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Communication and the Knowable Community

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This essay draws on Raymond Williams's concept of a knowable community in an effort to understand the myriad of connections that exist between individuals and society. Williams, who sees communication and community as synonymous, suggests that a knowable community may ultimately emerge through the process of communication and that in the discovery of connections between individuals and society, an understanding of historically specific patterns may be shown. This essay also discusses an oral history project with journalists who worked for Gannett in the 1960s as an example of an emerging knowable community that questioned traditional notions of community and challenged dominant ideological constructions of media history.

Keywords: *Knowable Community, Dominant Culture, Oppositional Memory, Oral History, Communication*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the concepts of communication and community has been well established by social and cultural theorists. For example, George Herbert Mead envisioned communication as a fundamental organizing process within the development of an ideal community, while John Dewey, who saw community as central to a democratic way of life, described the important role of communication in the creation of the Great Community. Within his theory of cultural materialism, which set the course for the development of British Cultural Studies, Raymond Williams asserted that communication and community should be seen as equivalent.

The ideal of community is usually considered in an entirely positive

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light and community is often used to represent established relationships within a dominant culture. The term community traditionally conjures up warm feelings of solidarity and commitment and it can help to create nostalgic visions of peace, harmony and permanence that are all rooted in the land. Yet, Hanno Hardt has reminded us that the concept of community may also be manipulated "to create a false sense of equality and participation" (1998, p. 86).

However, it is possible for the concept of community to be used to describe an alternative tradition — a counter or oppositional memory that challenges existing relationships and power structures. More than fifty years ago, Williams created the concept of a knowable community in order to represent the myriad of connections that exist between individuals, collectives and the underlying patterns of history. Agreeing with Williams's assertion that communication and community are synonymous, in this essay I will first discuss his concept of a knowable community and then I will address the use of oral history as one way to showcase an alternative set of communication relationships.

KNOWABLE COMMUNITIES

In a time of virtual communities, on-line gaming, list-servs, chat rooms and discussion boards that transcend geographic and temporal locations, it is important to note that in his work Williams rejected a definition of community as an "abstract aggregate with an arbitrary general interest" (Williams, 1989, p. 124). Instead, he understood community as a historically specific place where people actually live, investing their money, time, effort and care and forming lasting attachments to geographically specific locations. Williams considered community a "warmly persuasive word" (Williams, 1983, p. 76) that was used entirely positively to describe both existing relationships as well as to envision alternative conceptions of social organization.

Although the idea of a rural community with face-to-face interactions is often idealized as the "epitome of a knowable community" (Williams, 1973a, p. 165) Williams suggested that the actual experience of living in such a community was often fragmented and limited. Contrary to common belief that organic rural communities are historically created and then are

challenged and disrupted by elements of mass communication, Williams maintained that a community actually becomes knowable through an extended system of communication. A variety of different media may be seen to define society, to confirm and communicate specific societal norms and values and to help us to understand the connections between individuals and the cultural, political and economic structures of society.

From this perspective, communication and community are synonymous. Communication is central to the creation of society; it is through the process of communication that social and individual meanings and realities are formed and it is in the sharing of common conventions that they are interpreted. As Williams maintained, rather than having complete communicative freedom, "all of us, as individuals, grow up within a society, within the rules of a society, and these rules cut very deep, and include certain ways of seeing the world, certain ways of talking about the world" (Williams, 1989, pp. 21-22). Therefore for Williams, the communication process should be seen as a socially shared and constructed reciprocal activity.

Communities may be seen to evolve and grow through the development of shared meanings, conventions and institutions created through a common communication process. Ultimately, communication is the process of making individual experience into that shared common experience; it is a way of describing unique perceptions in ways so that others can understand them. As Williams explained:

> Since our way of seeing is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change. (1961, pp. 38-39)

It is through the communication process that a knowable community may emerge. In the discovery of connections between people and society, an understanding of historically specific patterns may be shown. For example, Williams suggested that novels, particularly those written during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, may provide insights into relationships between individuals and the broader realms of society, which also illustrate and communicate the relationship between observation and participation. Novels offer an important way of understanding the

relationship between knowledge and community and between people and place; they offer insights into "comprehending one's place within a social context" (Eldridge & Eldridge, 1994, p. 133). During the twentieth century, Williams found that other forms of mass communication, including film, radio and television had also illustrated this extended communication process.

