

Narratives of Successful Collaborations between Alternative Media and Women's
Groups

by

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Abstract

Despite the existing fragmentation amongst social change agents serving women on Vancouver's downtown east side, they are seeking fresh and innovative ways to work together to communicate their social change needs and to alleviate social problems facing their clients. Using appreciative inquiry to elicit stories of successful collaborations with alternative media, I collected narratives from seven change agents and then employed narrative analysis to understand what agents considered positive experiences and expressions. I found that successful collaborations are primarily ad hoc and are driven by: the organization's source of funding, the organization's viewpoint towards media, and the trust held towards the media outlet. Enabling factors for successful collaborations with media include: a viewpoint that media coverage is integral to an organization's success, dedicated resources to pursue collaborations with the media, and a high level of respect and admiration for the intended media partner.

Keywords

Public sphere, collaboration, social change agents, social change communication, alternative media, social media, media, women

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Narratives of Successful Collaborations between Alternative Media and Women's Groups

The purpose of this research project was to understand how change agents who work with women on Vancouver, BC's Downtown Eastside successfully collaborated with alternative media to achieve their social change goals. Using narrative and appreciative inquiry, this project reveals the enabling factors of successful collaborations between women's groups and alternative media in Vancouver, BC's Downtown Eastside. The goal was to be able to offer change agents tangible and cost effective communication tactics to help them better improve the lives of the Downtown Eastside residents they serve.

By alternative media, I mean any Downtown Eastside based grass roots community media outlet that distributes online written and video content and touts social change as a mandate. I define collaboration as any conscious act to work together with another party or organization to achieve similar social change goals. For this project, enabling factors refer to circumstances that led to a successful—as defined by the narrators—outcome.

In preparation for this study, initial conversations with Downtown Eastside change agents revealed that collaborations with media have immediate positive impacts whether through increased funding and donations or through increased opportunities to share knowledge by creating awareness of free workshops and seminars. However, change agents also said that instead of Downtown Eastside groups collaborating to help each other reach their goals, they were becoming increasingly fragmented—a symptom of disempowerment and marginalization (Melkote, 2000; Berrigan, 1979; Servaes &

Malikhao, 2012). During those early conversations, the ramifications of fragmentation seemed to be twofold: reduced donations and funding, and reduced instances of knowledge sharing, both of which directly impact the Downtown Eastside residents by limiting the quantity and quality of available services to Downtown Eastside residents. To better understand the situation on the Downtown Eastside, I interviewed seven Downtown Eastside change agents and elicited narratives of successful collaborations with alternative media, and constructed a grand narrative of emerging interview themes. While the narratives revealed fragmentation, they also revealed instances of collaboration with four factors driving the collaborations: resources, trust, perceived value, and viewpoint toward media. This study also uncovered narratives of successful strategies and elements of collaborations occurring between these seven Downtown Eastside change agents, alternative media groups, and mainstream media outlets.

Background on the Downtown Eastside

Inhabited by a large proportion of underprivileged, low income, and marginalized citizens, the Downtown Eastside region faces urban development problems (City of Vancouver, 2011). The Downtown Eastside Revitalization Plan (DERP) outlines current public policy regarding development within the Downtown Eastside and focuses on housing issues with social programs for women in transition glaringly absent. Excluded from public policy, Downtown Eastside women's groups face an additional challenge to entry within the public sphere and to contributing to dialogue for their empowerment. Because Downtown Eastside women in transformation out of street life, drug addiction, and prostitution seem to be an increasingly invisible population that municipal policy and

investment is ignoring, this research focused on change agents who provide services to them.

I begin this grand narrative by describing and discussing the current themes within the literature that show that collaborating with alternative media can reap many benefits for change agents. I then provide a detailed explanation of the methodology I used for this study, which is then followed by summaries of the individual narratives, and a discussion of the emerging themes, their impact and relevance to current scholarship.

Literature Review

Since its early incarnations, alternative media have been and still remain a vehicle for community members to access the public sphere through the distribution of their own self-constructed stories (Servaes, 1996; Higgins, 1999; Auferderheid, 1992; Berrigan, 1979; Gaynor, 2011; Costanza-Chock, 2011; Meadows, Forde, & Ewart, 2009). Scholars have identified four key benefits for community generated expression through alternative media: public awareness that generates funding and resources (Gaynor, 2011), political action that influences policy (Constanza-Chock, 2011), participatory opportunities that facilitate community development (Milan, 2010), and individual empowerment that fosters positive social outcomes (Higgins, 1999; Milan, 2010). By increasing and diversifying participation within the Downtown Eastside public sphere, more Downtown Eastside change agents could reap the above-identified benefits of sharing stories through alternative media and hence, more Downtown Eastside residents could receive improved services. While case studies exist that attempt to define best practices for community participation within alternative media, I have found none that have broached the Downtown Eastside situation. This gap informed my research as it

placed the Downtown Eastside situation within the current scholarship by revealing enabling factors that contributed to access to the public sphere.

Collaborating with Alternative Media

The first benefit of collaborating with alternative media for community groups that I will unpack involves public awareness that generates funding and resources. Gaynor (2011) found that the majority of community groups and alternative collaborations revolved around promoting local events and generating publicity. In Gaynor's (2011) study, most community groups earned on-air mentions through tactics such as sending press releases and making cold calls to radio stations. For Gaynor (2011), while community groups expressed the benefit of publicity coverage, "the station was very useful in getting our messages out" (p. 7), she also saw that publicity messages were usurping political discourse and hence, uncovering an unhealthy public sphere. However, when framed within a development lens, publicity takes a positive turn. Milan (2009) sees publicity coverage as evidence of positive participatory activity within the public sphere that is generating awareness. For Milan (2009), the process of participation itself is a positive act that generates community ties, collaboration, and local development. As for the Downtown Eastside, initial conversations with Downtown Eastside change agents also align with Milan's (2009) view. They expressed a correlation between publicity and resources—"every time a story about my organization gets published, a donation seems to follow" (Caroline MacGillivray, November 16, 2012, personal communication). My research aims to uncover successful engagement tactics used by Downtown Eastside women's groups to achieve collaborations with alternative media and how those collaborations benefitted their organizations.

