

Community Media and Processes of Civic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic case study focuses on community media producers and educators to find out how community media impacts civic participation in order to understand what role community media play in processes of civic engagement. This study also examines relationships of power and knowledge and how they shape social contexts through local community media. The organization studied, POOR Magazine, is based out of San Francisco, CA and works to promote social change in favor of citizens whose lives are marked by their struggle with homelessness, poverty, racism, incarceration, and discrimination in general. Based on Clemencia Rodríguez's (2001) theory of citizens' media, this study used participant-observation ethnography in which POOR participants' perspectives fostered a greater understanding of the organizational process and the participants' experiences. This study found a transition of civic engagement occurred through 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. 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.

Keywords: community media, civic engagement, poverty, citizens' media

INTRODUCTION

The major news media fail to deal systematically with the variety of compelling social needs of the entire population. Those needs remain hidden crises, obscured in the daily flood of other kinds of news.

Bagdikian, 2004, p. 21

When Ben Bagdikian wrote these words in his 2004 book *The New Media Monopoly* he was but one in a sea of voices trying to awake the masses from their apathetic slumber, ignorant of the perils of media conglomeration. Within this ominous proselytizing, media scholars have demonstrated how mainstream commercial media attempt to support unequal class structures, reinforce dominant ideologies, and marginalize ethnic, gender, class, and sexual communities (Marx, 1978; Said, 1997; Warner, 2002; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Chomsky, 2003; McChesney, 2004; Bagdikian, 2004). There is, however, a bright light in this dark tunnel of social inequality. A survey of current media scholarship reveals a number of organizations,

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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. This type of media-driven outreach and civic engagement strengthens social movements, cultivates grassroots organizations, and alters class structures and communication flows (Downing, 2001; Castells et al., 2005; Coyer et al., 2007; Gordon, 2007). 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 what POOR aspires because the organization believes they are engaging discriminated people in new and dramatic ways. POOR is located in San Francisco, CA, and works to promote social change in favor of citizens whose lives are marked by their struggle 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.

POOR Magazine operates as a community media center that focuses on three core areas: art, education and media. In addition to 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, online videos, and news articles on the POOR website 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. In an interview published through the San Francisco Bay Area Independent Media Center (Indybay) (Angola 3 News, 2010), Tiny states:

How do you ensure that the silenced voices of people in poverty are heard? By addressing the subtle and not so subtle ways in which our voices and research and scholarship is separated out and suppressed. We teach on our forms of media revolution and media justice at the Race, Poverty, & Media Justice Institute and PeopleSkool.

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Community members are able to take advantage of these opportunities through the personal support POOR provides in addition to education and media production. This support includes transportation to and from the POOR office, assistance in transportation for children, on-site child-care, meals, on-site 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

The conceptual framework of citizens' media helps best explain the process of civic engagement community media help to create. Citizens' media function as a potential resource for community activists to engage people and build community and civic engagement. According to Clemencia Rodríguez (2001), oppressed peoples can re-appropriate power through strategic use of alternative media. Through this re-appropriation, 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. Rodríguez (2001) also identifies the negative connotation of the term *alternative media* and instead proposes the use of the term *citizens' media*.

Digital Community Media Literature

Limited research has examined the role of new media in activism and civic engagement (Anderson, 2009; Coyer et al., 2007; Warner, 2002). This study intends to build upon that scholarship to expand what is currently known about the role of citizens' media and how they can be used to engage passive individuals through mediated agency. The Internet has become a pivotal form of citizens' media in recent years through its relatively open access for creating and disseminating information as well as collecting and receiving information (Atton, 2007; Rennie, 2009). Although the digital divide impacts who have access to create and receive Internet content, media activists are struggling to ensure open access through the Free Software movement¹, Open Source Initiative², and the Internet Neutrality movement³ (Rennie, 2009). According to Villareal Ford and Gil (2001), "by providing for the easy transmittal of simple texts as well as the means to combine and re-combine a range of media formats and social actors, [the Internet] allows for an unprecedented distribution of knowledge and resources to virtually anywhere in the globe" (p. 202). This mass distribution of knowledge includes

¹ The free software movement was initiated by GNU Project and encourages the creation, use, allowance and distribution of software free of restrictions, limitations and cost (GNU Operating System, 2010).

² The Open Source Initiative is similar to the Free Software movement in its goals also concentrating on the free creation and distribution of software but with more of a focus on code sharing in general (DiBona et al., 1999).

³ The Net Neutrality movement (or Network Neutrality or Internet Neutrality) focuses on preventing commercial structuration of Internet access through marketing tiers with faster more efficient access costing more money (Wilson, 2008).