Yet, in contemporary urban societies, with the complexities of labor and increased class distinctions, these socially constituted connections became more complex and problematic and understandings of a knowable community have been more difficult to discern. Williams suggested that the discovery of human connections in a knowable community not only showcased the interdependence between an individual and society but also exposed webs or tangles that illustrated complex relationships that may have been difficult, frustrating and/or limiting. It may be seen as both a process of creation as well as a process of destruction, defining, restricting and determining values and relationships. For Williams, "within this flow, the essential community, what is experienced again and again, is not only closeness and sympathy but conflict, loss, frustration and despair" (Williams, 1987, p. 173).

Therefore, a knowable community should be seen as more than a matter of physical space and the expansion of that place and it is fundamentally "a problem of viewpoint and of consciousness" (Williams, 1987, p. 88). Alan O'Connor suggested that Williams's concept of a knowable community was framed by a sense of irony, because in part what was being illustrated were aspects of a given society that were unknowable. And it is those unknown aspects that contrasted with already known values and relationships in a society. "The counter tradition of the knowable community includes a subjunctive moment. It asks what if this or that imagined future came to pass" (O'Connor, 1989, p. 69).

Williams envisioned the strength of a knowable community in its ability to challenge the prevailing power structure and provide an oppositional position within that society. While he acknowledged that most social experience was linked directly with a society's dominant ideology, he maintained key areas were repressed, neglected or ignored and remained outside of the official consciousness of any given society. For Williams, consciousness encompassed information and knowledge as well as "embodiment and performance" (Williams, 1988, p. 125) actively envisioned

in the individual and collective imagination. Ultimately, no social system was able to include all aspects of social experience, which made possible the potential for alternative or oppositional activities and intentions (Williams, 1979, p. 252).

As a highly complex combination of internal structures, hegemonic forces may be seen to deeply saturate the consciousness of society, yet they must be continually renewed, recreated and defended. These structures may be challenged and somewhat modified by emergent oppositional forces (Williams, 1973b, pp. 8-9), which is why any hegemonic process must constantly be aware of alternatives and oppositional positions that question or threaten its dominance. For Williams, "the reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive" (Williams, 1988, p. 113).

Oppositional and alternative conditions emerge within the cultural process from residual and emergent elements that reside along with the dominant positions. Residual positions are effectively formed in the past, yet are active in cultural processes of the present, and are incorporated through "reinterpretation, dilution, projection, discriminating inclusion and exclusion" (Williams, 1988, p. 123). Emergent positions offer new meanings, values, practices and relationships that must continually be created. Yet Williams has suggested that sometimes it was difficult to distinguish between new elements of a dominant culture, and alternative or oppositional elements within a society, because often when an alternative is determined to be as oppositional, it is then converted and appropriated by the dominant culture. To understand the dominant character, Williams has reminded us that it is necessary to remember "that no mode of production, and therefore no dominant social order of society, and therefore no dominant culture, in reality exhausts all human practice human energy, human intention" (Williams, 1973b, p. 12).

USING ORAL HISTORY

Ultimately it is within a process of extended communication that a knowable community contemplates relationships between individuals and society, which may actually challenge the reigning social order. Given that

a knowable community is one way to understand an individual's place within the larger social context, what I would like to suggest is that oral history projects can provide us with an opportunity to illustrate the potential of a knowable community to become a counter memory to the dominant ideology. In recent years, oral histories have challenged prevailing power structures and have attempted to redistribute that power and give voice to those previously silenced groups and individuals.

Paul Thompson (1990), whose book *The Voice of the Past* remains a seminal text in the field of oral history, has maintained that through an emphasis on the experiences of everyday people that we can construct a "richer, more vivid and heartrending" (p. 99) sense of the past as well as create a more authentic and credible story of history. For Studs Terkel (1997), oral history does not concern itself with uncovering plain unvarnished facts but instead searches for feelings about those facts. Yet, it's important to remember that members of a particular culture, who are living at a specific historical moment, construct all feelings. Oral history is not merely about individuals' recollection of past events but it is also an exploration into the collective memory and the collective amnesia of a community. When evaluating oral history, it is important for researchers to acknowledge that ideology plays a central role in the construction of all versions of history. As Louis Althusser explained, ideological apparatuses such as schools and churches, the state, media, advertising and popular culture guide our thoughts, beliefs and interests and help us see a "correct" vision of our history (1971). Cultural institutions and historical artifacts also help us to keep some memories alive and prominent in our minds while encouraging us to distort and even forget other aspects of the historical record.

For Williams, no journalistic account, historical report, scientific explanation or literary depiction is straightforward, objective, neutral or natural because as material artifacts of society they are all are socially constructed forms of communication. Language "is a socially shared and reciprocal activity, already embedded in active relationships, within which every move is an activation of what is already shared and reciprocal or may become so" (Williams, 1988, p. 166).

