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COMMUNITY MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURES AND THE “RIGHT TO KNOW AND TELL” IN CANADIAN CITIES

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ABSTRACT

Urban residents cannot exercise their “right to the city” without access to news and media infrastructures. To that end, community media is a crucial tool for social progress because it elevates minority voices and provides information to mobilize readers. I identify 62 community media organizations across the country that are serving urban communities and building promising social and technological infrastructures. Through a case study of FOCUS Media Arts Centre in Toronto, I show how these hyper-local groups respond to the gaps in news and media infrastructures by producing representative alternative media in various accessible formats; training residents in media production and literacy; circulating community-based non-English information; and creating informal, trustworthy mechanisms for hyperlocal information exchange as well as organizing. Federal and local governments must strengthen community media infrastructures across Canada through funding, research, and policy.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION: COMMUNITY MEDIA AS INFRASTRUCTURE

News and media infrastructures play a vital role in maintaining a healthy democracy. These infrastructures go beyond broadcast and print, and may also include telecommunication systems, radio towers, financial opportunities, and sociocultural institutions, all depending on the context of place.¹ Similar to infrastructures such as roads, bridges, and sewage, news and media infrastructures are part of the material and social grid that supports (or hinders) human life.² They are intended to keep communities and individuals informed and connected, dispute disinformation, inspire civic engagement, and build public consciousness.

However, ethnic, racial, and cultural minorities, as well as Indigenous communities, are often invisible in mainstream news outlets or stereotyped in reporting.³ In Canada, public service broadcasters monopolized news and media infrastructure throughout most of the 20th century, often telling stories about the nation that excluded minority perspectives.⁴ The country still faces a news and media infrastructure crisis, as various outlets disappear due to financial pressures, turning large swaths of the country into “news deserts” where there are no journalists and no flows of discourse.⁵ For example, between 2008 and 2024, 525 local news outlets closed in 347 communities across Canada.⁶ This trend, in turn, creates a biased knowledge base for policy officials and the public.⁷

Historically and today, “community media” – alternative news and stories produced by local organizations, collectives, and/or residents themselves – challenge the misrepresentations of mainstream media.⁸ Scholar Kevin Howley defines community media as:

...grassroots- or locally-oriented media access initiatives predicated on a profound sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream media form and content, dedicated to the principles of free expression and participatory democracy, and committed to enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity.⁹

¹ Kalathil, *Developing Independent Media*.

² Larkin, “Politics and Poetics.”

³ Gangadharan, “Media Justice and Communication Rights.”

⁴ Howley, *Understanding Community Media*.

⁵ Chiu, “Why Canada’s Media Industry.”

⁶ Local News Research Project, “Local News Map Data.” During this time period, 388 local news outlets launched, but only 260 remain in operation (Local News Research Project).

⁷ Government of Canada, *Online News Act*.

⁸ The term “community media” was coined in 1965, when Sony invented the Portapak video camera.

⁹ Howley, *Community Media*.

Community media forms tend to include non-profit organizations or non-commercial structures; collective ownership or decision-making; de-professionalized roles or resident producers; and often free distribution without a subscription. Community media content tends to critique mainstream media; report on oppositional culture; cover neglected stories; feature marginalized voices; and mobilize readers/viewers/listeners on local issues.¹⁰ It also democratizes the structure and conversational practices of modern communication systems; in doing so, it supports participation in public discourse.¹¹ However, community media infrastructures in Canada face many challenges, including financial sustainability and the controversial *Online News Act*.

In this article, I explore why strong community media infrastructures are necessary in Canadian cities. Given that approximately 75% of Canadians live in large, multicultural urban centres, it is important to understand how people use community media as a tool to address various forms of social injustice in urban areas. While policy-makers often discuss decreasing the digital divide as an antidote to news deserts in urban and rural areas, local governments must go beyond simply ensuring broadband in underserved communities. Providing access to the internet is critical, but some communities rely more on radio, print news, or even bulletin boards for information. Local governments should invest in appropriate technological and social infrastructures that allow residents to connect with one another and circulate pertinent local knowledge on their own terms. Access to information and freedom of expression is not the same as creating opportunities and appropriate platforms for that expression.¹²

In this article, I ask:

- What is the current community media landscape across Canadian cities?
- Where do these organizations exist? What are their missions? Who do they serve? What types of media do they produce?
- How do underserved urban communities build and use community media infrastructures to amplify their voice, control their own narratives, and influence policy in their neighbourhoods?

