Community Television’s Impact on Community

by

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Abstract

“Community Television’s Impact on Community” is a public ethnography in the form of a video documentary that looks at how a local television magazine show on South Vancouver Island, go! Island, contributes to community engagement. Local storytelling has the ability to connect us to the people, places, things and ideas of our community. Television plays an important role in sharing local stories with community. However, the media landscape is rapidly changing and local media has been hit hard by cutbacks, layoffs, and lack of technical resources needed to produce local television. As a result of online media, corporate media ownership, changes in technology and greater competition, local media, including television, is facing many challenges, including shrinking budgets. When this happens, we aren’t just losing local journalists, but we are also losing writers and producers who are known in the industry as lifestyles reporters. These specialists focus on the arts, culture, community news and human interest stories. This community-based storytelling has the ability to motivate people to engage in their community, and, can help build and strengthen relationships; helping people feel welcomed, valued and can enhance civic participation. This research will contribute to the conversation about the future of local television and allow those who have been part of its past to have a voice in this ongoing debate.
Introduction

Right now the media landscape is rapidly changing and local media have been hit hard by cutbacks, layoffs, and lack of technical resources needed to produce local television. David Taras in his 2015 book *Digital Mosaic* says, “in the last 10 to 15 years an entire architecture of human communication has been created that didn’t exist before” (p.7). As a result of online media, there are reductions in traditional corporate media ownership, in competition, and in local media, including television (p.8). According to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), private conventional television’s revenues have decreased an average of seven percent a year over the past five years, which has led to cutbacks and station closures (CRTC, 2015). We are not just losing local journalists, but we are also losing writers and producers who are known in the industry as specialty or beat reporters. Many of these specialists focused on the arts, culture, community news and human interest stories. What are the outcomes of this loss? According to Barbara Ganley, “healthy community – no matter the setting, is grounded in belonging, in understanding, in plurality” (Lambert, 2013, p. x). In other words, community-based storytelling motivates people to engage in their community, and can help build and strengthen relationships, helping people feel welcomed and “valued and civic participation is enhanced” (2013, p. x). My research examined how and why local media are changing, and how local storytelling has the power to engage community. My research is presented digitally as an ethnographic documentary, and titled, *The Power of Local Storytelling*.

As technology has continued to impact how we find and fund our local stories, there has been a growing concern at how this impacts community. Research suggests that despite where they find their local stories, Canadians do want to have access to local news and news features.
The CRTC commissioned a survey about programming for its 2013 Let’s Talk TV hearings and found that 81 per cent of respondents identified local news as more important than any other type of content including national or international news, feature films or sports (CRTC, 2013). According to the 2009 Knight Commission, news and information are “as vital to the healthy functioning of communities as clean air, safe streets, good schools, and public health” (Knight, 2009, p. xiii). People who live in smaller communities have even fewer options, and in recent years as local papers and stations shut down, their choices have become more limited. In the past five years local newspapers and broadcast outlets have scaled back operations, consolidated or shut down; even online news sites often struggle to stay afloat (Taras, 2015, p 7.).

As a community reporter and producer of 18 years, I was interested in investigating and discovering how this kind of local television show impacted those it served. In her study of the subject, Barbara Ganley talked about the importance of local storytelling for community building and added that digital storytelling helped give people a voice and this allowed them to have dialogue with their whole community and share what is important to them. She concluded that “there could be no more important moment to tell stories as a means to bear witness to our world and to change it for the better” (Lambert, 2013, p. xi). The data I gathered by interviewing 22 participants, experts, scholars and community members contributed to this research, and affirmed that local storytelling engages community and local media help create community. By discovering and telling the stories of the community that the members work and live in you create a deeper and richer connection (Gasher, 2009, p. i). My findings also indicate how local storytelling creates an identity or “sense of local place to which the audience members are encouraged to feel they belong” (Gasher, p. i). The very act of reaching out to the community for
this documentary created what James Carey described as “participation, association and fellowship” (Carey, 2008, p.12). *The Power of Local Storytelling* aims to contribute to the conversation about the future of local television and to allow those who have been part of its past to have a voice in its future.

**Methods**

With the introduction of new, affordable technology, the academic community is embracing the use of ethnographic research in the form of digital video to collect and analyze data (see Dicks, et al., 2006; Murthy, 2008, White, 2009; Vannini, 2014). I based my research on ethnography (Merrigan et al., 2012; Vannini, 2014; King et al., 1999) and participant observation (Vannini, 2012; White, 2009). The documentary featured interviews from social change practitioners, communication scholars, media experts, community members who have been featured on *go! Island*, and viewers. My personal experience as a community television reporter and my interest in exploring the impact this medium has on community shaped my decision to study local television in the interpretive paradigm gathering qualitative data through interviews and observation. As Murthy says, “Ethnography is about telling social stories” (2008, p. 838); and this is what I do. Good ethnography “effectively communicates a social story, drawing in the audience into the daily lives of the respondents” (p. 838). By interviewing past participants of community television I discovered how having your story shared on local television impacts community participation and engagement and how this experience contributed to their sense of identity and well-being (Dakers, 2010; King et al., 1999; Tedlock, 2007; Vannini, 2012).