Influencing Policy

The second benefit of community group/alternative media collaborations that I found within current scholarship concerns political action that influences policy. For Berrigan (1979), collaborations that lead to representation on and access to alternative media could be the prime ticket to emancipating the marginalized because media that “is placed in the hands of the community might become the machinery through which participation in the public sphere is achieved” (p. 9). Costanza-Chock (2011) uncovered two American cases of collaborative actions involving alternative media and community groups that demonstrated political impact and proved Berrigan’s (1979) claim. By using social media video and networking tools, and leveraging group wisdom to provide digital media training to community members, the first of Costanza-Chock’s (2011) cases uncovered undocumented immigrant youth living in the United States who collaborated to lobby key legislative initiatives involving education and legal residency. In Costanza-Chock’s (2011) second case, successful collaborations between immigrant groups and alternative media led to the removal of anti-immigrant commentator Lou Dobbs from CNN. While these cases illustrate successful participatory methods from the United States, in my research, I hope to reveal some successful examples of participatory methods from the Downtown Eastside that other change agents could emulate.

Facilitating Community Development

While Costanza-Chock’s (2011) case studies demonstrated participatory opportunities that led to political achievements, the third benefit of community/alternative media group collaborations that I uncovered in current scholarship relates to participatory opportunities that facilitate community development (Milan,

2010). Milan (2010) argues that alternative media furthers development by providing extrinsic channels for participation that not only foster extrinsic change but also intrinsic change. Using a participatory lens, Higgins (1999) found that alternative media facilities offered community members new skills, demystified the construction of television programs, and fostered “a more subtle interrelationship between the individual and the collective, where a transformation on the personal level affects society” (Higgins, 1999, p. 632). An informant from Higgins (1999) study illustrated what she learned from working on a program featuring African-American women:

I had never had the opportunity to observe African-American women before. I had my reservations about them, my stereotypes, but found that after hearing them speak, my stereotypes dissolved and I just really enjoyed the opportunity to learn from what they had to offer. (p. 635)

Hence, as the above example illustrates, through participation in alternative media and through the acceptance of others, new opportunities for collaboration are created. As indicated by Milan (2010), “what starts out as individual becomes a collective experience by creating shared meanings and highlighting opportunities for change” (p. 601). The nature of my research aims to bring to light whether or not similar examples of positive transformation enabled by Downtown Eastside community groups and alternative media collaborations exist.

Fostering Empowerment

Not only does participation facilitate development through intrinsic change and enhanced awareness as demonstrated in the previous paragraph, but also by fostering empowerment—the fourth benefit of community/alternative media collaborations. The

impetus for empowerment and sustainable development for Berrigan (1979), Melkote (2000), and Costanza-Chock (2011) involves combating isolation and top-down methodology through grass-roots solutions and eliciting and acting upon the wisdom of communities. As discussed by Berrigan (1979), Melkote (2000), and Costanza-Chock (2011), alternative media help dissolve isolation by empowering marginalized populations to come together to construct and distribute their own stories. Whether to traditional media facilities (Berrigan, 1979; Melkote, 2000) or to online tools (Costanza-Chock, 2011), access to alternative media also provides community members an opportunity to join in community, a channel to the public sphere, and for Habermas, (1991) an opportunity to engage in critical dialogue and the democratic process. However, despite the efforts of Downtown Eastside change agents, women's groups, and alternative media groups, to foster empowerment through participation and collaborative activities, according to initial observations by two change agents, "most groups continue to act in isolation" (Steve Williams, personal communication, January 10, 2013; Caroline MacGillivray, personal communication, November 16, 2012). Those Downtown Eastside groups absent within the public sphere, who are seemingly disempowered and operating in isolation, and not accessing alternative media opportunities, need a means to return to the public sphere so that they can better contribute to the democratic process and the development of their community. By seeking and sharing instances of successes, this research could offer a means to dismantle isolation faced by Downtown Eastside change agents.

This research project presents a deepened understanding of how women's groups have successfully entered the public sphere and enabled collaboration with Downtown

Eastside alternative media. This research hopes to provide other change agents successful tactics to overcome barriers to participation within the public sphere, and to create opportunities for collaboration that would benefit Downtown Eastside residents. For Downtown Eastside women's groups, awareness of the "unique factors that make success possible" (Cooperridge, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, p. 38) could open new possibilities for increased media collaboration, contribute to more positive social change in the Downtown Eastside, and help better provide the residents of the Downtown Eastside with the services they need. Gleaned from the participants' narratives, this study aims to construct a deepened understanding of the current benefits of collaboration and participation within the Downtown Eastside and its public sphere, and to provide tangible communication options for Downtown Eastside change agents to better foster their social change goals. By showcasing the collective strengths of Downtown Eastside change agents through the themes of success that emerge from this study, each could be in a better position to leverage each other's strengths, and encourage more collaboration and development.

Methods and Procedures

I modeled the main questions for this study after the appreciative inquiry method and Cooperridge, Whitney, and Stavros' (2003) dream and design phases: what factors fostered the most successful and effective instances of media coverage for the organizations who will participate in this study and what possibilities, expressed and latent, would provide opportunities for more vital, successful, and effective forms of future media coverage?

I used appreciative and narrative inquiry methodology, and Habermas' theory of public sphere and communicative action and Melkote's participatory communication theory to analyze data. I chose appreciative inquiry (AI) because it is an applied research method that focuses on a "positive, strengths-based approach to change management" (Cooperidge & Whitney, 2005, p. 1), because of its flexibility of sample size, and because of its narrative nature (Jeannie Cockell, personal communication, January 7, 2013). While a full AI consists of four stages: discover, dream, design, and destiny (Cooperidge & Whitney, 2005), due to the time constraints of this project, I engaged a small number of informants and focused in depth on the first two stages: discover and dream. During the discover stage of questioning, change agents shared how they fostered successful media collaboration. During the dream stage of this inquiry, change agents envisioned future possibilities and strategies that drew from the "positive core" of their past experiences (2005, p. 16). Looking at change agents' examples of current successes and their visions for future successes, enabled me to better comprehend what parts of the past change agents were drawing from in order to help them achieve future social change goals—an important insight enabled through AI methodology (Reed, 2007).