To answer these questions, I completed a scan of community media organizations across Canadian census metropolitan areas and in the largest cities of each province to understand who they were serving and what their missions were. Next, I conducted an in-depth case-study of one community media organization in Toronto, the FOCUS Media Arts Centre, that exemplifies how these collectives can build technological and social infrastructure in their communities to address inequality and elevate voices that are often ignored. Before delving into this primary data, I provide some historical and contemporary context relating to an earlier Canadian community media funding program as well as to the *Online News Act*.

¹⁰ Rauch, “Exploring the Alternative–Mainstream Dialectic.”

¹¹ Sandercock and Attili, “Digital Ethnography as Planning Praxis.”

¹² Barron, “Access to the Press.”

Challenge for Change

The idea that community media is a crucial tool for social progress is not new in Canada. The National Film Board of Canada created and ran Challenge for Change from 1967 to 1980¹³ – a first-of-its-kind program that advocated for “the use and control of media” at the local level to address poverty through the grassroots production and distribution of documentary cinema.¹⁴ The 45 films that resulted from the program covered such topics as First Nations rights and lifestyles, women’s movements, housing, environmental justice, and economic stratification. Challenge for Change focused on how these films could advance social change rather than on their production values.¹⁵

One of the most famous Challenge for Change community media experiments was a set of 27 short films about Fogo Island, produced by a professional filmmaker in collaboration with community members. They portrayed islanders grappling with local issues such as economic opportunity, education, and relocation. Productions were then screened in schools, churches, and other community gathering places to spur local debate, build hyperlocal public consciousness, and incite action.¹⁶ Wiesner writes, “Both its lack of a communication infrastructure and its isolation from the mainland made Fogo Island an attractive site for the experimental use of film in community development.”¹⁷ Challenge for Change grantees and filmmakers replicated the Fogo Island process in disenfranchised neighbourhoods across Canadian cities.

There was no formalized program evaluation or data collection to understand how the Challenge for Change media interventions affected communities. However, anecdotal evidence from participants showed that these videos had a role to play in democratic processes, and the program created beneficial communication infrastructures and social bonds among residents, community organizations, and decision-makers.¹⁸

The *Online News Act*

In December 2023, a CBC headline stated that community newspapers in Canada were facing an “existential crisis” amid declining revenues and other challenges.¹⁹ The Canadian government had passed the controversial *Online News Act* in June 2023 to protect local Canadian media organizations and ensure that major search engines and social media sites such as Google and Meta compensated these news outlets when sharing their content.²⁰ Unfortunately, in response to the legislation, Meta – which includes Facebook and Instagram – responded by restricting the sharing and viewing of all links and posts from news outlet accounts in Canada. This has hurt hyperlocal media outlets such as

¹³ Challenge for Change was funded by eight different departments of the Canadian government.

¹⁴ Waugh, Baker, and Winton, *Challenge for Change*; Wiesner, “Media for the People.”

¹⁵ Wiesner, “Media for the People.”

¹⁶ Waugh, Baker, and Winton, *Challenge for Change*.

¹⁷ Wiesner, “Media for the People,” 68.

¹⁸ Waugh, Baker, and Winton, *Challenge for Change*.

¹⁹ *CBC News*, “Community Newspapers Face ‘Existential Crisis.’”

²⁰ Canada, *Online News Act, 2023 (Bill C-18)*.

community newspapers the most. Many neighbourhood publishers see social media platforms as a necessary extension of the physical newspaper for engaging readers and sharing beyond subscribers.²¹ Meta's ban on Canadian news has interrupted flows of knowledge and discourse, increasing the circulation of unreliable information and fake news from untrustworthy accounts. In this environment, community media organizations have an even more critical role to play in ensuring that constituents are informed, heard, and connected.

*“Historically and today, “community media” – alternative news and stories produced by local organizations, collectives, and/or residents themselves – **challenge the misrepresentations of mainstream media.**”*

²¹ *CBC News*, “Community Newspapers Face ‘Existential Crisis.’”

