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Public Access Television: The Message, The Medium, & The Movement

From Dyle TV (photo Harriet Hirschman).



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urn on your TV. (You probably never expected to read that in the pages of *Art Papers*.) Start flipping through the channels, past the Weather Channel, past CBS, past any of those premium channels that you might secretly subscribe to while asserting to friends that you never actually turn the damn thing on. Keep searching until you come to the channel that stands out—maybe because the show stars the guy who sells you bread or features the local punks sharing their views on the lack of adequate municipal skate-board facilities. Maybe it's a boring planning commission hearing or a mesmerizing locally-produced documentary, or maybe just something so odd that

it defies categorization. You've probably discovered your local public access station, that little corner of the television world where norms are broken, bottom lines are ignored, and participatory democracy occurs in a meaningful way, far beyond the late night public service announcements of commercial broadcasters.

Like many other non-profit organizations in your town, public access television was created with the goal of community service. But public access television isn't the Kiwanis Club; it is your coaxial connection to the community, via the local cable franchise. This link to the communication system of television provides a unique forum for civic participation. Communication, especially the diversity of opinion, is fundamental to a democracy, and the freedom to communicate is useless without the ability to do it. Public access television was set up to revitalize a participatory democracy by empowering citizens to take the tools of television into their own hands and create local programming on issues, ideas, and talents important to them. Public access television also provides a channel and audience for artistic expression, often engaging television viewers who would never venture into a gallery, stage theatre, or alternative art space. It can even become a place of worship for those faiths who lack the fiscal power of the evangelical movement. Access (as it is commonly referred to by its advocates and practitioners) is a remarkable resource that should not be ignored by anyone with something to say or an open mind.

Appreciating public access television requires an understanding of power relations: to what extent do people have the ability to shape their environment and social conditions? In this age of electronic communication, television is the blood of the body politic. "Those who control the stories of a culture, control the culture."¹ Television, which is dominated

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by commercial networks and their overriding concern with financial gain, has become our primary means of circulating stories, and the commercial control of program content largely defines the ideological, social, and cultural perspectives of our society. To ensure the continuing development of the United States as a democratic society, television must be more than a one-way funnel of status quo platitudes and advertising. Through the public access movement, television has the potential to become a transceiver for our communities to speak to themselves about art, politics, and culture. Moreover, television must begin to incorporate the voices of those communities marginalized by the mainstream media. And finally, media resources can begin to educate rather than sedate us about the very nature of electronic media.

The growth and success of the public access movement has provided a space on the cable menu for an alternative to the mar-

ket controlled network infotainment monologue that has defined the medium. This alternative takes many shapes, as many shapes as there are producers of programming, but it all contributes to the same payoff: community development. Let's consider three ways in which public access television facilitates community development—by stimulating local communication, encouraging cultural participation, and providing media education.

Access television can be a dynamic venue of local communication. It is more than televised town hall meetings where issues are debated by those who have something at stake. It is more than a means for local problem solving, sharing of resources, or fresh artistic explorations. Or more than just an electronic soapbox, where individuals can freely express themselves in the manner of their choice. Access plays all of these roles and so many others; it is whatever we choose to make it, and the costs of participating rarely amount to anything beyond some time and effort. Access makes it possible for community members to engage in affordable production and circulation of electronic media messages by providing low or no cost access to the equipment, facilities, and training required to make a television program. Because access channels exert no editorial control, public access television producers can use their technical skills to express their views however they please; distribution

of producer's work is guaranteed as long as the work is non-commercial and does not violate the First Amendment. There are limits on program length, content, objectives, or production quality. "Public access gives new meaning to the First Amendment of the Constitution by providing the technical capacity for all of us to speak to our communities."²

Some might argue that as a negative. The popular image of public access often includes the rants of white supremacists and the befuddled mumbblings of bored high school graduates unable to secure jobs or social lives (a la Wayne's World). Public access strives to live up to its name, and accessibility is the root of its philosophy. No one is turned away, no matter how repugnant, disturbing, or downright bizarre their perspectives may seem. Having Tom Metzger, the San Diego leader of the White Aryan Resistance organization, on community television is the price we may pay to ensure that the medium will always be available to us, regardless of how our views or creative expression might be regarded in a nation that worships Steven Seagal's penis and Danielle Steele's literary style.

There may even be a silver lining to the participation of what might be considered offensive political groups in this forum. Access has the power to serve the community as a starting place for dialogue, interaction, and debate. By bringing people into the "marketplace of ideas" they learn to become better shoppers. We can also benefit from the reminder that these difficult opinions really do exist among our neighbors and that many of the problems that trouble us begin in our own neighborhoods. It is just as important that audiences have access to the variety of viewpoints presented by public access channels as it is that producers are able to exercise an electronic form of free speech using the station's facilities.

During the Gulf War, for example, people across the country had a wide range of opinions regarding US military involvement in the Middle East, but commercial television retained its myopic focus on non-offensive "centrist" viewpoints. From CBS to CNN, Americans were presented essentially only one perspective: war as the liberation of the Kuwaiti people from the Hitleresque Saddam Hussein. But on access channels people could voice their ideas as well as hear the diversity of opinion on the war fermenting among their neighbors. Mid-Peninsula Access Corporation (MPAC) located in Palo Alto, California, for instance, became a non-stop live forum for its community's reflections and emotions. The war erupted during the first year of MPAC operations, when it had an unfinished studio and precious few community producers. In order to insure that people could address the issue as well as hear the views of others, MPAC staff wired a camcorder directly into the cable system, drafted their two-line office phone into community service, and initiated a series of live, interactive programs. According to MPAC executive director Elliot Margolies, "The phone kept ringing with callers of all ages and persuasions; others came over to our makeshift studio to make a statement on camera and participate in one of the least sophisticated, but most important TV shows in Channel 6 history."³

Access TV generates more than just community dialogue on politics; it also reaches into creativity and expression. Grand Rapids Television and the Urban Institute for Contemporary Art in Grand Rapids, Michigan teamed up to have regular video artists-in-residence utilize the public access channel as an "electronic palette." Most recently, artist-in-residence Robert Mark Packer used the electronic palette to create an interactive sculpture. Live phone calls from Grand Rapids residents would direct Packer in how to work on the piece or what he might add to it. Between callers, Packer would share his views on television (he loathes it!), art, or anything else he cared to discuss at the moment. He also rigged the camera to a pulley mechanism that attached to his body, enabling him to work freely around the studio while simultaneously involving the audience in his creative process. There was no studio crew, no fast action or great variety of camera movement, yet the program was engaging because community members would continue to call in to discuss art and creativity, comment on why he should or should not

add something to the sculpture, or just ask Packer what the hell he was doing on television. This innovative use of interactive television demonstrates how even entertainment programs on public access serve the goal of local communication.

Access TV communicates ideas, whether they are political, artistic, or in the broad category of perhaps what can be labeled "none of the above." Free from the restraints of owners and editors, a community can talk to itself in voices that are loud, soft, angry, ecstatic, or strange. The influence of this tool is potentially monumental to the otherwise ignored voices of our communities who have always felt they had a message to share, but lacked an effective way to reach the people around them. We may like what they have to offer or we may be disturbed, but communication is a two-way process, and those who are voicing new opinions on the local access channel might be listening to fresh opinions as well. Community communication through a public access channel can help to ensure that television remains accessible to everyone who chooses to participate.

Understanding our diverse community demands that we challenge ourselves constantly with ideas and expressions that would otherwise be alien to us. Cultural participation is key in order to enfranchise everyone in determining the collective fate of a community, and discovering different segments of our community across the narrow tabletop of Access TV provides a starting point for developing tolerance and respect across the divides of race, gender, class, regions, and sexual preference.

Back in the Paleobroadcast Age, when television was just the 12 or 13 channels ransomed by the F.C.C. to the highest bidders, the ability for minority segments of society to develop programming was limited to the economic clout they could gather to purchase a TV station or to attract the attention of Madison Avenue demographers. Although the medium has always had the potential for expanding cultural participation, the financial dimensions guaranteed that television would serve more as a tool for entrenching ideas than for generating them. Although the addition of the cable spectrum has mostly provided more of the same, public access channels are the exception: minority groups of every sort can now get on the airwaves by learning how to use the technology and committing the time to producing their own shows.

Public access fosters greater cultural participation by offering cultural minorities the opportunity to represent themselves the way they choose to be represented, rather than through the eyes of commercial stations which often value good teeth and accentless pronunciation above a commitment to incorporating diversity into their brief bursts of airtime between advertisements. Through Access, many ethnic, religious, and gay/lesbian groups are responding to the marginalization and the misrepresentation of their culture by using television to address their issues, share their stories, and redefine their lifestyles beyond common stereotypes. *Haiti Recontre* (produced through Chicago Access Corporation) for example, presents the public with a Haitian perspective of Haitian culture. For producer Jacque LeBlanc its important that people recognize and understand that "Haitians are not just AIDS victims that are trying to get US citizenship." Dr. Arvindhumar Parikh's monthly program *This Is India* (produced through Cox Cable Access of New Orleans) likewise focuses on generating awareness: "The goal of the show is to educate Americans about India, its culture and people." *Dyke TV*, now offered on public access channels in 15 cities across the country, offers viewers a rich variety of programming on lesbians. Public access television not only invests participants with the capacity to communicate their ideas based on their own direct experiences, it also reveals the multicultural reality of communities across the United States.

Access channels can likewise be a way for community members from various cultural groups to connect and to speak with their own subcultures. *Variety Creole* (produced through Boston Neighborhood Network TV), for instance, focuses on issues of concern to the Haitian community such as immigration laws, housing, and job opportunities and is cablecast in Creole. *InnerVisions* (produced

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through Dekalb Center for Community TV) covers African American history and culture from a contemporary African American perspective. And then there is *H30*, a program that proclaims with a Voice of God narration "Television by surfers, about surfers, and for surfers" (produced through Olelo Access Corporation in Oahu). By televising programming for their own communities, ethnic and cultural minorities can document and preserve their traditions, values, and customs while exploring their cultural identity with one another. These programs are made by specific groups for other members of their own community, yet their participation in creating programming benefits all cable viewers; it exposes audiences to the information and expression of their neighbors while providing members of these groups with the opportunity to assert their identity through an otherwise unresponsive medium.

Besides these examples, access has been a potent tool for artists because of its ability to reach out beyond the closed nest of the art community. This is especially vital for art practitioners from marginalized communities, because they often express themselves in aesthetic languages conceived by and intended for their own communities, and these pieces might not always appeal to many people who do not share their backgrounds. Without public access, these artists could only find a forum for their work if their community provided the financial weight to justify commercial investment. Public access not only gives local artists the opportunity to get their hands on expensive video equipment, but it also provides them with guaranteed distribution of their work—something that PBS, ITVS, network and cable channels could never promise. On access television artists can transgress aesthetic formulas, embrace controversial topics, and express themselves in their own languages, regardless of commercial sponsorship. Even the concept of what an artist is can be redefined; anyone at any level in the development of artistic expression can work through the access channel to communicate his or her vision, experience, meditations, or quirks.

TV is not a "window on the world" or a "slice of life," but an illusion—a carefully packaged re-presentation of reality. Media are never value free; they use an assortment of identifiable techniques to achieve their purposes, regardless of whether the medium is commercial or noncommercial. As television continues to assert its supremacy as the medium of choice for news and entertainment, some kind of process is necessary to reinforce our intellectual independence from the sedative tyranny of shows like "Married...with Children," and "Nightline." These shows are not inherently detrimental

tal, but by establishing the definitions of what we call news and entertainment without our critical participation, they often restrict our understanding to the narrow paths laid out by advertisers and other sources of entrenched cultural influence. As Barbara Osborn notes, "we all participate actively in the media 'wrestling match.' But for those not trained in media literacy the contest is unconscious and therefore unequal."⁶

Media literacy (the ability to critically analyze and produce media) teaches people to identify and to question the language of television, its conventions, and its political and economic underpinnings. Although a lot can be learned about television through producing a public access program, community media advocates are discovering that providing citizen access to television equipment and offering a channel to view local programming does not guarantee an understanding of dominant TV forms, their limitations, why they exist, and who they serve. To meet the need for media education, public access stations are beginning to incorporate critical viewing exercises into their hands-on curricula.

This new curriculum begins by making a distinction between reality and the mediated information that television provides. It might seem obvious that television and real life often have little in common, since Gilligan and the Skipper are unlikely to show up at your next luau, but the important concept for media educators is that media construct reality; that is to say, someone somewhere makes the decision about what is to be shown and how it will be presented. Understanding their desires and agendas becomes crucial when they expect something in return for their services, such as brand-name loyalty to Cheer detergent or political affiliation. No form of communication lacks intention; learning the skills to determine that intention helps us to become autonomous and critical thinkers.

The attention of viewers is a highly valued commodity, sold by commercial television producers to their advertisers. If that attention is not conscious and critical, the audience is susceptible to manipulation. The second step of access media education programs is fostering the ability of viewers to question and analyze the television information they receive, and then teaching the skills required to make informed choices about their responses to mass media. That choice might be as simple as asking themselves questions about what they are watching (why do disasters and shootings so often kick off the newscasts?) or as complex as producing alternative programming, but either way, viewers can begin to steer television in the direction of their choosing.