I collected data through informal interviews captured using digital video and sound. Primary subjects are media experts, communication scholars, past participants and viewers of Shaw TV’s
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*go! Island* as well as those who worked at the other two South Vancouver Island TV stations, CHEK TV and BELL Media’s CTV Vancouver Island. Past participants from *go! Island* were chosen based on availability, diversity, personality and background. In order to get a cross-section of participants I looked at local businesses, non-profits, artisans, Gulf Island Chambers of Commerce representative, etc. We set-up interviews at their place of work or at their home.

While all three Vancouver Island television stations offer viewers local content, they are each funded differently. Shaw TV is funded through the cable fund, which is a CRTC requirement for Cable providers, which are required to put back 5 percent of their cable profit into local community programing in the areas they serve. Shaw’s commitment to local programing reached beyond this basic requirement, which is why they fund professional journalists, camera operators, and editors to create the flagship community show *go! Island*. It is also noted that Shaw TV can only be seen on the linear network to those who have Shaw Cable. CHEK TV is an independent station that is owned and operated by the station employees and their financial supporters, not by a larger company and depends on local advertising for their revenue. CTV Vancouver Island is owned by Bell Media, which is the mass media subsidiary of BCE Inc. Its operations include television broadcasting and production, radio broadcasting, digital media and Internet properties including Sympatico.ca. As part of their licensing they are required to operate local stations in the areas they serve.

Local media commentators were chosen by selecting experts, social change practitioners, and leaders who have been involved in local television. Experts and authors who have recently written about local television’s impact on community were also used both in my research and in the documentary itself. The data collected from past participants exposed their motivations for
being on community television and how being on television affected their connection to community, and what came out of being on television. Past participants also answered questions like “where are they now” as a result of being on television. Viewers shared how their experience watching go! Island affected engagement in their community. The interview style was informal, with open-ended questions to elicit conversation and to prompt replies that are personal and reflective (Vannini et al., year, p. 63). Examples of opening questions for past participants were:

- What motivated you to be on go! Island?
- How did this experience of being on community television impact your life?
- Can you tell me how people in your community responded to your story?
- Did anything change for you after you were on TV? If so, what changed?

These questions allowed for past participants to open up and share their story with me and reflect on their experience and how it impacted them.

The theoretical framework I used is a combination of James W. Carey’s ritual view of communication (2008), and Martin Seligman’s positive psychology (2004). In his book, Communication as Culture, Essays on Media and Society, Carey talks about the difference between a “transmission view of communication and a ritual view of communication” (Carey, 2009, p. 15). The transmission view is defined by terms such as ‘imparting, sending, transmitting or giving information to others’ (p.12).

The ritual view of communication “is defined as ‘sharing,’ ‘participation,’ ‘association,’ ‘fellowship,’ and the ‘the possession of a common faith’… A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in
time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.” (Carey, 2009, p.15). The research looked at how ritual communication is important to creating community and connecting people to their neighbours and those who live, work and play in their neighbourhoods. It is the “ritual” communication that this ethnographic research looked at, how *go! Island* and other local media affects, positively or negatively, ritual communication on South Vancouver Island, BC.

*The Power of Local Storytelling* also looked at how positive stories impact community, since most of the content on *go! Island* is positive. Positive psychology looks at key factors that contribute to individuals experiencing happiness, or as they call it, *the full life* (Schueller, et al., 2010, p. 260). Some of the studies have looked at the importance of meaning in one’s life and how it is “significantly correlated with happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect across the lifespan” (p. 260). Positive psychology also states that “consistent participation in engaging activities also contributes strongly to well-being” (p. 260). As digital storyteller Joe Lambert puts it, “Storytelling can help build healthy communities…Positive psychology, and self-esteem, are always the staples of healthy living. We need to nourish all the seeds that sit within us that make us feel good about ourselves” (2013, p. 3).

Ethnographers (see Pink, 2008: Pink, 2004; Vannini 2014) suggest, “video can serve as ethnographic diary keeping” (White, p. 402). Thus, I collected hours more footage than I needed for purposes of data analysis, gathering information such as body language, framing, expression and context, using both the digital video footage and my written field notes for data analysis. I focused on a participatory ethnography documentary style (Vannini, 2014, p. 403). This style, as
Vannini suggests in his article, allows an “intimacy, detail-orientation, and sensuousness” (p. 403). The visual medium allows an intimacy with the participants through sound, sight, expression, body language, and intonation in a vivid and immediate way (Vannini, 2014, p. 404). The interviews were logged and categorized for analysis. I also kept detailed written journals or data logs, to complement the videos to ensure continuity, and to further reflect observations, ideas, thoughts and further research that may be needed (Merrigan et al., 2012, p. 210).

