

Media/Communication Organizations

9.1 POOR MAGAZINE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH COMMUNITY MEDIA

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The author reports on her ethnographic study of POOR Magazine, a non profit arts, education, and media organization led by poor and indigenous people. POOR Magazine is dedicated to providing media access, education, and advocacy to people in poverty.

The United States is one of the largest economies in the world based on gross domestic product, second only to the coalition of countries comprising the European Union's single economy (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). This apparently robust economic status, however, obscures another startling statistic: from 2008 to 2009, the number of people in the United States struggling with poverty increased from 39.8 million to 43.6 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). We live in one of the richest countries in the world, but a significant number of our fellow Americans still struggle to make the bare minimum to support themselves and their families. However, in mainstream media coverage this population generally does not appear, or is not taken seriously, so which media serve the needs and express the perspectives and experiences of these 43.6 million people? The sphere of media, or the mediascape, is diverse and consists of several categories: *commercial* (for-profit), including most mainstream media; *public* (partially government-supported) such as the Public Broadcasting Service; and *community* media, in which people create and control media that reflects their own community's needs and experiences. Of these types, it is usually only in community media that we are able to hear the perspectives of people living in poverty.

The class system in contemporary American society can be seen through the lenses of two powerful dynamics: the overwhelming presence of mainstream media in society and the immense power these media have to maintain and strengthen dominant ideologies and social structures. For years, scholars have demonstrated how mainstream commercial media reinforce unequal class structures and dominant ideologies, and marginalize ethnic, gender, class, and sexual communities (Marx, 1978; Said, 1997; Downing, 2001). There is, however, a bright light

in this dark tunnel of social inequality. A survey of current media scholarship reveals a number of organizations, educators, and active citizens are using community media to bypass mainstream media's monopoly of control and to engage in social justice activism. These engaged citizens are creating alternative forms of communication to reach out and encourage unengaged individuals to become active participants in social and political processes. Such media-driven outreach and civic engagement strengthens social movements, cultivates grassroots organizations, and alters class structures and communication flows. But how do community media engage individuals who are normally ignored or vilified by the mainstream media? What role do community media educators play in encouraging civic engagement? Using Clemencia Rodríguez's (2001) concept of citizens' media, I sought to answer these questions by conducting ethnographic fieldwork with the community media organization *POOR Magazine*.

POOR Magazine is a poor people/indigenous people-led grassroots, non profit arts organization dedicated to providing revolutionary media access, education, arts, and advocacy to youth, adults, and elders in poverty. The concept of revolution is at the root of *POOR*'s mission because the organization believes it is engaging oppressed people in new and dramatic ways. *POOR* is located in San Francisco, and works to promote positive social change for citizens whose lives are marked by struggles with homelessness, poverty, racism, classism, disability, immigration, incarceration, and discrimination in general. The organization was created by Tiny, aka Lisa Gray-García, and her mother Dee in 1996. They launched a concept known as poverty scholarship, and they were in fact poverty scholars. Through poverty scholarship, *POOR* builds power with the recognition of scholarship and knowledge already held by the students at *POOR* (Tiny, 2011). True to its namesake, *POOR Magazine* could initially only afford to print a few issues before its budget was exhausted. However, thanks to the accessibility of new media technologies, *POOR* has been able to continue its mission with online publishing.

Apart from producing community media, *POOR Magazine* also provides both media education and media access to people struggling with poverty. Thanks to *POOR Magazine*, community members are able to voice their stories, ideas, and opinions in a variety of media, including books, radio programs, blogs, videos, and news articles on the *POOR* Web site and in local publications. *POOR Magazine* also offers courses on media production (radio, television, and publication) and investigative journalism ("digital resistance"), as well as courses on research methods, awareness of systematic oppression, and constructive ways to resist oppression through media and education. Community members are able to take advantage of these opportunities through the personal support *POOR* provides in addition to education and media production. For example, *POOR* provides transportation for students and their children, child care, meals, direct legal advocacy, and monetary stipends for time spent learning with *POOR*. Through these initiatives, *POOR Magazine* works to create change models for long-term economic sustainability and attempts to facilitate agency for people in struggle from many different cultures, races and generations.

