Nurturing Dissent? Community Printshops in 1970s London

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Introduction

Born of a particular conjunction of community activism, cultural critique, and technological possibility, self-managed ‘community printshops’ were set up in cities across the UK between the late 1960s and mid 1970s. The motivation to provide much-needed print resources for activists was accompanied by the aspiration that direct access to the means of print-media production could also foster social and political empowerment. They were part of an emergent phenomena of politically motivated ‘alternative left’ printshops that included poster collectives, printing co-operatives, and ‘resource centres’, and which appeared in numerous cities. This general occurrence was not particular to the UK; similar workshops were established in other parts of Europe and North America in the same period (Cushing, 2012). Although there was variation in the UK use of the term ‘community printshop’, it mostly referred to a printshop that was (a) ‘non-commerc[ial]’; (b) had a connection to locally based activism (‘community’ being partially associated with geography); and (c) encouraged ‘user-participation’. It is this general definition that I will be using. As will become evident, the manner and extent to which each of these three factors played out varied both between printshops and within their individual existences.

The mobilizing and ‘participatory’ potential of contemporary online media for the growth and sustenance of critical and creative civic engagement is, with good reason, being closely analyzed by media scholars and commentators. In these analyses there are echoes of the earlier, ‘pre-internet’ ambitions and practices of the community printshops – as well as some of the challenges they faced. This is not the only resonance of course; the social history of new communications
technology is littered with (unrealized) hopes for their possibility to empower civil society; the telegraph, the radio, and the portable video recorder are amongst those heralded in this way (Briggs & Burke, 2005; Couldry & Curran, 2003). Recent years have witnessed a singular but notable reversal of this trend; in both the UK and the US there has been a resurrection of activist ‘analogue’ print media. The following quote is taken from a published celebration of this activity:

Since the technology is easy to learn, people with little or no experience can represent themselves ... Silkscreen allows lots of people to participate in the production and distribution of a print ... With control of production in the hands of the creators, the process is also very empowering. (Moller, in MacPhee, 2009: 51)

The social(ist) construction of technology in this statement bears an uncannily close resemblance to the assertions of some of the early community printshops. It is also just such claims that in the community printshops’ specific historical context would, in time, be challenged. Generally then, I want to propose that the experiments of the late twentieth century community printshops have a place in the evolving narrative of social movement media practices. Specifically I want to trace how a range of particular London-based community printshops sought to support, sustain, and initiate critical civic engagement. The instigation, aspirations, practices, and narratives of the printshops cannot be detached from their changing discursive and material contexts and as such these aspects closely inform the discussion.

The chapter draws on the Bourdieusian inspired notion of field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2007) to conceptualize these ‘contexts’. In particular it follows Crossley’s (2002) proposition that social movements, or certain constellations of politicized activity can be usefully considered as ‘fields of contention’. That is, a distinct and dynamic social space (a ‘field’) constituted by the relations between different kinds of agents (individuals, groups, organizations, institutions), discourses, artefacts, resources, practices, and contestations specific to it. Fields are sites of ‘strategic’ action, organized around particular stakes and claims to distinctive value. Struggles over the definition of that value and the nature of what is at stake are also what determine and shape a particular field. Fields are only ever relatively autonomous, especially those concerned with influencing or changing another field (for example the field of institutional politics), but also because they will always be impinged upon to varying degrees by other fields. They may