However, because no power structure succeeds in incorporating all aspects of social experience, a knowable community may actually be able to challenge the prevailing ideological constructions of our collective

memory as well as offer alternatives to the dominant historical record. In an effort to understand the role that a knowable community may play in a given society, I now draw on an oral history project that I completed with Rochester, New York newsworkers (Brennen, 2001). Specifically, I will discuss this project as it relates to race relations, as an example of how this oral history may offer insights into the development of an oppositional knowable community that emerged in Rochester, New York during the 1960s.

This oral history study grew out of an interest in understanding the contributions of working journalists; it is a focus of my work that began with Hanno Hardt in *Newsworkers: Toward a History of the Rank and File*. Newsworkers are a part of a history of the working class; they work with institutional pressures and within the constraints of the media industry under historically specific economic and social conditions. "A history of newsworkers not only explains the nature and extent of industrial growth in the newspaper industry, but also defines progress in terms of human capital, that is, the investment of labor, knowledge, and experience in the service of media ownership" (Hardt and Brennen, 1995, p. viii).

ROCHESTER NEWSWORKERS

The Gannett Company has been a leading international news corporation and it is currently the largest newspaper publisher in the United States. It publishes 85 daily newspapers with a combined daily average paid circulation in excess of 7.2 million, as well as producing almost 1,000 non-daily publications. It also owns broadcast and cable television systems throughout the U.S. Gannett's *USA Today* has a daily circulation of approximately 2.3 million, making it the country's largest selling daily newspaper. Gannett owns and operates twenty-three television stations, and as of January 2008, its total online U.S. Internet audience was about 23.2 million distinct visitors. In the U.K., Gannett operates Newsquest, the second largest regional newspaper publisher in England. Newsquest currently publishes 17 daily newspapers as well as approximately 300 non-daily publications (Brandt 1993; Gannett Company Profile, 2008).

Although Gannett maintains extensive operations in the U.S. and abroad, thus far few media historians have focused on its history. To date, the

definitive history of Gannett remains its self-published *A History of Gannett, 1906-1993*, written by retired Gannett executive and company consultant J. Donald Brandt. According to the "official" history of Gannett, Rochester in the 1950s and 1960s was an urban area with small town values. People got along well, crime was minimal, and there were no racial issues or problems among the relatively small minority population. At the time, Rochester was home to two daily Gannett newspapers, The Democrat & Chronicle and the Times Union, which covered all local and regional news, including printing the names of individuals who were ticketed for speeding. Yet, something unusual happened in this sleepy town on the weekend of July 24-26, 1964 — the city erupted in violent riots.

A History of Gannett maintains that city officials, business leaders, local officials and Gannett management had no prior knowledge of racial problems in Rochester and all were shocked by the violence. This perspective was illustrated in a Times Union editorial that appeared immediately after the weekend of violence:

> Rochester can now demonstrate what must be done when hoodlums, under the guise of a racial problem, or civil rights legislation, seek to defy the law and place themselves above authority···
> There were many voices of racial reason in Rochester. They were drowned out by the shattering glass and jeering, looting crowd···" (Brandt, 1993, p. 307).

The official Gannett history, framed within a dominant ideological position, viewed the Rochester riots as the work of hoodlums rather than as an illustration of a larger issue or community problem. The *Times Union* editorial rejected the role of civil rights legislation and suggested that the civil rights movement encouraged people to question their appropriate place in society. However, throughout my oral history interviews, in conversations with reporters who actually covered the riots for the Times Union and the *Democrat & Chronicle*, they consistently challenged the official historical facts and instead offered insights into an emerging oppositional knowable community in Rochester, New York.

According to Charles Luckett, who at the time was a general assignment reporter on the *Times Union*, and who later left the field of journalism and became an ordained minister, during the 1950s and 1960s there was

a complete neglect of the minority communities in the Rochester newspapers. There were no minorities on the Gannett editorial staffs and there was no effort made to cover news about African Americans in the Rochester area. During his interview Luckett recalled being ashamed after taking twenty dollars from a black minister who came into the newspaper to get publicity for an upcoming choir concert at his church. The minister had told Luckett that he had always paid to get stories about his church in the newspaper. Later, when Luckett confronted his editor about the money, his editor had told him to keep it, that it was just the way things worked on Rochester newspapers.

