

**Access Television and Grassroots Political Communication  
in the United States**

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## **Access Television and Grassroots Political Communication in the United States**

Public access television began in North America in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a radical experiment in democratic communication. Access television supporters hoped to break the lock which commercial interests held on the television medium by bringing non-profit, grassroots political and cultural programming directly to people's living rooms. By securing inexpensive access to production resources and facilities, such as cameras, microphones, studios, and editing equipment, ordinary citizens would be able to construct their own televisual messages and to bypass the framing devices of professional, corporate media.<sup>1</sup> Distribution would be accomplished by cablecasting programs on a first-come, first-served basis over local cable systems. Supporters envisioned access television as a public space where, liberated from the economic and editorial constraints of commercial television production, citizens could air their views over the most powerful and pervasive communications medium of the era.

With twenty-five years of access television practice behind us and calls for access to yet another new technology -- the computer network -- before us, the question should be asked: Is access television an effective tool for democratic communication? One way to gauge the democratic potential of access television is to examine the strategic use of this resource by radical media projects. Following Downing's (1984, p. 2) definition, the term radical media here applies to media which pose challenges to existing power structures, empower diverse communities and classes, and enable communities of interest to speak to each other. These kinds of media are seldom distributed by American commercial or public television, and their experiences are indicative of the possibilities and limits of access television as a democratic medium. This study profiles three projects

currently utilizing access television as a tool for progressive political communication. Drawing on theories of democracy and democratic communication, the study analyzes both the political achievements of these projects and the structural limitations of access television as a forum for democratic communication. The study concludes that while public access has opened up a space for grassroots political communication on television, a restructuring of access television resources would further strengthen the democratic potential of the medium.

To begin, I will review briefly the set of circumstances in which access television came into being and its current structure. The same political and economic factors which precipitated the development of access television also have limited the nature of the services it provides. Access television represents a unique moment in the history of technology in the U.S. where progressive groups have managed to secure a genuine public space in the electronic media. Yet, this space has been underutilized by these groups, subject to inadequate funding, and devoid of government and industry support.

### **A Brief History of Public Access Television**

In the early 1970s, broadcast television consisted of three network channels and a fledgling public broadcasting system. Cable technology seemed to offer a genuine alternative to this highly centralized, broadcast market. Although cable had been developed in the 1940s, it was only in the 1970s that it metamorphosed from a technology for extending broadcast reception into a technology able to originate programming over its systems. With its new-found ability for program origination, its 12-channel carrying capacity, and its image as a local provider of services to discrete communities, cable inspired visions of a more diverse, decentralized, and competitive television market. As one early commentator enthused, "Television can become far more flexible, far more democratic, far more diversified in content, and for more responsive to the full range of pressing needs in today's cities, neighborhoods, towns, and

communities" (Smith, 1970, p. 8). The democratic promise of cable was espoused by cable operators, economists of regulation, liberals, policy makers, and progressive groups (Streeter, 1987, p. 181).

Access television came about in large part through a temporary confluence of interests among cable operators, federal regulators, and access activists. Access activism in the 1970s was an outgrowth of 1960s social activism which advocated participatory democracy as a means to social and cultural change. The alternative print media of the 1960s sought to create an alternative consciousness in their readers and, ultimately, an alternative culture (Armstrong, 1981, pp. 20-24). Access activism extended the goals of the 1960s radical press to the medium of television. Access activists hoped community members would be able to utilize cable systems, along with consumer video equipment, to engage in unmediated expression, to increase communication between and among themselves, and to discover and define a grassroots political agenda.<sup>2</sup> Michael Shamberg, author of *Guerrilla Media*, which became known as the "Bible" of alternative media, praised cable's potential to create an alternative information infrastructure, or a "grassroots network of indigenous media activity" (Shamberg, 1971, p. 9). Though inspired by technological developments, access activists also saw the need to realize their goals in concrete communications policy. The Alternate Media Center in New York, founded by documentarists George Stoney and Red Burns, served as the organizational center for the political instigation and popularization of access television in the U.S. (Hénaut, 1991, p. 96; Engelman, 1990, pp. 18-20).

Federal regulators and cable operators were also instrumental in establishing access television. The Federal Communication Commission (FCC) saw an opportunity to promote local programming policies in cable where they had failed with broadcast television. In 1972 the FCC mandated that larger cable operators provide public, educational and governmental (PEG) access channels, equipment, and facilities (Cable Television Report and Order, 1972) to the communities they served. Cable operators had

their own reasons to support the local and community programming potential of cable. Volunteering to provide PEG channels was one way to curry favor with the FCC, which had halted cable expansion from 1968 to 1972 while it deliberated over rules for the medium, and perhaps to preempt federally-mandated access television requirements. The offer of PEG channels and services to local communities was also good public relations for cable companies competing among themselves to secure a municipal cable franchise. Early government and industry support led many communities to believe they could rely on the good will of cable operators to supply access television resources and facilities, to adequately fund access television operations, and in some cases to manage public access channels and facilities.