Even though AI's foundation is narrative-based (Jeannie Cockell, personal communication, January 7, 2013), I also drew upon narrative inquiry methodology to more deeply understand how Downtown Eastside women's groups are achieving successful outcomes with alternative media. Narrative inquiry (NI) asserts that through stories researchers gain contextual insights into cultural knowledge and how reality is constructed (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). NI also provided an opportunity to provide emic and etic perspective as both the external storyteller and internal self-reflexive

observations of the researcher make up data within a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I drew upon AI methodology to help design the interview questions to uncover the positive core functionality of Downtown Eastside women's groups. I employed narrative inquiry analysis to help construct and interpret the Downtown Eastside women's groups stories into a larger narrative by highlighting their successful activities within the public sphere and collaborations with alternative media. In AI, past achievements guide and shed light onto future possibilities (Reed, 2007). By focusing on what change agents considered a positive achievement, I aimed to understand what they valued about their collaborations with the media and what kind of collaborations they were striving to create and maintain.

According to Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2003), the population selected for an AI study should have an important stake in the Downtown Eastside community, its residents, and its future. Following AI criteria, the population for this study consisted of seven decision-makers who were at the time of the interview paid staff for Downtown Eastside groups which host women's programs aiding women in transition. Three of the participants also drew upon past experiences where they had been influential volunteers with other Downtown Eastside groups that served women. The population's experience included non-profit founders, chief executive officers, and department heads whose organizations ranged from providers of short-term shelter, long-term housing, addiction services, health and wellness services, and daily needs such as meals, clothing, showers, and respite.

To create a sample population, I found informants using snowball sampling and chose them according to these two parameters: he or she must work or volunteer for an

organization that focuses on aiding women in transition as well as be responsible for determining his or her organization's communication strategy. I invited potential participants to participate through email and phone calls. I drew upon my own personal contacts to kick start the snowball sampling: a former co-worker who had founded a non-profit that served women in the Downtown Eastside, a former client who had produced a documentary about the Downtown Eastside's missing women, and a current colleague who works as a community investment officer with Downtown Eastside groups. While I invited over 20 individuals to participate, seven participants took part. Finding participants was one of the most challenging parts of this project. Some organizations that I approached shared that they did not think that participating in an academic study was a worthy use of their time or resources. Hence, all participants were referrals with cold calls proving ineffective.

In order to elicit specific positive-leaning responses required for AI, I used semi-structured questions (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). To elicit narratives about the informants' overall communication plans and goals, I employed unstructured questions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I structured the interviews and data collection using the below unstructured and semi-structured questions:

- Talk about your organization's communication goals.
- Describe results from a successful communication plan.
- Describe how you have collaborated or worked with alternative media in the past.
- What organizations seem to have successful collaborations with alternative media and the reasons for success?
- What is the role of communication for your organization?

- What was a peak experience or high point of your communication plan?
- What are things that you value most about your communication plan?
- What are the core factors that give life to a successful communication plan?
- Describe the role that policy may play in achieving successful communication strategy.
- What are three wishes to heighten vitality and sustainability of your communication plan?
- What are the top three goals of what you consider the best, most successful communication plan?

In alignment with both narrative inquiry (Kohler Reissman, 1993) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperider & Whitney, 2005), I used these questions as a guide and allowed the participants to share at length without interruption. Often, one question elicited answers to other questions. To ensure I received data that pertained to my research problem per AI and NI methodology (Reed, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I sometimes re-phrased questions or asked them in different order than as listed above. For example, I inquired, “Let me put it this way, instead of thinking in terms of core factors that give life, what strategies or tactics seem to work for you... You touched on this earlier, but do you mind expanding on your three wishes for the future... I think you answered this already, but just to make sure, could you share again what you value most about your communication plan.”

In this project, data were gathered through appreciative inquiry and narrative inquiry conventions-taped interviews, observations, and field notes-in order to account for body language and paralinguistic cues that could impact meaning (Cooperrider &

Whitney, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Interviews took place between February - May 2013. The exact scheduling of interviews depended on the schedules of the informants. Interviews were conducted in a private, closed rooms that fostered safety and a quiet, focused environment, and created a liberating structure that allowed the informant to answer as candidly as possible. Interviews ranged from 40 minutes to one hour in length. All informants were sent both an audio file and a transcription of their interview for their records to confirm agreement on the data that will be analyzed. All participants approved the data gathered with four approving at the end of the interview without reviewing the transcript and three approving after reviewing the transcript.

To align with Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) perspective of narrative inquiry methodology, throughout the analysis process, informants were offered opportunities to be involved in verifying the data and the themes that emerged in order to validate the interpretation and construction. As Kohler Reissman (1993) notes, narratives are social discourse with unstable meanings that can change over time. Participants in this study were offered opportunities to affirm the interpretation and persuasiveness of the grand narrative to affirm the truthfulness of its analysis. In narrative inquiry, the researcher must "take responsibility for its construction of truth" (Kohler Reissman, 1993, p. 67). By giving participants an opportunity to provide feedback on the grand narrative's interpretations, I intended to validate my analysis. AI also purports that beyond the interview, it is vital to work with the data in a manner that maintains momentum and continues to develop the positive vision of an organization (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). Thus, I provided opportunities for participant feedback and continued involvement in AI and narrative analyses throughout the study. However, none seemed

interested to continue participation beyond the interview. Despite that, draft copies were sent to all participants for feedback. At the time of this draft, no feedback had been received.

Transcriptions were analyzed according to the principle of NI methodology put forth by Kohler Reissman (1993) of identifying similarities from several narratives into an aggregate. Categorizing data into themes is also a prime facet of AI (Cooperider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003; Reed, 2007; Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly (2011) state that themes in AI offer answers to research questions and become the basis for uncovering the potential of what an organization's situation could become. In this case, I explore the possibilities of what the community could become. An NI perspective recognizes that sharing views, themes, and conclusions is of high significance and the narrative offered by a researcher is just one construction that does not necessarily guarantee agreement (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Thus the grand narrative I present is an interpretation of the Downtown Eastside situation that represents my insights and observations as supported by the participant's narratives.

For this project, I offer themes and a tangible, potential interpretation that Downtown Eastside change agents could emulate (or not). Categorizing narratives into themes allowed for common elements to emerge such as successful communication tactics and driving factors for strategy creation. Paralinguistic cues such as gesture, gaze, and intonation were assessed when contextualizing and analyzing denotative and connotative meanings that emerged from these interviews (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Data was manually coded according to appreciative inquiry method for instances of success with alternative media and hopes for the future, Melkote's theory of participatory

action for examples of collaboration and empowerment, and Habermas' theory of communicative action for ways groups accessed the public sphere. Coding for appreciative inquiry revealed each change agent's positive core for success and life-giving forces to success (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003). To illuminate AI components, I searched the narratives for specific examples the agents described as being big gains for their organization-achievements that made them proud and that they would like to re-emulate. To gauge the level of empowerment, data was also coded for instances of successful collaborations using Melkote's theory of participatory communication (2006). Here, I sought narratives involving positive outcomes that arose from working with another organization or external partner. For instances of access to the public sphere using Habermas' theory of collective action (1991), I looked for stories in which the change agents consciously and strategically created and dispersed messages to their public, to their audience, with the aim of creating a reaction from his or her public.

Coding data using appreciative inquiry, participatory communication, and collective action revealed what change agents considered success, their views on what enabled success, and what factors enabled their strategies and tactics. Inherent in AI methodology is the principle that by focusing on images of success, change agents mobilize to bring that image of success to life (Watkins, Mohr, and Kelly, 2011). This approach also provided insight into how Downtown Eastside change agents determined strategies to mobilize positive outcomes for their clients, and into which strategies they could be implementing their social change communication in the future. It also indicated the current available pathways to the public sphere, illuminated communication channels

that were under utilized, and provided an explanation why change agents chose certain communication channels over others.

Informed consent was received by each informant and from each organization where applicable. This research adhered to Royal Roads University's ethical standards and was subject to an extensive ethical review. Further, this research was subjected to a tri council review whose members include two faculties from Royal Roads University and one community citizen from Vancouver, British Columbia.

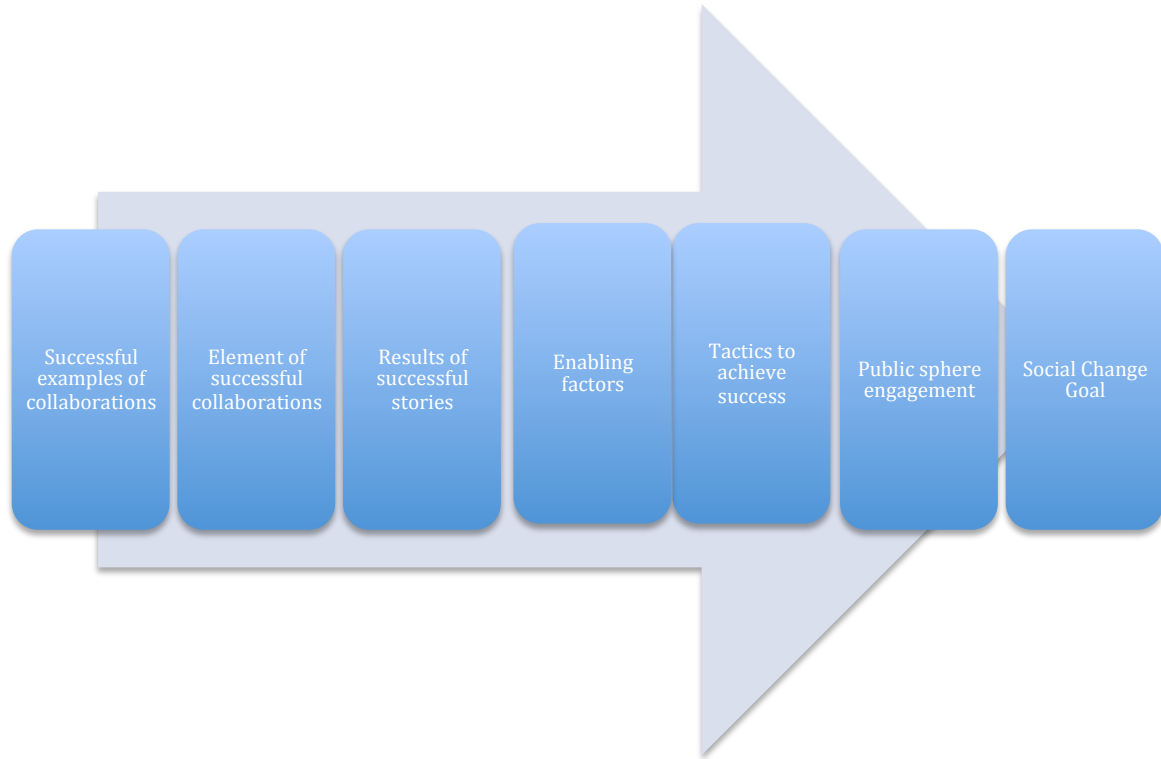
Description and Discussion of Appreciative Narratives and Findings

From February 13, 2013 to May 1, 2013, I interviewed seven individuals from the Downtown Eastside whose organizations whose services helped women in transition. While each organization was based in the Downtown Eastside and each served women on the Downtown Eastside, some also had programs to benefit women throughout BC. In addition, three of the individuals had worked or volunteered with other organizations previous to the one she was currently affiliated with at the time of the interview. Hence, I gathered stories that reflected experiences from ten different Downtown Eastside organizations.

Through this research, I intended to uncover what factors fostered the most successful and effective instances of media coverage for the participating change agents and what possibilities would provide opportunities for more vital, successful, and effective forms of future media coverage. Previous research had uncovered that collaborations with alternative media resulted in resource gains (Gaynor, 2011), policy changes (Costanza-Chock, 2011), increased development (Milan, 2010), and empowerment-driven social change (Higgins, 1999; Milan, 2010). From the individuals'

stories, I found a very complex system with many variables where self-publishing content using Internet technology is usurping seeking out collaborations with alternative media. While each story was unique, themes emerged that provided insight regarding what change agents considered successful collaborations with the media and with other community partners; what elements made up a successful story and collaboration; what factors were enabling their social change communication strategies; how change agents were engaging and reaching the public sphere; and what type of future change agents were striving toward. In the following sections, I construct an overarching community narrative by unpacking successful media and community collaborations, enabling factors to successful collaborations, public sphere engagement in the Downtown Eastside, and the hopes for future collaborations and media success that I observed emerging from the stories (see figure 1).

Figure 1 – Emerging themes from participant narratives



Defining Alternative Media

The pinnacle of this research study was to understand successful collaborations between women's groups and alternative media. Viewpoints among Downtown Eastside change agents about what made up alternative media varied and included social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook and non-mainstream media outlets such as left-wing online news and print papers. Like other scholars, I found that defining alternative media is a difficult, nebulous task (Petitt, Francisco-Salazar, & Dagrón, 2010; Metzgar, Kurpuiš, & Rowley, 2011; Elghul-Bebawi, 2009; Downing, 2008) because none of the change agents defined alternative media as I operationalized it-hyperlocal, grass roots alternative media based on the Downtown Eastside who distribute content online-and no narratives emerged that involved collaborations with Downtown Eastside hyperlocal

media. Despite the differing definitions between my operationalized term and Downtown Eastside change agents' understandings, I felt that the change agents' stories of collaboration using their definition of alternative media were important because they provided evidence of collaborations to achieve development and social change goals. For participatory community theorists, community members that collaborate to construct development messages increase their level of empowerment to transform its situation, and encourage long-term relationships that continue to positively transform living situations (Howley, 2010). Traditionally, alternative media provide a grassroots vehicle for community members to collaborate in the creation of messages to aid development and social change goals (Berrigan, 1979; Howley 2010). Further, because most Downtown Eastside change agents consider online media alternative, how they engaged within that space supported other scholars' observations about online public sphere involvement (Barker-Plummer & Kidd, 2010; Trere. 2012; Castells, 2007). While Downtown Eastside change agents are not collaborating with hyperlocal groups, they are collaborating with agencies they define as alternative as well as collaborating with mainstream media and other community groups.

Successful Collaborations with (Alternative) Media

Examples and elements of successful media collaborations. While successful collaborations with hyperlocal media didn't emerge, stories of successful collaborations with other media and with other community members did arise. Examples of success ranged from being the subject of a front-page story in a national newspaper to coverage in national magazines and alternative magazines-all of which the change agents regarded as the upper echelon of media. Even one agent, who described the "media as more of a

hindrance than a help”, described her biggest media win as an interview on a local morning radio show that “reached a huge audience”. Through these displays of success, agents felt that their voices were heard—a vital component for empowerment and social change (Dagron, 2009, Melkote, 2000, Howley 2010). In the above examples, agents also felt that because successful collaborations aptly reflected their messages and that their messages reached a large audience, the time and resource investment was worthwhile and would reflect good management and good social intentions to the public. In a highly competitive world with limited resources, as one change agent explains, “I hate to say it, but if someone has money to donate, I want my organization’s name to be at the top of his or mind.” Change agents have a responsibility to account for their actions and choices to funders in order to maintain funding so that they can continue with their social change efforts (Dagron, 2009; Rennie, Berkely & Murphet, 2010; Vozab, 2012). Working with highly regarded media outlets further validates an organization’s operations because as one change agent put it, “once the media notices you, you matter.” Hence, for each example of success shared, change agents held a positive view toward the collaboration because the media outlet either had a highly regarded journalistic reputation and/or large audience reach. Because the change agents valued the outlet and the outlet reciprocated by telling their stories, a successful collaboration occurred.

Other examples of success that change agents recalled included the use of Internet technology ranging from email communication, news alerts, website updates, and social media participation. Agents explained, “It took about two months of email conversations to establish a collaboration to include foot care as part of our wellness regiment.” Another shared, “News alerts were really effective because they got the point across

really quickly. No one has the time to read a full newsletter in this industry.” Every change agent mentioned website updates as a high point of their communication strategy, “it felt so great to rebrand...it was a small change, but made a huge difference...we are really proud of our new website. It really reflects who we are and our values.” Social media successes were also part of every narrative, “even though it’s time consuming, social media is responsive and effective...when we ask for targeted items like dishes or towels on Twitter, the public responds with donations...being able to directly engage in conversations with our public is really useful.” In previous studies, Constanza-Chock (2011) and Castells (2007) found that social change agents were also opting to use internet technologies because of the control they had over the message and for Castells, because the internet allowed “mass self-communication” (p. 238). Another factor related to the success of using the internet to self-communicate that change agents expressed was that this method was low-risk because of its low cost and high reliability of accurate story telling. When resources are limited, cost-effectiveness plays a substantial role in successful communication (Dagron, 2009). For the Downtown Eastside situation, whether through traditional media, alternative media, or Internet technologies, successful stories portrayed accurate information and a positive representation of the organization that resulted in garnering increased public awareness and increased resources through cost-effective means.

Tactics to achieve success. Change agents accounted for these successes by seeking out communication expertise, adhering to strict policy, employing effective strategy, and having engaging content. Scholar, Dagron (2009) wrote about the value of leveraging communication expertise for successful social change communication. Most

agents agreed with Dagon's position and relied on communication experts for successful outcomes. Whether from sources such as funders, private sector corporate pro-bono services, board members, or volunteers, access to communication experts offered agents communication tips on how to streamline messages and brand identity to better target their public. Two agents leaned on a board member who worked in the private sector as a communication expert, another agent began her career as a media and communication professional in the private sector, another was paid to solely provide communication and media relations expertise to her organization, and another sought self-education through free workshops offered in the Downtown Eastside. All change agents who felt the media was a vital tool to disseminate her organization's messaging and brand either were communication experts, had communication expertise within their network to draw upon, or sought out cost-effective expertise.

The impact of policy. All agents felt that strong policy contributed to successful collaborations with the media and advised that an awareness that media coverage is important and must be entrenched in an organization's mission in order for success to occur. Agents also unanimously agreed that having a spokesperson, and drawing out clear boundaries for the media led to successful collaborations because it helped them control the pathway to the public sphere as well as control what traveled to the public sphere. Strong policy constituted further understanding for Downtown Eastside change agents' messages, not manipulation of the public, and aligned with the tenants of collective action (Habermas, 1984). Agents unanimously frowned on groups that they felt were counter to collective action who used "fear-based tactics and radical means" to garner media attention and appeal to the public. As one agent stated, "when radical

means lead to knee-jerk funding, it hurts all of us who are working hard within the system to get a piece of the pie because resources are limited.” Howley (2010) warns of this danger as a mistake to think that all “collective action aimed at social change is progressive” (p. 237). For scholar Milan (2009), “community media are not intrinsically good” (p. 607). Some of the change agents I interviewed alluded to what they felt were anti-progressive policies to obtain media attention and are wary of associating themselves with radical groups and avoid radical tactics because they do not represent their social change mandates. For Downtown Eastside agents, positive, successful stories were a result of solid policy that promoted mutual respect-not fear.

For each positive story, agents also shared negative stories in which the media disregarded their policy, misrepresented their organization, and reported wrong information. Unfortunately, most of the change agents interviewed instilled policy because a reporter had broken their trust and put together a story that had negative consequences for their clients. While a positive story most often led to more funding or resources, negative stories had damaging effects on a client’s addiction recovery sending her back into addiction and out of sobriety. To illustrate further, an organization that maintained a policy that would not grant interviews to clients under any circumstances saw a reporter disregard that and interview a woman and her children who was using shelter services. Not only did the children become the targets of bullying, the violent spouse was able to find his wife’s location. Change agents have put in policy to protect their clients from the negative effects of media coverage. Despite the negative occurrences, agents felt that the benefits of media exposure was worth the risk and hence, have put in policies to minimize any risk.

Effective strategy. In many cases, along with policy, creative strategy led to successful outcomes with the media. Some examples of strategy and tactics that led to success that agents shared included: having a strong media list, responding quickly to media requests, fostering a dependable reputation with the media, and exhibiting creativity with communication. Dagrón (2009) and Vozab (2012) also speak of the importance of planning and strategy as a pathway to successful social change communication. Downtown Eastside change agents each had their own version of effective strategy. For one, agents need to “get their facts straight and know what they are talking about”. Others shared, “I will collaborate with whoever asks because you never know where the story will appear or who might read it...commit to research...pick a strategy and stick to it...seek out free advice and free tools for email blasts and measuring response rates...keep it simple and doable.” For the successful outcomes described by Downtown Eastside change agents, creative strategy made a positive difference.

Engaging content. Whether agents employed Internet channels or traditional media outlets, another common element of successful collaborations with the media involved creating compelling content and having great content to share. There is power in creating inspirational stories (Tacchi, Watkins, & Keerthiratnehne, 2009) and Downtown Eastside change agents noted the important role that compelling content played in successful collaborations with the media. To illustrate, one change agent won a free video from a local film school, “I sent in a proposal and we won. We got a free three-minute video for just tapping into our creativity.” Others commented on the value of images, “photos and images are really helpful to tell our story...we’re creating our

own video for our site, told our way.” Another agent explained why content was so important, “Some of the most successful experiences came out of creative, tangible, and visual representations of big ideas. Whether it’s a well-written press release, tweet or Facebook entry, researched information like studies, or testimonials, having content that the media can talk about and that the public can relate to is vital.” Scholars Tacchi, Watkins, and Keerthirathne (2009) point out that there is not a “one-size-fits-all approach” (p. 575) and like the Downtown Eastside agents mention above, content must be relatable to its local audience. Downtown Eastside agents are making content relatable by making international events relevant locally, “I shift my social media posts when a national disaster strikes because people locally will want to help somehow”; finding an emotional connection with their audience, “I want the women to share their own struggles and triumphs in their own voice to inspire others”; and using a common cultural reference to make a social point, “We used a report card image to grade the treatment of women in various areas and found that Vancouver wasn’t fairing too well.” Content that made an impression and a connection with their audiences generated successful outcomes for Downtown Eastside change agents collaborations with the media.

Other Successful Collaborations

Downtown Eastside change agents shared narratives of other collaborations that were aiding social change and development goals. Examples of successful non-media collaborations included sharing each other’s literature, sharing space, co-creating fundraising events, re-tweeting social media messages, sharing volunteer resources, and co-creating new service opportunities. The change agents I spoke with qualified their

non-media collaborations similarly to their collaborations with media or alternative media. What impacted their collaborations with other groups was also the level of trust for the new relationship and collaboration as well as the perceived value of the relationship and collaboration—“we have to have mutual goals”. Trust was fostered through holding similar values and social change goals, “we partner with organizations who hold similar beliefs to us.” A perception that the collaboration was going to either enhance the lives of the clients served by leveraging resources, cross-promoting public awareness, or filling in a service gap was considered of value and worth expending energy toward. This participatory action is evidence to the ongoing commitment to aid development and the willingness to increase empowerment for other groups in the Downtown Eastside (Melkote, 2006; Milan, 2009). Working together to achieve social change goals sustains long-term development goals (2005; Melkote, 2006; Milan, 2009; Shtapitanonda & Thirapantu, 2007) and demonstrates the motivation and empowerment of Downtown Eastside change agents.

Enabling Factors for Success

I found that communication decisions were driven and enabled through four main drivers: the viewpoint towards the media, the perceived value of the collaboration, the ability to control the message and its distribution, and the amount of trust held for the co-collaborating party.

Viewpoint towards media and perceived value of the collaboration. Two camps emerged from the stories: those agents who valued media coverage and wanted it and those who did not value media coverage and did not want it. For those who valued media coverage, what mattered was the reputation of the media outlet, whether the

change agent held it in high regard and with respect, the size of the audience reach, and whether the slant of the stories aligned with the change agents' values. Pettit, Salazar, and Dagrón (2009) found that using small-reaching media outlets such as community co-ops and hyperlocal media to dispel social change messages is not respected amongst funders. As a result, social change agents are turning to mainstream media outlets (Pettit, Salazar, & Dagrón, 2009). As one agent mentioned, "the bigger the readership or audience, the better". For the organizations who chose to avoid the media, they felt that they were serving their publics, being active in their spheres of influence, and seeing positive social change results. One explains her rationale, "I don't need to go on community media and bitch. The real work is happening on the ground." Another change agent expressed similar sentiment, "I really find the media more of a pain than a help and just wish they would go away most of the time. When I need them, I have contacts that I can call who I trust that will support me." Another participant observed that organizations that believed that the media is a valuable tool for social change messages had the most successful collaborations with the media. She also felt that "working with the media must be entrenched in an organization's mission statement." An organization's viewpoint on the media and the perceived power and value of the media agency impacted whether it sought or participated in media collaborations.

Controlling the message and its distribution. Regardless of whether or not change agents valued media collaborations, most interviewed positively viewed collaborations in which they could control the message and its distribution both on traditional outlets and online. To illustrate, successful collaborations not only showcased positive and accurate content about the agent's organization or desired message but also

placed it in a venue that the change agent desired such as a respected news program, radio show, or newspaper. As one agent put it, “a successful story is one where I got to say what I wanted to say with no damage to my client’s well-being.” Change agents also considered their new and updated websites and social media initiatives as successful outcomes because message accuracy and distribution was guaranteed. Other scholars have also reported social change agents turning to self-published online messages as a communication strategy (Castells, 2007; Dagon, 2009; Cammaerts, 2012). However, regardless of whether it was a traditional media story, website content, or a social media story, for the change agents, a positive story was one that protected her clients and showcased the organization accurately.