A stellar example of implementing this curriculum is happening at the Chicago Access Corporation (CAC). CAC has developed a series of videotapes and study guides to use in their production courses that demonstrate the key concepts of media literacy. The first tape addresses how TV doesn't reflect it represents reality. Tape two covers how commercial interests determine access on commercial TV and how that process eliminates certain voices. The third tape poses numerous questions (who is producing the images? who is the target audience? what is the purpose of the program?) to underscore television's ability to validate the value system put forth on behalf of the speaker. Tape four shows how commercial media speaks to us as consumers instead of constituting us as active, informed citizens.

Integrating media literacy into public access production courses aids the arts as well. Media education develops the viewer's appetite for video art forms that cannot be found on other channels. "Appreciation of any media form is related to what the viewer brings to the screen/text."⁷ Encouraging a recognition, if not a taste for unconventional forms, non-standard formats, and unusual content increases the sophistication of the viewer and such sophistication can translate into support for independent media artists, whose work often breaks with political, aesthetic, content formulas. This support can also pave the way for increasing viewership of non-traditional television programming which, in turn, might open up both cable and network TV to new voices. It might also increase public

support for congressional funding for alternative or innovative uses of television through PBS or ITVS.

As we move steadily into the 21st century, with its technological promise of 500 channels of television, it is vital that the public possesses a critical understanding of media and its relation to exercising citizenship skills. What those 500 channels might say will be determined by people who take an active role in mass media communication, and that requires the sort of education provided by public access television. "Media literacy education has the potential to realign an equitable relationship between knowledge and power and to revitalize the central, democratic goals of community access in the age of digital communication." Education through public access can equip students with both the video and critical thinking skills required to analyze as well as produce media messages.

Assuming your television is still on, turn it off. Because if the television is playing in the background while you are reading this article, you're likely missing the point; television requires active, conscious participation if it is to be more than a rubber nipple feeding us the social formulas of those who determine what is shown. We might appreciate what they are offering or we might not, but either choice requires that we are involved in the process of communication. The alternative is passive acceptance of what others would choose for us, and they may not always have our best interests at heart.

Public Access is part of the solution to the dilemmas of mass media. The Access mission is to transform television into a tool for community-building and participatory democracy. All of the examples we've seen, from *Variety Creole* to *Dyke TV*, demonstrate the freedom that your local public access forum has to offer towards sharing visions, replacing negative representations, and incorporating marginalized communities into the wider dialogue of our society. The number of possibilities reflects the number of people who get involved.

For all of its potential, Access is still an underutilized resource facing the simultaneous threats of budget cuts, alterations in franchise agreements, and changes in technology which could limit their access to our homes. Even in its present form, Access is limited to those who subscribe to cable television services, which cost money and are not available everywhere. Although there are over 3000 public access stations in the United States, they are concentrated in suburban communities rather than metropolitan areas, reflecting the middle class demographics of the cable industry itself. The result, arguably, has been to place more Access power in those communities while at least partially excluding urban Americans.

For all of these caveats, however, it is difficult to think of another community forum that can meet the challenges of democratizing electronic media. Given the likelihood that television and other emerging media are here to stay, the only feasible response is to join the call that these media be responsible and accessible to their diverse communities. The more people who take the time to produce programming, participate in media education, or even simply watch public access, the more support this movement will have in ensuring its slot on the dial. Don't just view it, do it.

¹ Laurel M. Church, "Community Access Television: What We Don't Know and Why We Don't Know It," *Journal of Film and Video*, Volume 21, No. 2 (summer 1987), p. 13.

² Fred Johnson, "Access Challenges The Structure Of Television," *Community Television Review*, Volume 9, No. 2, 1988, p. 34.

³ Elliot Margolin, "Armed Access First," *Community Television Review*, Volume 14, No. 2, 1993, p. 7.

⁴ Phone interview with Greg Borezell, program director, Chicago Access Corporation, March 9, 1994.

⁵ Phone interview with Dr. Arvidhanna Parikh, producer, *This Is Justice*, March 9, 1994.

⁶ Barbara Osborn, *TV Alert: A Wake-up Guide For Television Literacy*, (Los Angeles, CA: Center for Media and Values, 1992), p. 2.

⁷ Fred Johnson, "The Real Work Is Media Education," *Community Media Review*, Volume 14, No. 2, 1994, p. 8.

⁸ Kathleen Ryan, "Access in a Digital Age," *Community Television Review*, Volume 14, No. 2, 1993, p. 24.

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