The data analysis began once I started my interviews (Merrigan, et al, p. 211). I inductively coded the data into categories and sub-categories in order to begin to document patterns and topics such as community engagement, community participation, or positive storytelling (p. 211, 212). While I was interested in the theoretical framework of Seligman’s positive psychology, and Carey’s theory of ritual communication, I wanted to remain open and ensure that I could interpret and analyze the data with a certain level of transferability, so that “interpretations could be heuristic or thought provoking” (p.213). Thus, the ethnographic data collected, the participants’ backgrounds and experiences, and the collaboration with the participants and the camera operator all contributed to my “subjective understanding of the participants’ meanings” (p.214) and thus influenced the direction of the project.

The ethical considerations around my proposed ethnographic video included research credibility and degree of membership, and research participation rights (Merrigan et al., p. 212 – 214). Research credibility was imperative to this study, as I was the researcher and the interviewer. My experience and relationship with the viewers offered reflexivity as the “voice of the participatory filmmaker” (Vannini, 2014, p. 402), and as the interviewer and the storyteller.
Thus, it was important that my credentials and background in television were communicated to the participants and that I was open and honest about my research project (Merrigan, 2012, p. 213). Participants were well informed of their rights which included the “freedom to participate, privacy, to be treated with honesty, and to be kept free from harm” (p. 213) and I worked with the Royal Roads University Ethics board and my thesis advisor to ensure transparency with participants. Because of the nature of an ethnographic video, anonymity and confidentiality were breached but participants were given the opportunity to collaborate with me, and view the video and transcript if they requested before the final cut which was in line with White’s notions regarding maintaining ethical standards while conducting participatory ethnographic filmmaking” (2009, p. 395). Only two participants asked to see the draft, Astrid Braunschmidt of CTV and Bill Currie of Shaw TV. Bill Currie was comfortable with the edits and the documentary, however, Astrid Braunschmidt asked to be, and has been, removed from the documentary. As recommended by Merrigan and colleagues, the participants signed a legal document giving permission to use their interviews, data, and real names in both the documentary and supporting documents (Merrigan et al., 2012 p. 213). As suggested by Murthy, I was aware that participants may also “act” for the camera (2008, p. 840). To mitigate this I pre-interviewed participants to gather information without the camera. This data helped form questions and contributed to the data analysis, allowing a truth to emerge that was reflective of the participant’s experiences with community television as was done in King and colleagues’ research on community television (King et al., 1999, p. 610).

The limitations of this research project included the short time period during which the data was collected, the number of participants and the geographical scope of the project. I
interviewed 22 participants over five months, which in ethnography is a relatively short time period, and not a large number of interviews. These limitations were built into the study. Other limitations included a relatively small budget which included the salary of one camera operator and digital editor. The cost of the actual equipment – a camera and edit bay -- was free thanks to Shaw’s partnership with me as an access producer.

As public ethnography in this format becomes more accepted by the scholarly world, we have the ability to share our knowledge and thus influence change through our work (Vannini, 2014, p. 410). By creating a public ethnographic video that combined academic research, data and theoretical framework with common language and presenting it in an entertaining and palatable format such as a broadcast documentary, it can be shown on the Shaw TV community channel across the country and have the ability to educate and influence communities, politicians, policy makers, academics, and viewers (p.409).

With the challenges local television faces, this documentary is an effective and powerful way to explain trends and influence change, especially amongst those who create policy and fund local programming. I believe that by bringing together the academic world with the entertainment world we can have a greater influence on the future of television content.

The video

*The Power of Local Storytelling* is a 28 minute documentary that looks at the impact local storytelling has on engaging community. It is based on the researcher’s 18 years experience in local television in Victoria, B.C. It opens with a look at why storytelling remains important in a digitally driven era. On-camera statements by prominent scholars explain the importance of storytelling. We then look at the state of local media, and shed light on why it is in jeopardy
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according to both data on local media and expert analysis. We listen to past participants, viewers and community members who have participated in community television over the years in this city and discover what impact it had on them and how it affected their relationship with community. Excerpts from many stories illustrate the varied topics of local media, the personalities of those involved, and the community impact. Follow up interviews underscore the value that local media has provided for the participants. In the last section, media experts, communication scholars and others share their concerns about traditional and online media and their ideas on how we can move forward in ways that will continue to value and support the storytelling of local television.

The video gives the viewer a visual snapshot of local media’s past, present and future. I include myself as both the host-storyteller and as a past participant of local media. For me, one of the most powerful insights that past participants and media experts shared was this: professional journalists offer legitimacy to a story that a citizen journalist cannot, and despite the changing digital landscape there remains a need for professional journalists to be engaged in local storytelling. The data also affirmed that local storytelling matters; it inspires, engages, and connects people to their community and the more we understand about the power of local storytelling the more likely we are to save it. It is the hope of this documentary, The Power of Local Storytelling, to do just that, inspire local storytelling.

Endnote

I had the opportunity to present The Power of Local Storytelling at Congress 2016 of the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Calgary as part of a panel titled – Whither Community? Technology, News Deserts and their implications for Canadian communities? –at
the end of May. Shaw TV has committed to airing this documentary on their community stations across the country.
References


http://flavorwire.com/489218/celebrate-margaret


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