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more than just traditional forms to transmit media content. The Internet has triggered numerous processes of media convergence, creating never-before seen marriages of radio, video, digital photography and television used for real-time data transmission. According to Henry Jenkins (2006), “convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections amongst dispersed media content” (p. 3). Although media convergence addresses the technological convergence of media, it also embodies a change in cultural media consumption and the patterns that emerge in response. For community media users, technological convergence creates a realm of opportunities to engage individuals through almost any medium imaginable.

Not all Internet forums and sites engage individuals democratically; however, the ones that do contribute to an increase in civic engagement and community building (Villareal Ford & Gil, 2001; Atton, 2007). Atton’s (2007) research shows that through producing community media community members become more engaged in civic participation. For example, community radio stations seeking to reach larger audiences can now stream their programs online. The website, Irrational Radio distributes information regarding how to set up analogue pirate radio stations as well as how individuals or organizations interested but unknowledgeable, can stream radio programs on the Internet (Atton, 2007). The Open Radio Archive Network Group (ORANG) also provides opportunities for community radio stations to stream parts of its programs through ORANG’s website as a part of ORANG’s radio programming (Atton, 2007). These Internet community initiatives show how “the audience has a greater degree of control of production” (Villareal Ford & Gil, 2001, p. 203), which contributes to civic engagement. In creating their own media community members bypass and reject mainstream commercial media as a dissent to hierarchical power and hegemony.

In a 2009 study conducted by Dunbar-Hester, the author conducts an ethnographic case study of Pandora Radio Project, a media activist radio initiative based out of Philadelphia, PA. In this article, the author argues that “the significance of new and emerging communication technologies can be grasped most effectively when emerging technologies are considered in a dynamic field that includes older technologies” (Dunbar-Hester, 2009, p. 221). The study focuses on Pandora’s experience in transitioning from traditional community radio activism to incorporating community wi-fi networks. Although the article does not explicitly depict the struggle between community and commercial mainstream media, the author points out that Pandora was a large voice in advocating for media justice and greater access to low-power FM (LPFM) radio in the 1990s, implicitly pinpointing the power and hegemonic struggle between the two entities. Throughout her interaction with the organization the author describes an internal ideological struggle occurring within the organization to embrace or reject new media technologies. In this study, the author found that the group negotiates their identity through the use and meaning of incorporation of new media technologies while balancing a love and respect for the traditional format of LPFM. In her study, Dunbar-Hester shows how communities can use their power and fight hegemonic oppression through community media education and production.

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A well-known example of the effectiveness of new media and community Internet use is the Zapatista movement in Mexico. The Zapatista National Liberation Army emerged in response against the Mexican government to the impending North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 (Villareal Ford & Gil, 2001). In their research on the Zapatista movement, Villareal Ford and Gil show the movement was successful thanks to their inclusion of historically excluded and discriminated groups, depicting the power struggle between classes over ideological control. Having to maintain strong connections with local communities and international solidarity groups and organizations, the Zapatistas needed a way to efficiently and effectively communicate in real time. They were able to accomplish this through the Internet by creating a website where their communications “were routinely translated into any number of languages and disseminated to communities thousands of miles apart, often resulting in coordinated solidarity actions involving the participation of individuals worldwide” (Villareal Ford & Gil, 2001, p. 221). Although just one of many examples the Zapatista movement shows the potential of alternative media as a tool to facilitate civic engagement.

POOR Magazine: Community Media Producer & Educator

In its efforts to engage and build power with its demographic audience, comprised of underrepresented, 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. In the summer of 2010 I enrolled in Escuela de la Gente to observe this educational process first hand. 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 explicated further below.

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 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 nine weeks, meets twice a week, and provides training in art and media production and courses in language domination, bi-lingual 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

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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.

Voice articulation

In the first phase of learning at the school, 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.

Another activity used in the theater class to shape voice and confront personal struggle is a handout that asks the students write in poetic prose. For this activity the students write about themselves in the five senses: as a color, taste, smell, touch, sound; as well as their struggle in poetic prose. As the students read their answers and reveal personal secrets of self-identity, the students quickly grasp the poetic prose in their struggle. They use techniques like similes and metaphors to not only convey their self-concept but shape the voice of their struggle as well. For example,

Hola soy Mary, libre como el viento limpia mi camino. Mis huellas han sembrado mi destino. Y mi destino es lucha y dignidad. (*Hello I am Mary, free like the wind*)

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and the wind clears my path. My prints have planted my destiny. And my destiny is my fight and dignity.) [Original spelling and grammar retained]

Once everyone in the circle reads their answers a few students read theirs on the microphone, which shows more theatrical force in their words through their delivery, pauses and emphasis on certain words. In every class, POOR Magazine has bilingual translators to allow Spanish and English speakers to be able to communicate with each other. The interesting part of this particular class is that the English speakers attempt Spanish and vice versa showing the desire of the students to be able to communicate directly with one another instead of via translator.

