

Kevin Howley (2005). *Community Media: People, Places, and Communication Technologies*. Cambridge University Press: New York. ISBN 521 79228 7 pb.

Review by Ellie Rennie

I took it as somewhat symbolic that, in a book consisting of four community media case studies, two of them should be located in old fire stations (WFHB and DCTV). Howley focuses on the fiery themes of social justice and social entrepreneurialism, arguing that community media is a uniquely liberating and progressive phenomenon. For instance, the establishment of WFHB in Bloomington, Indiana, is 'in and of itself, an admirable, even heroic attempt to reassert local cultural autonomy and redress stark inequalities within the political economy of US broadcasting. As such, it is a decidedly political act' (117). The book will therefore appeal to scholars and students with an interest in 'alternative media' and political economy theory (in the tradition of Douglas Kellner). Howley refines this approach by way of Jesus Martin-Barbero's work on cultural mediation, preferring to focus on the tactical nature of community media interventions over structural reform. However, his dissatisfaction with the mainstream media is palpable, guiding much of his community media analysis.

The chapter on WFHB focuses on the tension between economic viability and political partisanship in alternative media. Having volunteered at the station for some years, Howley is able to provide a detailed and helpful history of the station's emergence, including the immensely difficult process of attaining a community radio licence in the US. He admits to being too close to his subject, which comes through in the writing as a somewhat embittered regard for the station's programming policy. Nonetheless, his critique reveals some real and ongoing tensions in US community radio including the lure of public money and the problems of professionalism that accompany it. Downtown Community Television (DCTV, situated on Manhattan's Lower East Side), on the other hand, is presented as an impeccable model for community video production and youth development. We learn of the pioneering work of Jon Alpert and Keiko Tsuno, who combined community views with inventive production techniques to achieve both critical acclaim and widespread distribution. Despite working largely in the professional sphere, DCTV maintain a critical edge and have established a not-for-profit youth education initiative which utilises the local access cable station. Street Feat, a newspaper produced for the homeless and poor (in Halifax, Nova Scotia) similarly seeks to combine social entrepreneurship and advocacy but on a smaller scale, combining ordinary voices with interest group commentary and information.

The final case study shifts to Melbourne, Victoria, where some of the world's most successful community media enterprises are located. Howley chooses instead to look at VICNET, a computer network run out of the State Library. I was surprised at its inclusion, knowing VICNET to be a government initiative that provides only limited, stagnant spaces for community group publicity. Citizen engagement in web discussions is almost non-existent. VICNET is an expensive exercise, one that is no doubt justified on the grounds of tourism and state promotion rather than community communication. Howley acknowledges all of this, but nobly tries to encourage government-sponsored community networks at the same time. If nothing else, I felt that the VICNET study should have been an opportunity to

tease out the definitional boundaries of what we consider to be ‘community media’, which Howley only touches upon. Community governance, not-for-profit status and user-led creativity are three crucial factors missing from VICNET, making its community rhetoric difficult to read. The example does demonstrate, however, that community media research can potentially make a valuable contribution to discussions around e-democracy, showing e-government experts what real participation looks like. In general, *Community Media: People, Places and Communication Technologies* provides some valuable histories and stories and will no doubt be a valuable text for students seeking to understand this complicated terrain.

Author note: Ellie Rennie is a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology.