Transformations of antagonism into agonism: Community Media as a Participatory Contact Zone for Youth in the Divided Cyprus
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Abstract

This research examines the participatory-democratic dimensions of community media practices in relationship with conflict transformation, building on Mouffe’s (2000) theory of agonistic pluralism. Focusing on the context of Cyprus conflict and the discursive antagonisms embedded in the education and media systems across the ethno-politically divided island, this inquiry is made through a research intervention that defines community media content production as a participatory contact zone (Torre, 2010) with the aim of exploring how these potentially maximalist-participatory processes, characterized by co-decision making and collaboration, may support transformations of antagonism into agonism, by studying both the possibilities and limits, and the realizations and failures of a series of community media workshops organized with mixed groups of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot teenagers. Methodologically, the research was conducted in five stages. In the first stage, existing conflict transformation projects in the Cypriot educational field were mapped, and two selected cases were studied for a detailed understanding of the context, in which the intervention would then take place. The second stage involved an ethnography of the community media training and production workshops, organized with 3 clusters of a total of 24 participants. This was followed by an analysis of the multimedia outputs produced at the workshops in the third stage, and in-depth interviews with the workshop participants in the fourth stage. The fifth and final stage covered a reception study (Staiger, 2005) of the workshops’ multimedia outputs, revolving around 13 focus group interviews with Cypriot stakeholders.

Findings, based on qualitative content analysis (Silverman, 2011; Saldaña, 2013) of the collected data, indicate that the teenagers’ participation in community media content production processes took the form of self-organization and self-representation, realized at varying intensities, given a set of supporting and limiting factors. In this shared symbolic space, three pillars and different degrees of transformation were identified, distinguished with an awareness of difference and confrontation against a homogeneous view of the self, where interactions with the “other” are characterized by non-violence, dialogue and teamwork, and categorizations of “us” are diversified and expanded, leading to alliances based on and advocating respect for difference. The participatory intensity of community media production process, along with the embodied knowledges, are found to support these transformations by fostering critical thinking, free self-expression and collaborative action on shared grounds, while giving space for conflicts, which were handled via democratic means with the use of self-introduced decision-making tools. Reception study findings further highlighted the mediating function of community media productions, which present the participatory contact zone to the outside world, promoting a culture of non-violence and participation, and exemplifying possible forms of conflictual co-existence.

Keywords: community media, participation, conflict transformation, agonism, participatory contact zones, critical pedagogy, education, youth, Cyprus