Not surprisingly, this alliance of interests was short-lived. Once the FCC freeze was lifted and their municipal contracts were secured, many cable operators saw little reason to support public access channels. In addition, while cable had been touted as a locally-oriented business and technology, the industry saw localism as an economic liability to be overcome. Cable television looked for ways to organize itself around the economies of program distribution, rather than the capabilities of its technology. In this respect, cable proved similar to broadcast television which also derives its socioeconomic power not from its technology or production activities, but from control over a distributive activity whose profitability is linked to large economies of scale (Garnham, 1990, p. 65). Cable's extra channel space was to be filled not by local productions, but by television reruns and Hollywood films which could be easily and inexpensively distributed to individual cable systems via satellite. The late 1970s saw the advent and diffusion of satellite program services such as Home Box Office (HBO), Showtime, the Movie Channel, and Nickelodeon. At the same time, the Midwest Video Corporation mounted a legal challenge against federally-mandated access television. The Supreme Court struck down FCC public access rules, charging that the FCC had overstepped its jurisdiction by requiring cable operators to act as common carriers (Federal

Communications Commission v. Midwest Video Corp., 1979). Public access systems around the country that had relied on these rules, and failed to mention access television specifically in their franchise agreements with cable operators, were shut down (Brenner & Price, 1993, p. 6-34; Rice, 1980-1981, p. 101). In the future, access television would survive only in communities that lobbied their municipal governments to include public access provisions in the local cable contract.

In the absence of strong governmental or industry support, the continued existence of access television has been precarious and has depended on grassroots politicking within individual communities. This has meant that public access resources and facilities vary from place to place. Some communities offer studio facilities, production equipment, training, and outreach, while others provide little more than channel space. What remains constant from city to city are the customary conditions under which access television operates. First, with its nondiscriminatory, first-come first-served policies, access television establishes an open forum for public communication which is free from editorial control by cable operators. Second, funding for access television must be obtained either from cable operators or city governments. There is no federally-mandated funding for access television, and the majority of access television centers are poorly funded (Aufderheide, 1992, p. 62; Rice, 1980-1981, p. 106). Lastly, access television is conceived of as an exclusively local resource. The facilities and equipment enabling production and distribution are made available only to those living within the immediate community, local citizens are required to sponsor all programming cablecast on access television, and there is no structural or administrative support for networking between public access channels.

### **Radical Television Projects: Three Case Studies**

Since its inception, access television has provided radical media makers with a non-profit, open forum for the expression of their views. Although the existence of

access television has not led to revolutionary social change as some of its founders had hoped, radical public access programs and distribution ventures constitute ongoing experiments in the development of an alternative information structure and program base. Radical access television projects have been concerned with the political empowerment of producers and viewers and the representation of excluded or underrepresented political and cultural communities. The democratic aspirations of many of these projects are manifest both in the way they are internally organized and managed, and in their political strategies and goals. Space limitations will not permit a comprehensive examination of all radical access television projects.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, I have selected three projects for case study: the *Committee for Labor Access*, *Paper Tiger Television*, and *Deep Dish Television*. These projects are distinguished by their conformity to Downing's criteria for radical media, their democratic internal organization, their longevity as access television producers, and their national recognition within the access television community.

### *Committee For Labor Access*

Began: 1983

Location: Chicago, Illinois

Activities: produces *Labor Beat*, a bi-weekly news and public affairs program covering labor issues (also produces *Labor Express*, a weekly, hour-long radio show)

Personnel: approximately 7 core producers, 10 volunteers

Screened: access television in Chicago, St. Louis, CUNY-TV in New York, public screenings, *Free Speech TV*

Finance: donations, program sales

**Introduction.** Numerous independent producers and producer groups utilize access television to produce video on labor issues.<sup>4</sup> *Labor Beat* is one of the longest running of these shows and is produced and distributed by the Committee For Labor Access (CLA), a coalition of independent video producers, labor activists, and artists. *Labor Beat* engages in "small-format, nano-budget, fast-turnaround, labor video

journalism" (L. Duncan, personal communication, May 17, 1996), using consumer grade cameras to produce cheap and timely shows on labor issues. Although CLA demonstrates its solidarity with organized labor through its affiliation with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 1220 (a TV production union in Chicago), the group is an independent organization that does not receive financial or administrative support from the IBEW or other unions.

*Labor Beat* programs focus on local, national and international labor issues. The show covers topics of interest not only to organized labor, but to the labor movement more broadly defined as incorporating all working people regardless of whether they are union members. In recent years, *Labor Beat* has included shows on the effects and implications of the North American Free Trade Agreement, on the leadership change of the AFL-CIO, and on the wave of labor struggles occurring in Illinois. Show producers utilize documentary techniques, and many of the programs favor a style in which the camera is clearly an active and interested participant in the events and issues it portrays.

*Labor Beat* strives to act as a forum for rank-and-file perspectives and interests.

Programs document strikes, demonstrations, and other labor conflicts; report on news of specific interest to the labor movement; convey key speeches given by political and labor leaders; carry the highlights of labor conferences, and present interviews with labor leaders. Programs also preserve the history and culture of working people by profiling the daily lives and problems of workers, recording the oral histories of longtime labor activists, and documenting significant events in labor history.

**Internal Organization.** CLA's producer-members compose a board which meets once a month to discuss collective business. These meetings are open forums for planning upcoming shows, devising fundraising strategies, orchestrating program publicity, debating how best to further the goals of labor television, and dividing collective tasks, such as answering correspondence and overseeing the distribution of

shows. Collective work is accomplished on a purely volunteer basis. A few committee members take responsibility for keeping track of finances, distributing tapes, grantwriting, and editing programs. Board decisions, while formally subject to a majority vote, are generally the product of consensus. The group, which is small and cohesive, seldom disagrees on goals and strategies (P. Donahue, personal communication, May 21, 1996; L. Duncan, personal communication, May 17, 1996).