METHODOLOGY

Geography

Given the scope of this research, I narrowed the search to community media organizations in the most populous urban regions in the country (that is, cities at the “core” of census metropolitan areas, with populations over 1,000,000 people). This included Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Ottawa-Gatineau, Calgary, and Edmonton.²² To ensure a broader geographic reach, I also included the largest city in each province, which added Winnipeg, St. John’s, Halifax, Moncton, and Saskatoon.²³

Defining the criteria for community media

I defined the parameters of the community media scan as follows:²⁴

- media that emerged from collective grassroots action and continues to be run by a non-profit organization or community-based group;
- media organizations that have information about themselves – their goals, mission, values, or history – available for public access online;
- outlets that are attached to more traditional news and media infrastructure such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines;
- organizations that are local, serving the urban population of one of the cities listed above, or organizations that serve a larger area within a province but focus on representing voices of those who are underserved by mainstream media outlets;²⁵ and
- media outlets that:
 - discuss, broadcast, or report on civic issues important to or affecting people and communities in their everyday lives; and/or
 - have goals around training and capacity building, either identified explicitly through their mission statements, principles or values, or implicitly through their reliance on volunteers who have to undergo training to participate in the organization.

²² Statistics Canada, “Census Metropolitan Area (CMA).”

²³ Statistics Canada, “Canada’s Fastest Growing and Decreasing Municipalities.”; Given that the populations of the biggest cities in Prince Edward Island, Yukon, Nunavut, and the Northwest Territories were under 100,000, I excluded those from the search, although these are important areas for future research.

²⁴ Downing, *Radical Media*.

²⁵ Canada-wide media organizations or outlets with no evident local urban or provincial focus were not included, as the study’s focus is on how hyperlocal community media organizations build technological and social infrastructures of communication for their constituents.

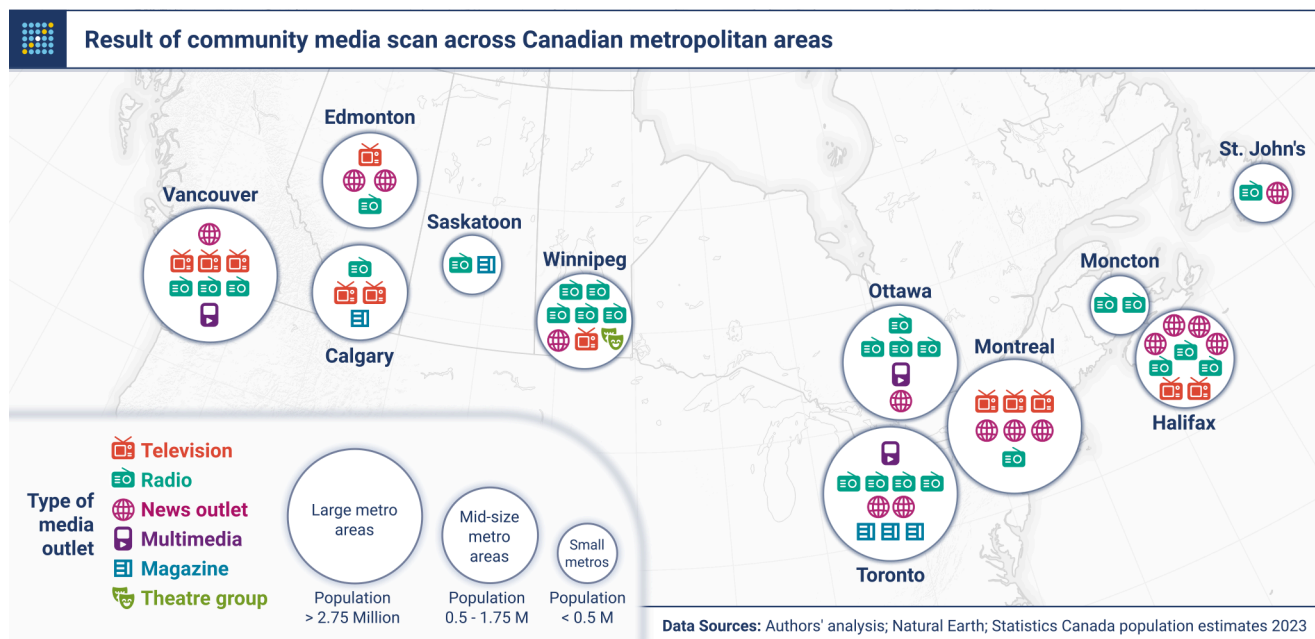
Using keywords based on these parameters, I conducted a systematic search for community media outlets and organizations in each of the cities listed above on the Community Media Portal administered by CACTUS (the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations), as well as with Google.²⁶

²⁶ See <https://commediaportal.ca/>; <https://cactusmedia.ca/organizations>. The keywords included combinations of “community media,” “community media organizations,” “community TV,” “community radio,” “community news,” “independent/indie media,” “feminist media,” “Indigenous media,” and “youth media.”

FINDINGS

I identified 62 community media organizations across the country²⁷ that are building or facilitating promising technological and social infrastructures, allowing knowledge and discourse to flow. In their mission statements, 13 of these organizations define themselves in relation to mainstream media. The majority claim to focus on issues relevant to a particular local community, whether at a neighbourhood, city-wide, or provincial scale.

Figure 1. Distribution of community media organizations in Canadian metropolitan areas



Note that “news outlet” refers to web or print-based platforms whose primary goal is sharing written news.

For example, *The Local*, a non-profit online magazine in Toronto, aims to “fill a role that traditional media neglects – turning complex policy issues into compelling narratives, and addressing problems that are systemic and ongoing, even if they don’t have a news hook.”²⁸ CKDU Radio Station in Halifax says that their mandate is “to provide an alternative to private and public broadcasters, and to be a forum for diverse and under-represented voices, music, and news.”²⁹

Similarly, the *Sask Dispatch* states, “There are very few independent publications in Saskatchewan; even fewer that position themselves to the left of the corporate mainstream...we build on [a] half-century of activism and publishing...in order to produce fearless investigative reporting and critical

²⁷ See data set here: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1xFg8iY3yOo3sAuK0ZEpyawWd-KHBsCrjLTBKGfV7bA/>.

²⁸ *Local*, “About.”

²⁹ *CKDU*, “About Us.”

commentary about our home province.”³⁰ Native Communications Inc. (NCI) radio has been operating in Manitoba since 1971, and is regarded as “the Voice of Indigenous People.”³¹

Topics covered and communities served

The topics covered by these 62 community media organizations span housing, health, climate change, politics, labour, grassroots initiatives, Indigenous issues, culture, and education.³² All organizations identify their diverse local urban populations as a) the communities they aim to serve, b) their audiences, and c) their participants and volunteers. Within nearly all of the larger urban areas identified, there are university-based and student-run community media outlets that provide programming for the broader urban community. A smaller number of organizations identify specific population groups as their key audiences, such as newcomers, ethnic communities, Indigenous peoples, Black people, people of colour, working-class folks, and/or members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. A handful of organizations, a majority of which were run by Indigenous communities, are dedicated to sharing worldviews of Indigenous peoples and empowering other Indigenous communities through media training.

Training and advocacy

Several of these organizations have a mandate to provide technical media training in production and distribution. Given that the majority of them are non-profits, they rely on volunteers for much of their operational labour, and often build training for these volunteers into their organizational goals. The training aspect is especially pertinent for university- or college-based media organizations that partly exist for the purposes of training their students in various aspects of media production and management. Beyond operations, several organizations also invite participation from local residents in programming and content creation. A few organizations identified a responsibility in local activism and advocacy efforts, as is illustrated by the mission of *The Mainlander*, a news outlet from Vancouver: “We aim to be a cornerstone for social movements and political debates in Vancouver.”³³

Community-based services and community building

Several organizations also use their platforms to provide affordable (or free) advertising for local small businesses, non-profit organizations, events, and the work of local artists.³⁴ In some cases, the organizations collaborate directly with local artists and groups for their programming. In a few instances, they emphasize their responsibility to amplify local and regional cultural expression from

³⁰ *Sask Dispatch*, “About.”

³¹ *NCI*, “About Us.”

³² A deeper analysis of the organizations’ actual community media content is needed to confirm the most frequent, popular, and pressing topics.

³³ *Mainlander*, “About.”

³⁴ Organizations see this as a means to strengthen relationships between their audiences and local arts, businesses, and cultural communities.

underserved communities, and want contributors to “understand the significance of their own voice[s]” and “shape their own narrative[s].”³⁵

Reporting on decision-makers and policy officials and engaging with them through hyperlocal and in-depth journalism is a significant goal for many organizations. News sites such as Vancouver’s *Mainlander*, Toronto’s *The Hoser*, the *Halifax Examiner*, and others strive “to hold the powerful [...] accountable.” A few organizations also underscored preserving cultural heritage, diverse languages, and hyperlocal histories.