Former Democrat & Chronicle police reporter F. Lawrence Howe explained that during this time newspaper reporters and editors did not recognize minorities as such. On the newspaper, no one spoke about minority problems or black issues or problems. Another former *Democrat & Chronicle* police reporter William Beeney remembered covering a 1950s news story that involved an African American man and being told by his managing editor that he could not include any pictures of the man with his story. Beeney said that although he did not know why the photographs were forbidden, he never remembered seeing pictures of African Americans in newspapers during that era.

Interestingly, Tom Connolly who was a *Times Union* police reporter in the 1960s maintained that rather than representations of Rochester as a conflict-free city without minority concerns, that troubles in the African American neighborhoods had been seething for many years. Not only did newsworkers who covered the police beat sense that something violent was going to happen but the police also felt a sense of general unrest and spoke about these problems with reporters. Connolly said that the riots really shook-up the political, economic and business power elite in Rochester. Yet, he suggested that although the riots occurred many years ago, that poor living and working conditions continued to plague the minority areas of the city.

From these oral history interviews it is possible to understand the sense of a knowable community that began to emerge in Rochester, New York during the 1960s. For example, consider the following recounting of the arrest of Rufus Fairwell, by former *Democrat & Chronicle* reporter Tom Flynn. As Flynn explained:

> It was astonishing to me to come down the back stairwell of the old police station in this 1800s building, with its wood wainscoting and creaky wooden plank flooring, to happen upon three police officers, one of whom was the turnkey because the lock-up was right at the foot of those stairs, the holding area. The turnkey was standing next to a black man who was slumped over in the chair that prisoners traditionally sat in while their file was filled out, and two other police officers who were the arresting officers, all of them were spattered with blood. But the worst of them was the black guy, whose head was split open. I can remember to this day seeing what looked to me like his brain pulsating. It was just astonishing and they were startled because I don't think I was supposed to be coming down those stairs at that time.
>
> The two arresting officers took great detail to show me the scratches and cuts on their arms from confronting this man who, as it turned out, was locking up the gas station at which he worked, when he was challenged by the officers who thought that they were responding to a burglary in process. He apparently exchanged some words with them, which was the worst thing to do. They chased him across the street, as I remember, beating him with batons. He ran into what was then an all-white bar. He was dragged back out of there. Obviously in the ride between there and the police station in the old paddy wagon, he was really beaten all to hell. I got the details as presented by the police. Then I wrote it in that kind of innocuous style that one man was under arrest, and he and two police officers were injured in a scuffle last night, and blah, blah, blah. (Flynn quoted in Brennen, 2001, pp. 55-56)

Flynn recounted that Fairwell's arrest and beating resulted in an important lawsuit for false arrest and assault against the city of Rochester; the case influenced a growing civil rights consciousness among members of the African American community that culminated in the riots of 1964.

During their interviews, several other former Gannett reporters echoed Flynn's assessment that Fairwell's arrest had been the linchpin that began the civil rights movement in Rochester. The Fairwell case also marked the beginning of these reporters' break from a traditional reliance solely on official sources, as well as their newfound understanding that a reporter

must make certain that he or she understands the full impact of each story. Flynn remembers the Fairwell story as a defining moment in his journalistic career. That night he learned that it was naïve to always accept the word of individuals in power because they might not be accurately depicting a situation.

CONCLUSION

The previous example of Gannett newsworkers illustrated changing race relations in Rochester, New York during the 1960s. These oral history interviews hinted at what soon became a fully oppositional position in Rochester, New York that eventually challenged existing notions of community within the elite white power structure. Yet, in addition to illustrating the emotions, reactions and context surrounding the official institutional history of Gannett's *Times Union* and the *Democrat & Chronicle* newspapers, this oral history example may also be seen to have challenged the official version of that history.

The oral history interviews conducted with Gannett journalists provided insights into a specific knowable community that began to emerge in Rochester, New York during the late 1950s and 1960s. Recounting their experiences illustrated actively lived and felt meanings, values and experiences that not only showcased the dominant culture but also touched upon emergent ideological positions in American society. As such, their stories provided a contrast to what was already known and illustrated an emerging knowable community that may be seen to have challenged dominant ideological constructions of media history. Ultimately, I believe that oral history is well suited to showcase Williams's concept of a knowable community particularly as it challenges traditional notions of community. Williams found that nineteenth and early twentieth century novels were particularly useful in illustrating relationships between individuals and the larger society. Oral histories can also help researchers to uncover feelings about facts, give voice to previously silenced groups and individuals, and provide a counter memory of a knowable community that serves to challenge the dominant culture.

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