CITIZENS' MEDIA THROUGH NEW MEDIA

Alternative and community media play a vital role in helping people in struggle create opportunities to express their voice. According to Rennie (2009), alternative media exist as a direct challenge to mainstream media and dominant information and communication systems. *POOR Magazine* is a good example of a community medium challenging social injustice structures and processes. Not only does *POOR* create revolutionary access for community voices, it also

gives citizens an opportunity to examine and challenge the social, political, and economic causes of their conditions of poverty. According to Rodríguez (2001), oppressed peoples can re-appropriate power through strategic use of alternative media. Through this reappropriation, citizens can then engage other passive community members. This engagement happens when citizens create their own media and broadcast their own histories, voices, and cultures. As community broadcasts enter the mediascape, the larger dominant society is forced to take notice of them. The new audibility of these voices can then begin processes of increasing the power of these previously silent populations.

The term *citizens' media* can help us understand how media use can promote citizen engagement in political democracy. Rodríguez (2001) defines a *citizen* as someone who enacts her/his citizenry through everyday life practices of dialogue and action that, ultimately, shape the local social fabric, and argues that passive individuals become active citizens when they become immersed in regular participation in local decision-making processes. Passive people do not civically engage with their communities or political systems. Importantly, by encouraging passive people to express their voices and articulate their perspectives and points of view, community media can become citizen's media; they are uniquely positioned to trigger the transformation of passive individuals into engaged active citizens who can build and shape their own communities.

POOR MAGAZINE: COMMUNITY MEDIA PRODUCER AND EDUCATOR

In its efforts to engage and build power with its demographic audience, composed of under-represented, misrepresented, and silenced communities of color in the San Francisco Bay Area, *POOR* provides PeopleSkool/Escuela de la Gente, an educational initiative designed to teach community media production. I enrolled in Escuela de la Gente to observe this educational process firsthand. I watched and participated alongside local community members as they learned to use new media technologies, including blog writing and video production, and also to respond to the mainstream media's misrepresentations and stereotyping of their communities. In my ethnographic fieldwork, I embraced a Freirean approach to shared knowledge and dialogue of equals (Freire, 1998). In my interactions with *POOR Magazine* staff and community members, rather than assuming any superior knowledge, I attempted to create a dialogue of knowledges. I sought engaged conversation between my academic perspective and the experiential knowledge and understanding of *POOR* participants. Listening to *POOR* participants as legitimate producers of their own knowledge and perspectives allowed me to form a greater understanding of the organizational process and the participants' experiences as will be detailed later in this chapter.

In my participation and observation with *POOR Magazine*, I attended classes, observed protests, wrote articles, recorded press conferences, assisted with F.A.M.I.L.Y. Project (an arts/education initiative for the children of Escuela de la Gente students), and taught video production, among other activities. Escuela de la Gente provides education for people with limited access to formal education channels. The program runs for 9 weeks and provides training in art and media production and courses in language domination, bilingual education, and class struggles from the poor perspective. Once students complete the initial program, they have the option to continue in an advanced program that includes book publishing and advanced media production. After completion of the advanced program, they are also eligible to work as reporters for *POOR*

Magazine. During my enrollment, the *POOR Magazine* office was filled with both first-time and advanced students.

While enrolled in Escuela de la Gente, I observed students transitioning from passivity into active citizenship. Step by step, I saw *POOR* participants progressing from novices to advanced students and finally becoming reporters of *POOR Magazine*. I saw this process following four distinct steps: (1) students articulating their voice and crafting/creating their message, (2) students learning journalism and media skills, (3) students passively using journalism/media skills for class assignments, and finally (4) students actively using their journalism/media skills to express their own perspective and personal struggles. The entire process occurred cyclically as students returned to various phases throughout their participation in the program.