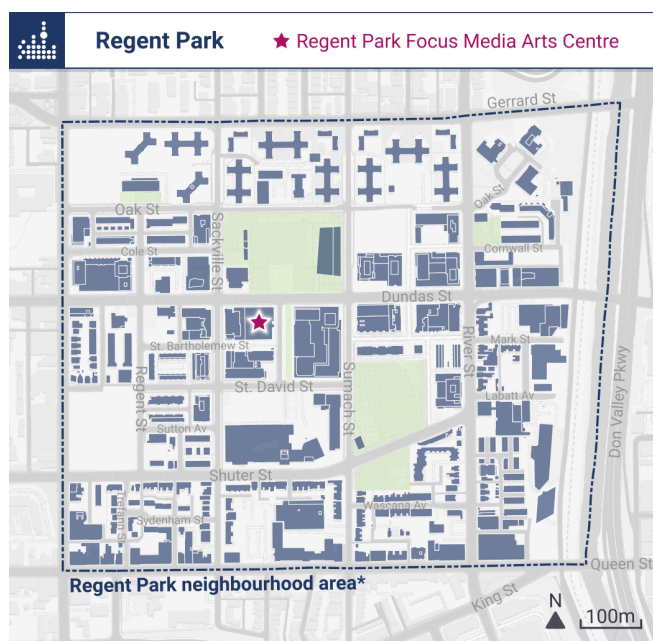
³⁵ Youth Ottawa, “Youth Active Media”; Regent Park Focus Media Arts Centre, “About Us”; Interestingly, some organizations also identify the need to foster intercultural awareness and conflict resolution through stories that embrace differences between people in specific geographies. This is illustrated in the mission statement of SKYRISE Media Society, from Vancouver: “The platform serves as a medium for fostering understanding, appreciation, and dialogue among different cultures and communities.” (SKYRISE Media Society, Home Page.)

CASE STUDY: FOCUS MEDIA ARTS CENTRE IN TORONTO

FOCUS Media Arts Centre epitomizes how community media organizations give individuals voice, build collective identity and power, and facilitate strong relationships among residents through the process of media production. For over 35 years, the organization has developed social and technological infrastructure in a historically marginalized (and ever-changing) neighbourhood amid various political, social, economic, and environmental disruptions. The history of FOCUS demonstrates how community media-making is also a form of city-making.³⁶

Harmful media stereotyping

Figure 2. Map of Regent Park showing location of FOCUS Media Arts Centre and surrounding area.



Data Sources: City of Toronto; OpenStreetMap
*Neighbourhood boundary as defined by the City of Toronto

The City of Toronto built Regent Park in 1948 as an urban renewal effort to address the substandard living conditions of the working class amid post-war housing shortages (see Figure 2). The new neighbourhood provided affordable subsidized housing to the “deserving poor.” Although the development was deemed a success at first, over time media articles about it became more negative, and by the 1960s some media labelled it a “hopeless slum.”³⁷ During the 1970s and 1980s, Regent Park became a “reception area” for new immigrants arriving to Toronto, leading to an increase in families from Asia and Africa and a decrease in families of European origin. FOCUS Media Arts explains on its website,

Despite some positive and neutral articles about Regent Park, the overall impression was that the neighbourhood was a negative and dangerous place to live and raise a family. Lacking evidence or facts of any kind, underlying most of these articles ... was racism towards the large number of people of colour and immigrants living in the area, coupled with a societal discrimination of the poor and low-income people.³⁸

³⁶ Schiller, “Urban Media as Infrastructure for Social Change.”

³⁷ Purdy, “‘Ripped off’ by the System.”

³⁸ Regent Park Focus, “About Us.”

What is now FOCUS Media Arts was born as Regent Park Focus in 1989 when the Ontario Ministry of Health implemented a health promotion pilot program across various communities that suffered from disinvestment in the province.³⁹ Residents identified combatting media stereotyping as a priority to improve their welfare, reporting severe negative effects on the morale of community youth and even discrimination in the job market because of their stigmatized addresses. They argued that the press's focus on the drug problem exacerbated the problem, as it encouraged drug seekers to come to the area.

Regent Park Focus began with the goal “to educate and inform reporters and editors about the ‘real’ Regent Park. While acknowledging that there were problems in the neighbourhood, just as in many other downtown areas, residents argued that overall, the Regent Park community was safe, with many strengths and a positive community spirit.”⁴⁰

Focus collaborated with the Jane and Finch, Parkdale, and Warden Woods neighbourhoods, which also experienced media stereotyping, and coined the concept of “neighbour-hoodism,” defined as “prejudice against certain neighbourhoods that are perceived to be low income and occupied by a concentration of racial minorities.”⁴¹ Working together, they formed the Communities Against Neighbourhoodism (CAN) Coalition. CAN wrote letters to editors and journalists to fight the negative press plaguing their neighbourhoods.