The collection of program material is largely decentralized. CLA producers generate their own ideas for programs and accept suggestions from rank-and-file workers. In addition to material shot by *Labor Beat's* core producers, CLA receives raw footage from workers and activists around the country which is then edited for cablecast. Because Chicago's public access center requires producers to submit two new shows a month to retain a series slot, *Labor Beat* faces a rigorous production schedule. The task of editing, which must be done quickly, tends to fall repeatedly to one committee member and to accord that member a large say in the final form the shows take (L. Duncan, personal communication, May 17, 1996).

**Political Strategies and Goals.** CLA's overarching goal is to empower workers by providing a forum which gives voice to "the lives, experiences and struggles of working people" (The Committee for Labor Access Grant Proposal, 1996). This goal is carried out in part through the inclusion of worker-produced tapes in the series, the training of labor activists in television and radio production, and the creation and maintenance of a distribution network for labor programming. CLA also administers to this goal by creating programming whose point of view differs from that of both union bureaucracies and commercial television.

CLA seeks to reflect and represent the interests of rank-and-file workers rather than union bureaucracies. *Labor Beat* provides a forum in which these interests can express themselves more directly:

Our ten-year stint in covering stories...convinces us that, as the labor battle lines pop up, talented and dependable videographers will emerge from the ranks who will provide footage closest to the issues and action. And they will get those interviews from folks who very often understand what's going on better than their representatives hundreds of miles away (Duncan, 1996, p. 24).

There has been a recurrent tension between the AFL-CIO's idea of labor television and what the rank-and-file produce ("Labor and Access," 1995, p. 26) . CLA's programs are not a venue for the views of union bureaucracies. Rather, many of the programs criticize sectors of bureaucratized labor. In "Our Class of People," for example, strikers from Decatur, Illinois demand access to the AFL-CIO executive council meeting in order to express displeasure with both the council's weak support for the "war zone" struggles and their reliance on labor-management circles.<sup>5</sup> As the program documented, access to the meeting was refused. Other *Labor Beat* programs continued to support these Midwestern labor struggles.

CLA also produces and distributes images of labor that seldom find their way onto mainstream television. Believing that the interests of corporate media are intrinsically at odds with those of labor, former *Labor Beat* co-producer Bob Hercules asserts the importance of using access television to increase workers' awareness of excluded perspectives (Hercules, 1987, p. 12). CLA creates opportunities to sensitize workers and others to the anti-labor biases of commercial television by addressing this issue in their shows, by facilitating discussions at public screenings, and by involving rank-and-file workers in the production process. Through the production of an on-going, radical series on labor issues, CLA hopes to contribute to the articulation and development of workers' perspectives on the world.

**CLA's Experience of Access TV as a Communication Resource.** CLA sees access television as an invaluable resource for the labor movement because it enables

people to assert alternative perspectives on labor issues with a relatively small budget (L. Duncan, personal communication, May 17, 1996). Rank-and-file workers are able to disseminate information and analysis on access television that would never pass the gatekeepers of commercial electronic media. That union bureaucracies have failed to recognize the potential of access television as an organizing tool or to provide resources for its use by workers is, in the eyes of CLA, symptomatic of the distance that currently exists between union leadership and working people.

While access television in Chicago provides CLA with channel space and editing equipment, the group has had to find its own means of publicizing programs, obtaining access to production equipment, and funding the project. Because the local cable company has little interest in publicizing access television programs, CLA has developed its own promotional strategies, including the publication of a newsletter, the public screening of tapes, and special mailings and faxings of brochures and flyers to union locals. CLA also produces a program catalogue for labor historians, activists, educators, unionists and others with a potential interest in buying shows. *Labor Beat* sometimes requires shooting with little notice or taking cameras to distant locations for extended periods of time. CLA has invested in its own camera, microphones and lighting equipment because the requirements for borrowing these production tools from Chicago's public access center has proven too restrictive. Funding has been a continual problem for *Labor Beat*, which does not receive funds from unions and has been largely unsuccessful at obtaining grants from foundations or arts councils. CLA's budget, including in-kind support, is less than \$10,000 per year, and funds are raised through tape sales and donations.

Distribution is important both to the show's potential effectiveness and to its economic survival. CLA has searched for ways to expand program distribution to a wider geographical audience than local access television allows. CLA mails programs to New York and St. Louis for cablecast and currently distributes shows through Free

Speech TV (FSTV), a national program service targeting access television centers. Through FSTV, *Labor Beat* can be seen on approximately 60 public access channels in over 44 cities. CLA is also part of the Union Producers and Programmers Network (UPPNET), a coalition formed in 1989 to support the production, distribution and preservation of electronic media which addresses labor issues and the problem of media access. At present, UPPNET and FSTV are collaborating on the development of a national labor television series.

### *Paper Tiger Television*

Began: 1981

Location: New York, New York and several other locations<sup>6</sup>

Activities: produces weekly show on media criticism, conducts educational workshops on low-budget television production

Personnel: approximately 10 core members, 15 occasional members, 1 paid part-time distribution coordinator

Screened: access television in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, CUNY-TV in New York, universities, museums

Finance: program sales and rentals, grants

**Introduction.** Paper Tiger shows are produced by the Paper Tiger Television collective, a volunteer group of artists, media professionals, and activists. The show began as a special series on *Communications Update* in which communication theorist and scholar Herb Schiller analyzed the political economy and agenda-setting function of the *New York Times*. From these beginnings, the program evolved into weekly "readings" of different media publications, programs and trends by a variety of hosts, many of whom are professional writers, scholars or media critics. "Readings" in this case refers to the critical analysis of a media text which aims to explore both the ideologies and symbolic forms which give the text its meaning and to examine the institutional, political and economic factors conditioning its production.