The impact of trust. In many ways, the degree of trust a change agent had established with media outlets and with funders impacted communication decisions. Relying on the good will and generosity of the private sector requires accountability from the recipients of donations. Communication to the public then serves to reassure funders that they made a sound investment (Pettit, Salazar, & Dagon, 2009). All change agents’ who receive private funding commented on this facet of communication. “I want my funders to understand how my organization is helping, where their money is going...Staying active on social media is really important to donors know that we are using their money responsibly.” Thus, successful communication collaborations with the media involved stories that enhanced the level of trust between funders and the change agents’ organizations.

Positive narratives also emerged related to the level of trust between change agents and media outlets or reporters. In situations where the change agent had

developed a solid, trusting relationship with reporters, the resulting collaborations resulted in positive stories with successful outcomes such as countering a negative story with a positive counter-position or obtaining donated supplies or services. Change agents spoke highly of their experiences with media outlets they respected and of which adhered to similar politics and values. As one change agent explained, “It’s a little political. It’s the point of view that an outlet or organization supports. The issues we care about.” Trust is being achieved through a combination of seeking partnerships with those who hold similar values and a history of a positive, beneficial relationship. Agents are primarily focusing their energy online because they can trust the source of the information and can foster trust with their funders because they control the message and the message distribution.

Public Sphere Engagement

Akin to what Gaynor and O’Brien (2011, 2012) uncovered in their studies with community groups and media in Ireland, I found that Downtown Eastside groups espouse to have the media work “for” them as opposed to “with” them. In the Downtown Eastside, agents engage with the public sphere on an ad hoc, reactionary basis to correct misinformation, drive fundraising efforts, increase awareness about their organization, and increase public engagement with their organization. For example, one participant shares, “if a reporter says something negative or gets his or her facts wrong, you can guarantee, I’ll be finding ways to counter that any way I can.” Another said, “if my organization has a need for more supplies or funding, I’ll ask for help on Twitter.” Others offered, “we will email press releases for targeted fund-raising events to get the public interested and hopefully donating to our cause.” Some change agents are

leveraging relationships to get diverse voices and counter-mainstream opinions into the public sphere, “it’s great to see experts infiltrating the media who have progressive positions that counter conservative viewpoints.” Most change agents will reach out to reporters about issues that matter to them, “I can rely on some reporters to do a story on my organization if I lose funding or resources...when my organization was criticized on a major news outlet, I was able to counter that and correct the information that was out there...through our contacts, we worked hard to change the perception that our organization only helped those who would convert to our faith.” When a need arises, whether to manage the organization’s reputation or to raise more resources, change agents will reach out to the media for support.

Despite having access to the public sphere and relationships with mainstream reporters, most change agents are opting to forgo working with traditional media and putting their energy into Internet technologies (ICT’s) such as social media networks, websites, and email tools. The media can no longer be relied upon to act as a guardian of good will or as a public service provider because it is driven by capitalism and consumerism to turn a product (Saeed, 2009), so, change agents are finding cost effective vehicles to the public sphere through ICT’s (Castells, 2007; Cammaerts, 2012). One agent said, “I don’t need the media anymore. I have facebook and twitter.” Two others said, “we’re teaching ourselves how to make video so that we can add video to our website.” Similar to what Barker-Plummer and Kidd (2010) and Costanza-Chock (2011) discovered in their studies, Downtown Eastside change agents are also opting to add their voice to the public sphere themselves in their way via ICT’s. The preferred vehicle to the

public sphere for Downtown Eastside change agents is self-publishing content through ICT's.

Envisioning a More Successful Future

By exploring what the change agents valued about their experiences with the media, collaborating with the media, and collaborating with other community members; I learned why and how agents are collaborating with the media and their community, and how they are participating within the public sphere. Now, I turn to another vital facet of the AI process-hopes for the future-to better understand what change agents are working toward and what they are bringing from their past achievements into the future in the hopes of reaching their social change goals (Macruder-Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). Change agents envision a future where they have enough resources to enable more collaboration with others to achieve their social change goals. For some, this included continued collaboration with the media but on a much larger scale, as one participant stated, "I would like to get picked up by a really big media outlet like the Washington Post", and another mentioned, "I'd like to get endorsed by a huge celebrity like Oprah or Ellen". Others visions of collaboration included having the resources to engage the community it serves to co-create communication and media plans. Some wanted to encourage more educational opportunities and sharing of knowledge by hosting speaker series, more face to face community events, and promoting data-driven decision making. Others wanted better communication channels with each other to ensure that groups weren't duplicating services. In the end, all collaborations and visions led to one goal: to reach their social change goals by fostering better living situations for the people they serve. This vision of the future suggests that while there is still fragmentation, limited

resources, and social issues to combat, there are still empowered individuals whose motivation resides in helping un-marginalize Downtown Eastside women. Despite the fragmentation and the limited resources, change agents are doing the best they can with the current situation.

Discussion

Overall, similar to what Barker-Plummer and Kidd (2010) found in their study of how social change agents were accessing the public sphere in the San Francisco Bay area, most Downtown Eastside social change agents are primarily opting to self-publish their own messages and distribute them using internet technologies instead of haggling with alternative or mainstream media for coverage. When Downtown Eastside social agents do engage with alternative or mainstream media, as O'Brien and Gaynor (2012) found in their research with community groups in Ireland, the intersections are ad hoc and service-based instead of long-term collaborations that reflect the intended nature of alternative/hyperlocal media put forth by scholars like Berrigan (1979), Melkote (2006), and Habermas (1991). While there is activity involving the Vancouver's Downtown Eastside change agents I interviewed within the public sphere, it is mainly reactionary sparked by fund raising needs, correcting misinformation, or countering negative stories.