From advocacy to self-determination

By 1993, Focus and the CAN coalition found that it was difficult to prevent journalists from continually stereotyping their communities. Focus shifted gears and began producing their own media and stories to take control of the neighbourhood's narrative. A new physical space in the basement of a building owned by Metro Toronto Housing Authority – now Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) – allowed Focus to build radio, newspaper, music, and photography studios – a full neighbourhood media infrastructure.⁴²

Before they had their own studios, Focus would buy two or three pages from the community newspaper and publish about drug prevention and other youth-related issues. However, the paper eventually shut down, and youth members of Regent Park Focus conceptualized *Catch da Flava* newspaper in 1995. Youth residents contributed stories and published four to six issues a year. The youth journalists hand-delivered the publication to every home in Regent Park as well as to libraries, community centres, and other youth organizations across the city, further manifesting the social infrastructure they were facilitating through their storytelling.⁴³ *Catch da Flava* still exists today in the

³⁹ At that time, nine sites were selected: Black Creek (North York), O'Connor (North York), Parkdale (Toronto), Regent Park (Toronto), Sault Ste. Marie, Vanier (Ottawa), Windsor, and West Bay First Nation (Manitoulin Island).

⁴⁰ Regent Park Focus, “About Us.”

⁴¹ Regent Park Focus, “About Us.”

⁴² Regent Park Focus, “About Us.”

⁴³ Regent Park Focus, “About Us.”

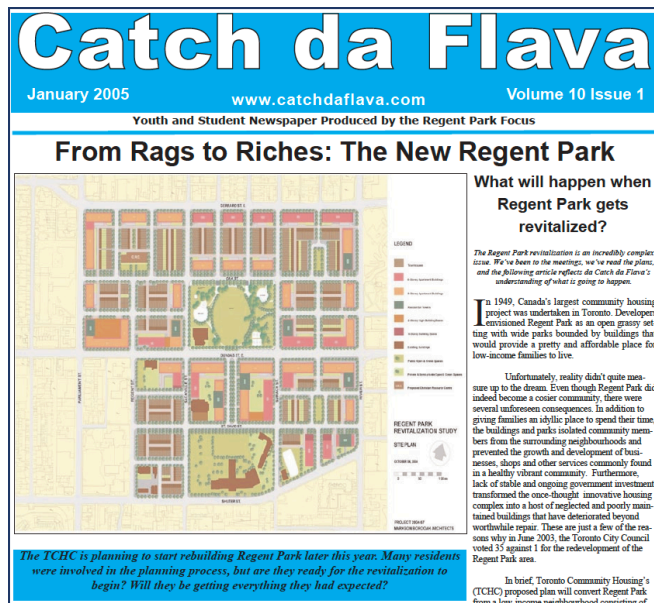
form of an e-newsletter, print magazine, and blog, and it continues to provide a platform for Regent Park youth.

Figure 3. Regent Park youth journalism: *Catch da Flava*



The cover of one the first *Catch da Flava* print magazines from summer 1995 (left); the cover of *Catch da Flava* magazine eight years later from summer 2003 (right).

Figure 4. The January 2005 issue of *Catch da Flava* reports on the Regent Park revitalization project



Building a communication infrastructure

While *Catch da Flava* was a popular publication and resource, it was only available intermittently. Despite various outreach efforts from non-profits and city agencies, residents felt uninformed about neighbourhood services and opportunities.⁴⁴ Thus, Focus also envisioned building a technical communication infrastructure via television in TCHC apartments. Each TCHC unit had access to a closed-circuit channel that displayed the footage from security cameras at their building entrance. Residents never used the feature, however, due to lack of maintenance.⁴⁵ Focus asked TCHC for access to this channel in 2000, with hopes of programming a closed-circuit TV

⁴⁴ Adonis Huggins, interview by the author, September 4, 2024.

⁴⁵ Adonis Huggins, interview by the author, September 4, 2024.

station that would report reliable information to TCHC tenants during the upcoming redevelopment project.⁴⁶ Having a community-led source of information during a time of drastic change was a way to ensure that the voices of Regent Park residents were at the forefront. With persistence, by the mid-2000s, Focus convinced TCHC and developer Daniels Corporation to allow the organization to program the channel, called Regent Park TV.