By articulating and defining voices normally ignored by the media POOR helps facilitate agency for these community members through helping them find their own source of power from within: their voice. Rodríguez (2001) describes how this process of identifying and articulating voice helps to change the larger hierarchical power structures that create systems of oppression.

By forging their cultural identities into texts for their own programming, citizens' media shift the balance of the subordinate/dominate cultural relationships. What before was at the margins now moves toward the center; what before was considered inappropriate now becomes the locus; what before was unworthy of being on the television screen, or the radio waves, now becomes the reason for the existence of the new medium. (Rodríguez, 2001, p. 153)

In other words, through their individual voice construction and the collective merger of these voices POOR enables power for each community member. Through the collective transformation of the dominant cultural system POOR operates as a catalyst for cultivating organic intellectuals within the local community mediascape. The next section will address the types of skills students learn in order to publish and broadcast their voices once they have articulated them.

Journalism & media skills

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 like 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).

The POOR office has three rooms where students learn to use media equipment like digital recording devices, handheld digital cameras, or computer software programs for editing audio, video or written files. The advanced media lab consists of approximately eight computers and a couch and looks more like an unofficial meeting or brainstorming room than a computer lab. This is the room where most of the advanced

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production for the audio and video occur. On the day the students record their personalized audio sound bites and learn to use the digital recording devices the tiny room is crammed with ten to twelve people scattered about. In the summer the room feels the greenhouse effect of the setting sun beaming through the window and some of the students complain of the heat. Despite some discomfort the students pay attention to how to operate the recorders and patiently wait their turn as each student, one by one, records their ten-second sound bite. During this time the small office also serves as a makeshift recording studio, except the door is open as many people enter in and out of the room during the exercise and visitors are reminded to be quiet during recording sessions. Students loiter about the room, holding hushed discussions in Spanish or English while one student learns how to hold the recorder, what each of the button's functions are, and how to record a sound bite.

While observing POOR I was also provided the opportunity to assist the main instructor in the video production class. When the main instructor enters the room, rather than dictating a lecture, he sits down in a chair with the students and asks questions and solicits responses from students who already know about the camera. He creates a Freirian class atmosphere where teacher and students are equal by having the students speak as often as he speaks, encouraging shared knowledge. Together, students and instructors go over the basic features of the camera and 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 most balanced image.

According to King and Mele (1999), "the process of media production itself is politically transformational" (p. 608). In their study of community television stations and civic engagement they found that the process of production is key in creating a sense of civic engagement for those involved. "Personal accomplishment, meaningful communication, and social solidarity experienced by public access producers, while mitigating against a 'shared subjectivity' (Young, 1990, p. 309), constitute basic elements of sustainable civic involvement" (King & Mele, 1999, p. 621). This same concept can be applied to POOR as the students not only learn to cultivate their voice but also to use and control the technology that will broadcast their voice into the public sphere. Through the process of production these community members are engaged as local citizens, addressing important social issues that affect their lives directly. Without these technological skills dominant ideological structures are upheld and subjugated voices remain silent. The next section will explicate how applying these skills also transitions passive individuals to engaged citizens.

Journalism & media use (Passive)

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

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personal struggle in blog format. One of the immigrant students describes her struggle of her arrival in the U.S. 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.

Over the course of the program, class assignments progress from impromptu writing assignments to thoughtful blogs and articles. One student’s writing exercise transformed from an in-class exercise to part of blog writing campaign addressing important local issues. During this transformation one draft read:

I believe everything in the universe happens for a reason and I am truly grateful. I am grateful for my child I am grateful for cal works because without the food stamps and the financial help and medical my child and I would be hungry homeless and sick. Although we have experience hunger homelessness and illness I know in my soul that it would be so much worse. As a welfare mom I recently had the blessing of being given work experience for pay. This work experience at San Francisco City College has boosted my self-esteem and truly helps me realize that I am working for myself and the betterment of my child. Although I only make \$400 month this has truly been a help to the betterment of my mind soul and spirit. [Original spelling and grammar retained]

In this draft, the author not only addresses the social issue that was raised during the in-class assignment but her writing reflects her own voice and struggle throughout. Even though this draft contains what academia perceives as spelling and grammar errors this poverty scholar writes to the best of her ability without compromising her message or voice. By recreating this student’s text exactly as she wrote it I hope to invoke a Freirean ideal of “using the everyday language and images of the students (poor farmers or city dwellers), and reject[ing] pre-packaged language and images pulled from the scholar’s authoritative shelf” (Downing, 2001, p. 45). This Freirean concept is also taught to students at POOR who may feel inferior to cultural notions of what constitutes a good writer or intelligent person. Instead the staff and students at POOR work together to reinforce one another’s perspective and voice and combat mainstream media depictions of their subordination.