Phase 1: Voice Articulation

In the first phase, students learn to reflect on their personal experiences with poverty and homelessness, and to shape the story of their struggle. These burgeoning voices of resistance are informed and articulated through directed guidance in media education/training courses and class teachings on *POOR* ideologies. For example, a theater class revolves around helping students shape their voices, enabling them to express their own experiences, feelings, and emotions about controversial issues such as homelessness, poverty, and welfare. In the first theater class, students are asked to think of examples of negative media depictions of people like themselves. The students respond with media stereotypes such as: "Welfare mothers are lazy," "Immigrants steal our jobs," "Illegals are just that-illegal," "All crimes are committed by brown and black people," or "People on welfare should just get a job." Afterwards, students are given time to formulate a response based on their own experiences and perspectives and then share their responses with the class. Responses are personal and use personal experience to demonstrate that the negative media depictions are untrue. One student, responding to media images of "welfare mothers," observed that mothers on welfare could not possibly be lazy because being a poor mother is a full-time job. Another student responded to messages about illegal immigrants by observing that immigrants do not steal work from anyone; they actually take the jobs that nobody else in society wants such as harvesting fruit or providing childcare. In this process, as each student confronts a negative stereotype, she is forced to address it with a personal response that stems from her own struggle.

Phase 2: Journalism and Media Skill Cultivation

As students learn how to find and shape their own voices, they are simultaneously learning the skills of "revolutionary journalism" and media that enable them to broadcast their personal stories. Again, revolutionary stems from the concept of creating dramatic change using unique journalism techniques such as guerrilla press conferences and blogging. Journalism and media skills are taught through classes such as Revolutionary Media for Skolaz #101, Radio/Video production, Language Domination, and Po'Poets/Theater. In these classes, students learn basic computer skills, how to write revolutionary blogs, how to conduct revolutionary journalism reporting and interviewing, basic radio production (audio and interview recording), basic video production (camera operation and audio recording), and theatrical skills for corporate media infiltration (similar to the concept of culture jamming).

For example, I assisted the main instructor in the video production class in introducing the students to video camera basics. When he entered the room, rather than dictating a lecture, he sat down in a chair with the students, asking questions and soliciting responses from students who already know about the camera. He created a Freirian class atmosphere where teacher and students are equal by having the students speak as often as the instructor, encouraging shared knowledge. Together, students and instructors go over the basic features of the camera. Each student handles the camera and plays with the buttons to learn by doing. We cover operation of the camera, angles, props, perspective, and lighting, and then have the students practice shooting profiles of each other while figuring out the most comfortable way to hold the camera while still getting the best image.

Phase 3: Passive Application of Journalism and Media Skills

Once students learn the necessary journalism skills and media techniques, they are given class assignments to exercise and strengthen these new skills. Exercises include introspective writing assignments on personal struggles, creating video profiles, and recording audio sound bites. One example of passive journalism/media use is the introspective writing assignment. For this assignment, students write an example of their personal struggle in blog format. One of the immigrant students describes her struggle of her arrival in the United States. Upon her arrival, she lived with her sister and brother-in-law who kept her in captivity by threatening her deportation if she left. While living there, she was forced to clean the house and provide child care for only \$100 a month. Out of fear, she did not leave the house and in turn became a prisoner of her family. She eventually could no longer deal with her entrapment and voluntarily placed herself in the foster care system to leave her abusive family. While the student shares her story, the instructor listens and provides insight into how the student can format the struggle into a compelling blog. She gives guidance for the class to begin with attention-getting lines and create empathy by “dropping” the reader into their experience. These exercises build on the skills the students previously learn and begin to incorporate the students’ voices and personal struggles.