While early shows tended to focus on print publications, such as "Teresa Costa Reads *Biker Lifestyle*," "Muriel Dimen Reads *Cosmopolitan*," and "Natalie Didn't Drown: Joan Braderman Reads *the National Enquirer*," later shows have taken on a broader range of media texts and phenomena. The series has included Mark Crispin Miller on the history of American advertising, Elayne Rapping on soap operas, and Renee Tajima on Asian images in U.S. cinema. Recently, Paper Tiger has begun producing more activist-oriented tapes. As one collective member has stated, "More tapes deal with immediate political controversies and feature direct participants in social struggles, such as labor strikes and abortion rights battles, while maintaining a focus on how media representations do not reflect the realities of life for most people today" (Marcus, 1991, p. 32). This later focus has produced shows on the 1989 United Mine Worker's strike against Pittston Coal Company, New York City's plans to build an incinerator in a low-income neighborhood, and the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico.

**Internal Organization.** Paper Tiger membership consist of a floating core of ten or more regular members and a Diaspora of peripheral members who maintain occasional involvement. The Paper Tiger Television collective allows all members to participate in all aspects of the organization. The collective has two primary activities: the production of shows and program distribution. The group believes that the collective structure allows members equal autonomy and agency within the group, ongoing flexibility in the amount of work they assume, and the chance to exercise and develop a variety of work-related skills. As Stein and Marcus (1990) assert, "A collective may not always function as efficiently as an organization with strict hierarchical structures, but what it lacks in efficiency it makes up for by valuing the opinions and ideas of all of its members." These egalitarian characteristics are a great advantage to a group which relies upon volunteer labor.

Members meet once a week at the Paper Tiger office in downtown Manhattan. Meetings are held in the evening in order to allow those with full time jobs to attend. These weekly meetings are central to the organization's internal exchange of ideas and maintenance of collective identity.

The ritual of convergence of opposing powers, fiery debate and collective stewing. Everything is discussed Wednesdays, from upcoming conferences and festivals, demonstrations and lectures, to potential show proposals, aesthetics, goals, and available sublets. Plus screenings of shows new and old for critique. Once every couple of months it's a mailing party where we all get together and stuff envelopes over beers. Live shows are on Wednesdays. Mostly Wednesday night is what makes us a collective. It is the time we all get together to exchange information and get a look at ourselves. (Marcus, 1991, p. 32)

The meetings are the forum for collective decision-making regarding the group's activities and goals. Any member of the group may suggest new projects and initiatives or voice their opinions on proposed shows. Final decisions are made by group consensus. Group business is discussed and delegated to committees which oversee different aspects of PTTV's operations, such as distribution, fundraising, and office support, and which serve to familiarize collective members with the inner workings of the organization. Committee activities are reported on during the weekly meetings.

Show production also is organized collectively. New shows may be suggested either by collective members or by persons outside the collective. If the entire collective agrees that the show idea is consistent with Paper Tiger's interests, individual collective members volunteer to work on the show. As with other collective projects or business, a member's role in production varies widely from show to show. A producer of one show may act as preproduction researcher on another or as a camera operator on yet another. The collective often works on several shows at once. With varying production schedules, shows may take anywhere from two weeks to two years to complete. The credits of each show reflect Paper Tiger's commitment to its identity as a collective, listing the names of those who worked on the show without reference to the specific jobs performed.

**Political Strategies and Goals.** The introduction to the series in its second year proclaims:

[Paper Tiger Television] looks at the communications industry via the media in all of their forms. The power of mass culture rests on the trust of the public. This legitimacy is a paper tiger. Investigation into the corporate structures of the media and critical analysis of their content is one way to demystify the information industry. Developing a critical consciousness about the communications industry is a necessary first step towards democratic control of information resources.

Paper Tiger shows utilize political economy and critical cultural theory to critique media content and to call attention to the disjuncture between people's lived experiences and media representations. The goal is to create critical viewers with a sophisticated understanding of how and why artifacts of the culture industry adopt particular forms and functions.

While the content focuses on critical readings of media representations, the aesthetic aims to offer viewers an alternative experience of television. Paper Tiger's style and pace are self-consciously different from that of commercial television. The pacing is uneven. Back drops and graphics cards are brightly colored and often handmade. Shots sometimes reveal equipment and crew. Mistakes made during production deliberately may be left in the finished tape. This aesthetic, which strives for a "homey" or "friendly" look, has several stated functions. First, it differentiates the show visually from other television in the hopes of catching the attention of potential viewers. Second, Paper Tiger visually highlights the constructed nature of television through its refusal to look slick. Third, it conveys to viewers that flawless production values are not a precondition for having something to say in the televisual medium (Halleck, 1984, pp. 315-316; Halleck, 1993, pp. 416-417). Furthermore, the aesthetic makes a virtue of necessity. Since PTTV's budget will not allow it to mimic the production values of corporate media, its

eschews these values from the start and seeks to invent an alternative, though nonetheless engaging, aesthetic.

### **Paper Tiger's Experience of Access TV as a Communication Resource.**

PTTV hopes to demonstrate the larger potential of TV as a political communication resource by offering an alternative vision of the medium. Access television provides Paper Tiger with a space for the creative reworking of the television form. It also provides access to consumers of electronic media. From the collective's perspective, the written word cannot perform the same critical functions as PTTV shows, which rely on contrast with, and subversion of, the tropes of mainstream television. The collective believes that access television is the only forum capable of hosting the alternative content and style of radical programming. As collective members Stein and Marcus (1990) state, "Paper Tiger TV believes that by producing shows on public access, it can provide a model of quality, low-budget television and engage in critical discussions and aesthetic experimentation which would never be acceptable to commercial or, in most cases, even public television."

For most of the collective's existence, public access resources in Manhattan consisted of channel space only. While raw materials and incidental expenses, such as tape stock, transportation, and props are costs which access television producers usually cover themselves, Paper Tiger also was obliged to obtain its own access to cameras, studios, and editing equipment. Funding for these resources comes from grants and from program sales and rentals. Paper Tiger is fortunate to be located in New York, where the state's arts council has been committed to funding video projects. Since New York City access television programs are not listed in *TV Guide*, local newspapers, or cable schedules, the group also must publicize its programs. To this end, PTTV cablecasts shows during a regular series slot so that viewers know when to tune in and maintains a mailing list of interested viewers to which it routinely mails program schedules.

Distribution is an integral part of the collective's activities, as well as a primary source of funding. Paper Tiger believes its critiques of the culture industry have both local and national appeal, and has searched for ways to distribute the show beyond the local Manhattan cable system. In its earlier years, wider distribution was limited by the fact that the group lacked the resources for postage and tape duplication (Halleck, 1984, p. 317). Today, a part-time, paid distribution coordinator fills orders and tracks tape distribution. The group's efforts to develop distribution have included increasing its visibility by screening tapes at festivals and on access television in other communities, and by instituting targeted mailings of program catalogs to universities, museums, arts centers, and community groups.

### *The Deep Dish Television Network*

Began: 1986

Location: New York, New York

Activities: maintains a satellite network for the production and distribution of progressive television, coordinates production of national series, programs shows produced by other non-profit groups

Personnel: 3 paid employees, hundreds of volunteer producers and series coordinators

Screened: approximately 250 public access channels throughout the U.S., some public television channels

Finance: grants, program sales

**Introduction.** In the mid-1980s, members of the Paper Tiger Television collective began organizing a public access satellite network in an effort to build a national infrastructure and audience for progressive television programming. Collective members believed that satellite distribution, long used by commercial program services, would be considerably more efficient, manageable, and cost-effective than mailing tapes to individual access television centers. Testing the feasibility of such a project, Paper Tiger produced a ten-part series of "magazine-style" shows on a variety of topics; rented time on a satellite channel; and transmitted the first Deep Dish TV (DDTV)

programming. The series was offered to public access stations, and anyone with a receiving dish, free of charge. Over 250 stations around the country telecast the series. This trial run of the public access satellite network seemed to augur new possibilities for the distribution of grassroots programming on a national scale. DDTV emerged from Paper Tiger to become its own organization with the goal of producing and distributing programming that would challenge the conservative orientation of mainstream TV and allow people to present viewpoints on political and social issues ("Deep Dish Television Directory," 1988, p. 3).

Deep Dish has pioneered a program format in which independently produced work is assembled into multi-part series organized around a central theme. The series examines social issues from regionally and culturally diverse perspectives generally absent from broadcast news. Programs draw on production genres ranging from documentary and public affairs to drama and experimental video and juxtapose highly-produced material with the more rough-edged fare typically associated with access television. They may consist of works in their entirety or compile excerpts from a variety of sources. DDTV series have treated a diverse range of subjects, including citizens' uses of public access television, social and political change in Asia, grassroots views on environmental issues, the U.S. war in the Persian Gulf, censorship and contemporary threats to civil liberties, the Columbus quincentenary and the struggles of indigenous people around the globe, health care reform, and the growth of the prison industry. Deep Dish seeks to present perspectives that generally are ignored or marginalized in mainstream debate. The recent health care series, for instance, sought to present progressive perspectives on health reform in a public debate otherwise dominated by policy makers, insurance companies, drug manufacturers and corporate healthcare providers. The series included programs on proposals for reform, holistic medicine, reproductive rights and services, health care practices in Black communities, prison

health policies, community mental health programs, environmental racism, and Native Americans and alcohol abuse.

**Internal Organization.** Three staff members maintain an office in New York City which facilitates network operations and coordinates series production. The staff performs the centralized work of fundraising for each series, initiating program development, assembling press kits, arranging satellite transmission, and publicizing the series. Deep Dish's board of directors, drawn from the ranks of political and media activists around the country, sets policy for the project. The board deliberates over the final selection of series topics, programming formats, staff hiring and supervision, and how best to reach potential audiences.

Individual program production and local scheduling is largely decentralized. Deep Dish selects series coordinators from varying ethnic, cultural and gender backgrounds and from different geographical regions of the country. For magazine-style shows, the series coordinator views material submitted by contributing producers from around the country and edits a number of these segments into a finished program. Alternately, Deep Dish may commission individuals or groups to produce an entire show if a paucity of preproduced material exists. Local coordinating and contributing producers are responsible for generating local publicity, arranging to downlink the programming from the satellite feed, and insuring that the Deep Dish series is scheduled on their local public access channels. This last step is especially critical because many public access channels will only schedule programming submitted by local community members. When the budget permits, Deep Dish pays series producers and coordinators a fee for their work.

Recent funding and staff difficulties, as well as a break in series production, have precipitated a restructuring of the office staff and board.<sup>7</sup> For many years staff positions had been organized hierarchically, with an executive director, a program director, and an

operations manager. Currently, staff work is being reorganized into a less hierarchical structure and a New York-based support group is being established to provide volunteer labor and other resources for the staff. Deep Dish also is reorganizing the structure of its board, as it found that maintaining a diffuse national board was impractical for an organization that lacked the financial resources and skills necessary for board development, training, communication and cooperation. To paraphrase one board member, a diverse, broad-based, and representative policymaking group requires the laying of the necessary groundwork to foster understanding and the ability to work together (L. Davitian, personal communication, May 28, 1996). While DDTV is still committed to building a diverse organization at all levels, the new board will be made up primarily of members from the New York area.

**Political Strategies and Goals.** Deep Dish TV aims to distribute programming which allows progressive individuals and groups to represent themselves and their concerns to each other and to larger forums for public debate. Deep Dish also seeks to demonstrate the potential political uses of access television, satellite transmission, and activist programming to independent producers and activists. Series transmission often is accompanied by a concerted effort to distribute information to activist constituencies on how to use access television resources, how to receive Deep Dish programming via satellite, and how programming might be used to augment their organizing activities. Through such efforts, Deep Dish hopes to strengthen a sense of community among activists across wide geographic regions (Halleck, 1993, p. 420). A key assumption of the project is that progressive voices lack a significant outlet in mainstream media. Deep Dish TV seeks to provide this outlet and, according to board member Lauren-Glenn Davitian (personal communication, May 28, 1996), to act not just as a TV network but as an organizing force.

For many years, Deep Dish's prime strategy for making the programs representative of progressive opinion involved openly soliciting ideas from independent producers for series themes and subtopics and compiling material submitted by these producers. "Sick & Tired of Being Sick & Tired," a Deep Dish series on health care reform, signaled a new strategy for the network. Rather than surveying independent video producers, Deep Dish staff spoke with 98 progressive health care organizations and activist groups to define the series' subtopics. Devising shows around the local and national agendas of these groups, DDTV developed programs specifically tailored to reflect the needs and concerns of health care activists. Deep Dish hoped this strategy would allow them to familiarize new audiences with the idea of alternative television, to heighten the use-value of programming for activist audiences, and to link progressive groups with access television producers. In addition, this series aimed to strengthen the relationship between access television and national forums of political debate. The series was timed to coincide with the 1994 congressional debates on health care in the hope of adding new voices to the debate and influencing policy outcomes (C. Lopez, personal communication, August 7, 1995).

Deep Dish's inclusive production style actively searches out and amplifies marginalized voices. This method of production is both time-consuming and administratively complex. As former program director Cynthia Lopez (personal communication, August 7, 1995) notes, a for-profit organization would be unlikely to engage in this process. Indeed, Deep Dish's activities are conditioned by the fact that its goals are primarily political:

We are constantly asking what are the most democratic, most empowering models for media production and distribution? Under what circumstances will local activists start using their access stations more? How can we make the programs more interactive with viewers? How can Deep Dish collaborate with other media outlets...? How can we facilitate media access for constituencies that are underrepresented and misrepresented in the mainstream media (Wallner, 1991, p. 34)?

As this quote suggests, Deep Dish TV is engaged in the project of extending activist activities and struggles into the realm of media and culture. Since there are no pre-existing models for this type of project, strategies are constantly being experimented with, evaluated, and reformulated.

### **Deep Dish TV's Experience of Access TV as a Communication Resource.**

Deep Dish TV aims to provide a national network for progressive programming through geographically-dispersed and locally-oriented access television facilities. Access television centers contribute to this project by training amateur producers, supplying production and post-production equipment to these producers, and offering channel space on which to cablecast the finished series. However, because access television resources have been structured to serve local rather than national communities, Deep Dish faces a number of problems in trying to build a national infrastructure based on access television. First, many public access centers do not own satellite dishes. Individuals wishing to program DDTV in these areas must obtain access to a satellite dish independently or arrange for nearby public access centers with dishes to send them copies of the programming. Second, DDTV must handle all administrative aspects of networking to hundreds of local stations, placing tremendous demands on the organization's small staff and budget. Administrative tasks include identifying and contacting interested producers and programmers; aggressively promoting its program schedule through mailings, phone calls, and postcards; and contacting programmers afterward to determine the extent of carriage. These tasks are made more difficult by DDTV's project-by-project orientation, its distribution of only two hours of programming per week, and its consequent intermittent presence on local cable schedules. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, DDTV has had to operate under significant financial constraints. Public access channels

are not permitted to carry advertising or to pay for the programming they receive, eliminating them as a potential source of revenue.

Since its inception, Deep Dish has relied on grants from private foundations, individuals, and government agencies to fund the project. Recent national cutbacks in arts funding have taken a severe toll on the network, which went for two years without producing a series and only recently resumed its activities with the production of a 1997 series on criminal justice titled, *Bars and Stripes: Doing Time Inside the Prison Complex*. Current efforts to expand funding sources include direct mail campaigns to persons on the DDTV mailing list, establishing a "Donor's Club" of people willing to pledge sustaining financial support, distributing information via a World Wide Web site, and increased marketing of programs to schools and universities, video outlets and bookstores, global TV outlets, and home viewers.

### **Access Television and Democratic Communication**

In assessing the contributions of access television to democratic communication, I will call on two major strands of democratic theory. Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist hegemony theory and Benjamin Barber's participatory democratic theory hold considerable explanatory power for the type of activities in which radical media projects are engaged. The *Committee for Labor Access*, *Paper Tiger Television*, and *The Deep Dish Television Network* represent overt attempts on the part of radical media makers to engage in political communication. This communication is political in the sense that Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 153) invoke when they define political action.

...When we speak here of the 'political' character of these struggles, we do not do so in the restricted sense of demands which are situated at the level of parties and of the State. What we are referring to is a type of action whose objective is the transformation of a social relation which constructs a subject in a relationship of subordination.

While these radical television projects would like to influence government policies, their more immediate concerns are posed in terms of contesting the frameworks and biases of commercial media and constructing alternative representations of social experience and reality.

If we define democracy, along with Dahl (1989, p. 311), as a process or system "in which the members regard one another as political equals, are collectively sovereign, and possess all the capacities, resources, and institutions they need in order to govern themselves," then access television may be understood as an institution which provides citizens with some of the necessary communicative tools for self-governance. The radical television projects described here utilize access television to engage in democratic communication in three ways. First, access television enables its users to reinterpret, reframe, and refute the artifacts, messages, and ideologies of commercial culture from within a dominant forum for political communication. Second, access television allows users a space in which to represent themselves and their interests to the larger community. Finally, access television permits the exercise of democratic functions of speech which are largely absent from commercial media. An examination of each of these points will elaborate further their contribution to democratic processes.

Central to Laclau and Mouffe's democratic theory are the ideas that social meaning is derived from among a plurality of possible ways of understanding social organization and activity and that this meaning is subject to unending contestation. Radical media projects view television as a site in which to contest such social meaning. For these groups, access television is a feasible and appropriate forum in which to respond to the hegemonic position of the larger medium. Like Habermas's (1962/1991, p. 27) ideal public sphere which lies between the realm of the economy and the state, access television provides a speech forum which is relatively free from economic and editorial constraints and which permits the discursive reinterpretation and refutation of media forms and symbols. Laclau and Mouffe argue political change must be preceded

by "discursive conditions" that alert people to oppressive relationships, and thereby make it possible to expose various types of inequality and to transform social and political understanding:

Our central problem is to identify the discursive conditions for the emergence of a collective action, directed towards struggling against inequalities and challenging relations of subordination. We might also say that our task is to identify the conditions in which a relation of subordination becomes a relation of oppression, and thereby constitutes itself into the site of an antagonism. (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 153)

Radical television projects take it as axiomatic that television is an important sphere of political communication and that commercial television systematically distorts, biases, and represses the potential diversity of debate and representation. These projects pursue the task of discursively identifying media hegemony in two ways. By critiquing and reworking the televisual form itself, these projects reposition what might otherwise be experienced as transparent meaning into a site of antagonism. By challenging the content of the mainstream media and introducing alternative perspectives on social reality, radical television invites viewers to reexamine and perhaps reformulate their existing viewpoints.

Radical television projects also assert the right of ordinary people to represent their own interests and perspectives in the television medium. Representation is a relatively new and problematic concept in democratic theory. While the ancient city-states of Greece and Rome theorized a more participatory and direct form of democracy, Liberal democratic societies have relied on representative government to solve the modern problem of scale that occurs in applying democratic processes to nation-states. Rule by elected representatives, rather than rule by the people, however, creates a schism between the theory and practice of democracy. Barber (1984, p. 145) argues that a system which allows a few chosen people to govern in all matters all of the time harms participation and citizenship by delegating and alienating the citizen's political will,

drastically reducing the scope and exercise of self-government, and destroying political autonomy. Likewise, Dahl (1989, p. 225) notes that representation reduces participation to the relatively passive acts of listening, thinking, and voting. Nonetheless, representative institutions and processes are a fact of life in modern democracies. According to Barber, if democratic societies are to strive toward fuller self-governance, they must increase citizens' abilities to represent themselves and their interests in some public matters at least some of the time. Radical media programs, such as *Labor Beat*, *Paper Tiger Television*, and *Deep Dish TV*, are motivated largely by the sense that their interests and viewpoints are not represented adequately in public debate. By encouraging workers to describe what is at stake in labor conflicts or health care activists to present alternative plans for health care reform, access television promotes a more participatory concept of democratic representation. Barber (1984, p. 117) sees this participatory process as essential to the formation of legitimate public opinion which depends on civic education and civic interaction to unite individuals in common purpose and action.

Finally, access television offers radical media projects the opportunity to utilize speech for a broader range of democratic purposes than mainstream media allow. Barber (1984, pp. 173-178) notes that if political speech is to support reasonable political judgment, it must be affective as well as cognitive and must serve as an impetus to action through its construction of alternative futures, purposes, and visions of community. He further notes that Liberal market societies tend to view politics as an adversarial process in which the role of speech is to exchange words "among competing individuals who seek to maximize their self-interests through market interaction" (Barber, 1984, p. 179). As a more participatory forum, access television broadens the possibilities for political communication to incorporate functions of speech considered more democratic by Barber. These include: grassroots formulation of issues and problems; the exploration of mutuality in thoughts, feelings, and experiences; affiliation and affection through the development of feelings, concerns, and empathy for others; maintaining autonomy by

consistently reexamining and repossessing one's convictions; expression of one's convictions, as well as dissent, frustration, and opposition; the reshaping of political terms and values through reformulation and reconceptualization; and community building through the creation of citizens capable of making informed political judgments. Radical media projects are overtly concerned with many of these speech functions. The projects examined here contribute to the definitions of problems and issues within local, national, and international communities; unite geographically-dispersed communities of interest; voice dissent against prevailing political opinion and policy; allow diverse groups to represent themselves and their interests; expose larger communities to a plurality of viewpoints and experiences; offer competing visions of the common good; entreat viewers to reexamine and reformulate their existing convictions; and challenge predominant political and cultural representations.