Exercises like these build on the skills the students previously learn and begin to incorporate the students’ voices and personal struggles. In this step students learn to weave their personal voice through their technological media skills. According to Friedland (1996) “democratic conversation consists . . . of engaged citizens combining in a variety of roles to review what they may achieve with a given project—and then carrying out the project, often debating and modifying as they go” (Downing, 2001, p. 49). Through the process of tying together their voices and production skills, students at POOR create a democratic conversation. This conversation is continued through

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projects like Community Newsroom where students and staff are given journalism assignments and monthly “Elephant Meetings” in which students and staff discuss local issues important to them and develop plan of actions for implementation. In creating these democratic conversations and enacting their skills and voice, students become involved in local processes of civic engagement. The next section will address the final step of culminating all of the processes for final publication and broadcast of community voices.

Journalism & media use (Active)

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. In this phase, class exercises become complex responses to larger social issues, such as blog campaigns to collectively address issues affecting the students’ daily lives, like slumlords evicting the elderly. Other exercises include press conferences to confront local politicians and the mainstream media about issues concerning the poor like welfare cuts, and staged theatrical performances as part of their 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 as an immigrant mother:

Soy una madre de familia tengo 5 hijos como familia. Y he comprendido que con el sueldo de mi esposo no nos alcanza para lo necesario. Dia por dia luchamos como matrimonio para que nuestros hijos puedan vivir una vida digna. No como nosotros tuvimos en nuestros paises. Por eso optamos por este programa. Como familia nos beneficiamos del programa trabajo de la comunidad por eso les pido por medio de esta carta que no nos corten este programa. Porque como familia nos beneficiamos a poder agarra un poquito mas de dinero para poder brindarles una mejor clase de vida a mis hijos. Yo como madre me beneficio de este programa porque soy la que trabaja por medio del programa y apenas tengo un mes de estar trabajandoy realmente necesito este trabajo para poder pagar mis deudas. Porque tengo una deudas. Por eso es necesario para mi el trabar. Para vivir una vida digna. A caso es algo dificil de pedir. *(I am a single of five children and as a family of seven my husbands salary is not enough for our nececities. Day after day we struggle as a couple so as to give our children a life with dignity. A life not like our own back in our mother countries. These are the reasons that as a family we support the extention of the Community Jobs Program. It is a key to the survival of our family. The benefits*

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allow us just a little bit more money in an attempt to offer our children a better life. As a mother this program benefits me because it allows me to work. With just under a month working in this program I have the hope to be able to earn enough to pay off my debt. I need this job. I want to live a dignified life, that shouldn't be too much to ask for.) [Original spelling and grammar retained]

In addition to the blogs posted on POOR's website, students write letters to the local government offices of Senator Feinstein, Senator Boxer, and Congresswoman Pelosi. The letters provide an overview of the students' struggles and invite the senators and congresswoman to visit POOR's website to 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 senators' and congresswoman's office. The phone calls are not easily made because of language barriers but the students are able to overcome adversity and leave their messages of support. One month after the blog campaign was launched, POOR Magazine received a phone call from Congresswoman Pelosi's office thanking them for writing their blogs and voicing their perspectives.

According to Michael Warner (2002) counterpublics consist of those who are subordinate to the dominant ideological culture. "The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness" (Warner, 2002, p. 119). By this definition, POOR Magazine constitutes a counterpublic comprised of organic intellectuals whose goals are to question the dominant ideological structures that seek to oppress them through systematic subordination. By articulating a subjugated voice, teaching journalism and new media technology skills, applying these skills in class assignments, and publishing/broadcasting them within the public sphere, POOR facilitates agency and engages local community members. The final step of publication and broadcast gives students a sense of achievement in cultivating their stories by refusing to be ignored or slandered by commercial media. Through the act of publishing their voices, students complete the transition from passive to engaged citizen, contributing important dialogue to the public sphere. In essence POOR helps cultivate civic engagement where individuals believe "a life without speech and without action . . . is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men" (Arendt, 1958, p. 176).

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. In the last phase students take what they learn 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 building on the previous stages and 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.

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Through this process, we see the power of community media. By 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 to include African American, Asian American, and Native American perspectives into history books have succeeded in unearthing lost voices (Zinn, 2003; Chomsky, 2003). 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.

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