Figure 5. Homepage of Regent Park TV



The public access community channel can be viewed on the web at <https://www.regentpark.tv/> and on YouTube (@regentparktv).

In 2005, Regent Park began a multi-billion-dollar redevelopment. From the outset of this 15-plus-year project, Focus meticulously chronicled the process in various formats and with differing perspectives, building an archive of the neighbourhood's transformation. As the organization worked toward operating a TV channel in TCHC buildings, youth in the neighbourhood continued to produce community media that reflected their realities. For example, popular videos such as the *Myths of Regent Park* subtly argued that the revitalization

project was more a gentrification project.⁴⁷ The video *Detective Jones and the Case of the Missing Buildings* followed an entertaining detective's efforts to uncover the thief stealing the buildings in Regent Park.⁴⁸ Through Detective Jones's investigation, the viewer learns about the politics and plans of revitalization. These stories counter the mainstream reporting of Regent Park's redevelopment that tout the project to be "a model of inclusion."⁴⁹

In 2013, a few years after the redevelopment started, the Regent Park TV channel was installed in the new buildings as a part of a deal with Rogers. Shown on residents' channel 991, it featured programs created by the community for the community, such as interviews with local leaders in the Focus studio and reports on the redevelopment. The channel that had connected the neighbourhood's original residents as newcomers quickly moved into the area's freshly constructed market-rate housing.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, by 2018, the channel had shut down because TCHC could not fund needed technological upgrades.⁵¹ Focus pivoted to running Regent Park TV on YouTube, which anyone with internet could access, and enhancing its social media presence.

⁴⁶ Interestingly enough, back in 1951, the Housing Authority of Toronto (HAT) banned televisions in the neighbourhood, arguing that because the housing was publicly funded residents should not be able to buy luxuries. The Regent Park Ratepayers and Tenants' Association (RPRTA) fought against this ban, claiming that it was restricting their freedom. In an act of defiance, Alf Bluett installed an aerial on his house. Although he took it down after being threatened with eviction, neighbours followed his lead, and by 1954 some 60% of units had defied the HAT regulation and installed aerials. This forced HAT into a corner, leading them to provide a central antenna system for a monthly fee. (Purdy, "By the People, for the People," 525.)

⁴⁷ Focus, *Myths of Regent Park*, 2005.

⁴⁸ Focus, *Detective Jones and the Case of the Missing Buildings*.

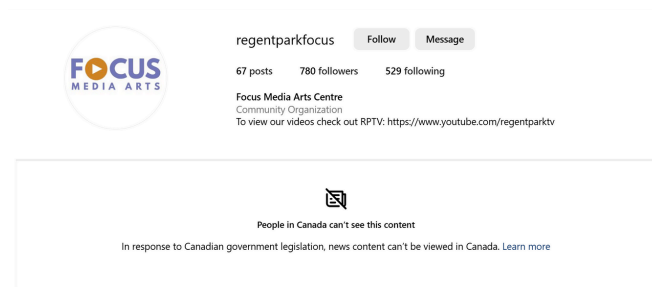
⁴⁹ Levin, "In Toronto."

⁵⁰ One drawback was that only residents who signed with Rogers could access Regent Park TV.

⁵¹ TCHC lacked the funds to replace the equipment needed to meet Rogers technological changes.

In 2020, Regent Park Focus officially changed its name to FOCUS Media Arts but has continued its mission, including coverage of the ongoing redevelopment. Recent media representation of Regent Park has generally been highly positive, thanks to the area’s redevelopment and the accompanying shift to a more mixed-income neighbourhood. However, much of the recent coverage ignores the voices of lower-income, minority residents. FOCUS responds to the gaps in information, communication, and news in the neighbourhood by producing alternative media in various accessible formats including radio, television, and print; by training residents in these forms of media production and literacy; by circulating community-based information; and by creating informal, trustworthy mechanisms for hyperlocal information exchange and organizing.

Figure 6. As of fall 2024, Meta blocks FOCUS content on Instagram and Facebook



Sadly, as of the fall 2024, Meta has categorized FOCUS as a news organization, so media content is blocked on channels such as Instagram and Facebook where the organization regularly communicated with constituents. FOCUS is also blocked from creating a business account on Meta’s WhatsApp, a popular messaging platform among the neighbourhood’s immigrant residents.

