the community arts movement in Australia):

Community is not something to be magically recovered but a goal to be struggled for. It is not something to be manufactured by outside professionals but emerges out of collaboration and shared commitment and expression. Cultural work is an effective tool in the formation of community, it is a tool for activism. (p. 109)

As we have seen, the post-1997 “subsidy revolution”—a New Labor government committed to more socially inclusive arts funding, urban regeneration via the engine of culture, and the funds from the then new National Lottery to support such a “seismic” shift (Everitt, 1997, p. 157)—in community arts in Britain saw specific cultural forms benefit significantly. These included community music and community media.

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