Phase 4: Active Application of Journalism and Media Skills

As students begin to use journalism and media skills shaped by their individual voices, experiences, and struggles to address important social issues, they enter the fourth stage of transformation from passive to engaged citizenship. Class exercises become complex responses to larger social issues, such as blog campaigns to collectively address issues affecting the students’ daily lives, for example, slumlords evicting the elderly. Other exercises include holding press conferences to confront local politicians and the mainstream media about issues concerning the poor, and staging theatrical performances as part of corporate media infiltration. For *POOR*, corporate media infiltration is a type of guerrilla journalism in which citizen journalists use mainstream media against mainstream media and dominant social ideologies. For example, *POOR* sets up instant “guerilla” press conferences in public areas to attract the attention of the public and the mainstream media, in order to get the stories covered in the evening news.

To actively engage the students in a larger social issue, *POOR* created a blog campaign to address a local initiative to improve the CalWorks Community Jobs Program (a program that

allows people to earn a living wage without requiring a college degree). For this campaign, students write blogs, send letters, and make phone calls to local government offices to voice their support for the measure. One student writes a blog detailing her struggle with homelessness, hunger, and illness. The bright light in her struggle is the CalWorks Community Jobs Program because it provides her work experience that raises her self-esteem and allows her to earn \$400 a month to support her family. In addition to the blogs posted on *POOR*'s Web site, students write letters to the local offices of congressional representatives. The letters provide an overview of the students' struggles and invite elected officials to visit *POOR*'s Web site and read all of the students' blogs of support for the initiative. As part of the campaign, the students and staff members also make phone calls to the politicians' offices. The calls are not easily made because of language barriers but the students are able to overcome adversity and leave their messages of support. Did this make a difference? Perhaps. The month after the blog campaign was launched, Congresswoman Pelosi's office phoned *POOR Magazine* to thank them for writing their blogs and voicing their perspectives.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT: AN AFTERTHOUGHT

During these phases, students begin to use new media technologies, interwoven with their life experiences and struggles, and shaped by their own voices to become active engaged citizens. The last phase of active citizenship is built on the first three. Students first articulate their voices, learn journalism and media skills, and then apply these skills. Finally, students take what they have learned and transition from passive to active citizens through the passion they bring to their assignments and merge with their own painful struggles. In this last phase, *POOR* cultivates engaged citizens by providing opportunities for students to express their voices and their stories. *POOR* affords oppressed people the opportunity to join in the mainstream media's exclusive conversation through the power of their own unique voices and stories.

Through this process, we see the power of community media. Through articulating the voices of subjects that have been historically ignored and misrepresented, community media engender communication processes based on empathy, allowing viewers, readers, and listeners to understand the experiences and struggles of these people. In recent years, movements that include African American, Asian American, and Native American perspectives into history books have succeeded in unearthing lost voices. However, many overlooked groups, including the homeless, disabled, and elderly, among others, still struggle to be heard on a daily basis. Through citizens' media and community media education, *POOR Magazine* provides a forum for people to articulate their own voices and allow their stories to break through barriers of oppression.

IT'S YOUR TURN: WHAT DO YOU THINK? WHAT WILL YOU FIND?

1. Compare the coverage of issues in *POOR Magazine* (www.poormagazine.org) with recent issues of mainstream news magazines and television news broadcasts. How are the *POOR Magazine* articles expressing the journalists' own voices?

How do these compare with the perspectives and voices prominent in mainstream media? What does this comparison teach you about the class system currently operating in the United States?

2. The digital divide is defined as the gap between people who have access to advancing technology and those who do not. *POOR Magazine* is one example of a way to create media literacy, or the ability to know and use new media technologies, that bridges the digital divide. What are some other ways media scholars can advance media literacy? How does the existence of the digital divide prevent this?
3. Are there any community media organizations where you live? If so, identify them and evaluate how their content and style of production differ from that of mainstream media organizations. How, if at all, do you think these differences affect the potential impact of the community media?
4. Generate a proposal for creating a community media organization to serve a currently underserved group in your area. What medium will you use? What population will you serve? How will you meet their needs? What obstacles will you face, and how will you overcome them?

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