Despite these challenges, FOCUS continues to reinvent itself while serving as a trusted source of information and media production and a literacy training hub for Regent Park’s residents, old and new. Currently, FOCUS produces regular content for its YouTube channel, also called Regent Park TV, publishes *Catch da Flava* as a monthly e-newsletter, and operates an online public access radio station, Radio Regent.

*“Having a **community-led source of information during a time of drastic change** was a way to ensure that the voices of Regent Park residents were at the forefront.”*

RECOMMENDATIONS: ENSURING “THE RIGHT TO KNOW AND TELL”

Community media organizations such as FOCUS Media Arts develop communication and media infrastructure that is especially necessary for neighbourhoods in crisis. For those experiencing gentrification and displacement, environmental disasters, public health crises, or violent conflict, access to information is a lifeline – one that is at risk. Federal and local governments, along with community media organizations themselves, have important roles to play in strengthening community media infrastructures across Canada through funding, research, and policy.

Federal government

- The federal government should redesign and relaunch the radical Challenge for Change program, funding community media organizations to produce the films. The community media grantees should be required to openly share their projects for others to learn from and to propose their own metrics of impact based on the purpose of their media-making processes and productions.
- As the federal government negotiates with Meta to allow Canadian news to be visible and circulated on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, it should protect the country’s non-profit community media organizations such as FOCUS Media Arts from being blocked. The ban is especially dangerous during times of public emergency, when people rely on social media for reliable information from trusted hyperlocal news sources.⁵²
- The precarious financial situation of community media organizations is one of the biggest challenges that this sector faces; it needs reliable funding to continue addressing the information needs of communities across Canada. The Canadian government’s recent Changing Narratives Fund of \$10 million over three years is an excellent program that funds “incentives and initiatives to encourage greater participation by diverse communities in the media and cultural industries.”⁵³ However, we need more funding for longer periods of time as these programs are fleeting and the amount is not enough to keep the country’s community media infrastructures durable.

⁵² McLean and Ryan, “Meta’s Canadian News Ban.”

⁵³ Canadian Heritage, “Government of Canada to Launch Changing Narratives Fund.”

Local government

- Local governments should partner with researchers to investigate which community media organizations exist in their cities and conduct a needs assessment of what these organizations need to operate better. Technical infrastructures such as broadband, radio licenses, production equipment, and physical space are key components that local governments can help provide.
- When local governments hold press conferences for mainstream press outlets, they should also host separate events for community media organizations to ensure feedback loops between local communities and city hall.
- Local governments should train their planners, policy-makers, and community engagement specialists to connect with community media organizations as important points of entry to understand and learn about a place.
- Policy officials should require the information communication technology industry to mirror the real estate industry's use of community benefit agreements (CBAs). CBAs are contracts signed between community-based organizations and real estate developers that obligate the developer to give back to the local community or neighbourhood in the form of public space, affordable housing, or jobs. Cities should require information communication technology companies that franchise with them to invest directly into community media programs, as occurred with Rogers in Regent Park.

*“For those experiencing gentrification and displacement, environmental disasters, public health crises, or violent conflict, **access to information is a lifeline – one that is at risk.**”*

Community media organizations

- Community media organizations should aim to create business models with community residents whom they train in media production. Local businesses and governments, as well as other non-profit groups, can hire community media organizations for services such as videography or podcasting, among others, that recently trained residents could deliver. FOCUS Media Arts uses this business model to stay afloat.
- Mission statements from Canada’s community media organizations and the FOCUS Media Arts case study show that these organizations are more than just news and information providers. They are also trainers, educators, historians, organizers, and builders of social infrastructure, and should highlight these latter contributions to government and philanthropic funders. Community media organizations facilitate media literacy in the age of “fake news,” build public consciousness, and are first responders in times of crisis. Identifying these various roles may expand funding possibilities.

While these recommendations address immediate challenges, we also need a paradigm shift in how urban policy and planning practitioners and scholars approach news and media infrastructures. The outcomes of urban policy and planning are evaluated through the ideals of procedural justice (a fair decision-making process with equal representation from all affected stakeholders⁵⁴) or distributive justice (a policy, program, or outcome that yields equity in society⁵⁵), but neither of these perspectives critically examines how individuals form and obtain knowledge to make sense of their environments in the first place. Urban practitioners and scholars must include access to community media infrastructure – “the right to know and tell” – as an issue area in the field to effectively address inequality in urban centres.

⁵⁴ Fainstein, *Just City*.

⁵⁵ Fainstein, *Just City*.

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