The organization that reaped the most success accessing the public sphere was highly resourced from the private sector with a dedicated team of communication professionals working toward gaining coverage in local and national mainstream outlets, interacting on social media, and designing its own marketing materials. This organization also supported the return on investment from their communication strategy with strong data. However, the organization that fostered the most collaboration was

completely resourced through government funding and was opposed to receiving media coverage. As a publicly funded organization with no need to access the public sphere to raise resources, this organization focused primarily on communication strategy that fostered empowerment within its board, staff, and volunteers which is the ultimate goal of development communication theorists such as Servaes (1996) and Melkote (2006). It became clear that resources are a factor in how an organization is accessing the public sphere. Pettit, Salzar, and Dagrón (2009) found that when resources are limited, the first service to be cut is communication. For the government-funded organization, communication strategies could focus on empowerment instead of having to raise resources through media channels and public engagement. The private sector-funded, high-resourced organization sits on the opposite side of the spectrum and saw huge value in seeking media opportunities and dedicated many resources to seeking media collaborations. It also received multitudes of media and public engagement, and public recognition as a result of its investment in fostering media collaborations.

For less-resourced organizations that relied on private-sector funding, raising capital to run their organizations was paramount and drove their interactions within the public sphere and their collaborations within the community. Whether through the Internet, social media, or traditional media, these organizations sought out media coverage to promote fund raising events or to encourage donations from the private sector-not unlike what O'Brien and Gaynor (2012) uncovered in Ireland. Castells (2007) attributes this phenomenon as a way of reframing public perception. As one change agent said, "there is a lot of competition out there. When someone finds him or herself in a position to donate. I want him or her to think positively about us and have our

organization's name on top of mind." This sentiment was reflected in five out of the seven stories I gathered indicating an awareness of the benefits brought on by media coverage.

While working with the media has its benefits (Milan, 2009; Gaynor & O'Brien, 2011); it also has its drawbacks which are driving change agents to focus on leveraging internet channels (ICT) to self-publish their own stories-an observation previously noted in other regions by other scholars (Costanza-Chock, 2011; Trere, 2011; Castells, 2007; Vatikiotis, 2010). Downtown Eastside change agents are using a combination of news alerts, newsletters, blogs, websites, email, smart phone applications, Twitter, and Facebook to share their stories with their public because these tools are cost-effective and enable them to control the content. Even though change agents shared many stories of positive interactions with the media, they also had experienced negative stories where they felt the reporter had misrepresented their account, failed to speak accurately about the issue, or disregarded their media policy: "The reporter and I had a great lengthy conversation, but he only used fifteen seconds and made me sound like an idiot...I asked them not to speak to our women, they are in a vulnerable place and we need to protect them....What the reporter put to air and published was straight out false." Because countering negative stories takes resources and can have damaging impacts with funders, change agents are working with the resources they have to put out their own content. Many are aiming to add video stories to their web sites because they cannot always trust that the media will get the facts correct nor to tell beneficial stories about the organization.

Operating with little resources and because hiring video professionals and communication expertise is expensive, change agents are seeking free educational opportunities to teach themselves communication skills such as video production, branding and merchandizing, and social media strategy. While gaining new information and skills is empowering, not having the resources to implement this new knowledge has become frustrating for some change agents. As one change agent shared, “I know from some free consulting that I won that I should have video on my website to really make an emotional connection with potential investors, but I just don’t have the equipment or staff to make it happen.” Another said, “Sure, this advice is fantastic and I can see how it would work, but clearly the instructor has never worked for an agency like this before. As if I have the time to do all those things.” Because of limited resources, Downtown Eastside change agents are forced to implement strategy on a piece meal basis; they are simply doing the best they can with the resources they have. As put forth by Tacchi, Watkins, and Keerthirathne’s (2009) study of participatory content creation in South Asia, individuals participate “to the extent that their time, abilities, and desires allowed” (p. 581). Benefiting from free workshops, and learning new information and skills to help agents tell their own stories has had an empowering effect on change agents but more resources are still required to be able to implement each new skill.

Conclusion

What is glaringly absent from these stories are collaborations with alternative/hyperlocal media—an outlet that scholars purport as being the most empowering for social change agents (Melkote, 2006; O’Brien & Gaynor, 2012; Costanza-Chock, 2011). However, even though collaborations with hyperlocal media

were non-existent, change agents were aware of the Downtown Eastside hyperlocal community media outlets and were open to working with these groups if approached. Four agents recalled that these groups were on their media lists, but none have ever responded to their requests for coverage. The explanations for the lack of collaborations with hyperlocal groups given by change agents was threefold: the audience reach is too small, “we want more bang for our buck”; the groups seem highly politicized and “we want to avoid being associated with those values”; and the quality of content they produce is substandard. In short, it seems that alternative/hyperlocal media outlets hold an unprofessional and radical reputation that the agents interviewed do not want to be part of (Kirkpatrick, 2001). In an arena of limited resources, as Dagon (2010) writes, “communities are complex social bodies, made up of individuals that may have diverging or opposing interests” (p. 458). In the case of Downtown Eastside change agents interviewed, and the lack of collaboration with hyperlocal media, perceptions of diverging interests are blocking any potential collaboration. Downtown Eastside change agents may not be empowered to work with hyperlocal media groups, but they are empowered to tell their own stories on their terms. From ICT’s that are providing an outlet for self-publishing to ad hoc coverage requests to mainstream media, change agents are leveraging their limited resources to reach their public. The decisions to leverage their limited resources are enabled by their viewpoint on the media, perceived value of the collaboration, amount of trust for the organization, and available resources.

This study does not fully represent the diversity or the vast numbers of change agents working toward social change on the Downtown Eastside. To be more inclusive, more change agents’ perspectives need to be added to the findings. This project also

underestimated the amount of time required to engage and build trusting relationships with community members who are operating with very limited resources and available time. This project could have benefitted from engaging in a more ethnographic approach by spending time on the ground with the agents to gain more varied insights into how they were communicating their social change messages. If I positioned myself more intrinsically within the organizations through volunteering, perhaps the participants would have felt more trust toward towards me and would have been more inclined to engage with this project beyond the interview and follow-up emails.

The purpose of this research was to understand the enabling factors Downtown Eastside change agents were using to share their social change messages and collaborate with alternative media. Despite the picture painted here, many more organizations need to be interviewed to give a fuller account of the situation on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Also, a critical approach would be useful to understand why Downtown Eastside alternative/hyperlocal media remain silent to change agents' coverage requests. Scholars Wilson & Constanza-Chock (2008) find that women are also "chronically underrepresented" (p. 11) in American alternative media—is there a systemic problem in Canada as well? Also, it would be beneficial to complete the final stages of AI-design and destiny-in an environment that is not cloistered. I think there could be some benefits to removing anonymity such as encouraging dialogue and collaboration between participants and community validation through celebrating each agent's accomplishments.

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