### **Rethinking Public Access Television**

Access television's legal and regulatory status remain precarious. While access television traditionally has operated as a public forum, the 1992 Cable Act called the public forum status of access television into question. The Act made cable operators, rather than the public, liable for programs containing indecency (Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992, 1992). In 1996 the U.S. Supreme Court repealed this legislation in *Denver Area Educational Telecommunications Consortium, Inc. v. Federal Communications Commission*. However, the Court refused to decide whether access television should be treated as a public forum in which programmers have free speech rights. Instead, the Court stated that the indecency rules were not applicable to public access channels because indecency had not been a problem on public access, and because cable operators traditionally had not exercised editorial control over these channels. The Court also maintained that public access was adequately supervised and that the new law impermissibly altered the relationships established by

municipal law, regulation and contract (*Denver Area Educ. Tel. v. FCC, 1996*).

Nevertheless, "obscene" or "indecent" programming, as well as hate speech, have tarnished access television's image, alienating potential public access supporters and prompting several communities to question the desirability of maintaining an access television station. The presence of this type of programming has been made possible by the policy of open access. While many radical media producers feel that without this policy their work might be censored or suppressed, there is no doubt that open access has been detrimental to both the substance and image of access television.

Besides the perennial problems of legal and regulatory status and public relations, access television harbors a number of structural limitations which prevent it from serving as a more effective resource for democratic communication. Political communication on access television is attenuated by an inadequate governmental provision of the resources necessary to produce and distribute programming; by the bias of localism; and by a lack of ties to larger spheres of discussion and debate.

Many public access centers provide channel space, training, and a moderate level of equipment and facilities. These centers do not provide administrative support for program publicity or for the distribution of programs beyond their local cable system. Publicizing programs is particularly important if shows are to find their intended audiences, and all of the projects examined here devote considerable resources toward developing and maintaining their audience. Distribution beyond the local cable system is necessary both for the financial survival of serious access television projects, as well as their political reach and effectiveness. Yet, most public access centers facilitate only show production, placing the burden of reaching the audience on the individual access television producer.

Perhaps the most critical and immediate problem for public access projects is funding. These projects rely on combinations of grants, donations, special fundraising events, and program sales and rentals for financial support. Although the costs of these

series are minuscule compared to their commercial media counterparts, they do demonstrate that the cost of access to the public sphere encompasses more than access to technology itself. The price of communication includes not only the cost of production and exhibition technology, but also the financing of labor, administration, distribution, and publicity. Garnham (1990, p. 65) points out, access to technology does not constitute "access to a mode of communication." The radical media case studies suggest that access television must be viewed holistically as set of resources which promote access to an audience and not simply to channel space or production equipment. In addition, some type of national program support is necessary if access television is to be effective and affordable. Such support might be funded through the extension of franchise fees or rents to all commercial communication industries which utilize public goods.

Another limitation of public access is that it is designed primarily to serve local communities. Radical media projects exhibit a range of strategies for overcoming the localism of access television. CLA, PTTV, and DDTV address topics and issues of national significance, incorporate work produced and edited by regionally-diverse individuals and groups, and aggressively promote widespread program distribution. While localism may further political participation within small communities, it cannot address the problem of scale which modern nation-states present to any democratic system. Representative democracy has consigned a large part of the political decisionmaking process to national, rather than local, representatives. Buying into the long-standing myth of the political effectiveness of the small community and the town meeting (Rowland, 1982, p. 6), early access television activists in the U.S. ignored the fact that much of the American political process operates through institutions organized at the level of the nation-state. Media produced in small communities may influence agenda setting or foster community building at a local level, but these media currently have no institutionalized means of reaching national audiences. Structuring access television to serve only the local community greatly underutilizes the medium.

The democratic potential of access television also suffers from its lack of supporting structural links to larger political communities and institutions which are themselves forums for opinion formation and which command social resources. Deep Dish TV's attempts to influence government policy debates and CLA's efforts to confront union bureaucracies with rank-and-file perspectives attempt to rectify this deficiency. Without concrete links to larger institutions, public access lacks a bridging mechanism for the translation of public criticism into political action in the policy realm. The development of stable mechanisms of support for the national distribution of grassroots media and the linking of access television to larger political and cultural forums will determine the ultimate effectiveness of access television as a tool for democratic social change.

### **Conclusion**

The public access television movement in the United States sought to create a democratic forum that would allow citizens to contribute more directly to the political and cultural lineaments of American society. The experience of radical media projects suggests that access television provides a genuine, if imperfect, public space for democratic communication. Groups, such as the Committee for Labor Access, Paper Tiger Television, and the Deep Dish Satellite Network, utilize access television to critique and comment upon commercial culture, to represent themselves and their viewpoints, and to employ political speech in ways that are both affective and cognitive. Yet, the greater democratic potential of access television is stymied by its insecure legal and regulatory status, its partial provision of the resources necessary to produce and distribute programming, its predominantly local orientation, and its marginalization as a sphere of public debate. Radical media projects have sought to overcome these limitations by obtaining outside funding and resources, instigating national networking activities, and positioning themselves in the sight of larger public forums. Advocates

wishing to restructure access television resources must try to foment change by building public awareness of the democratic potential and achievements of access television and by lobbying for a policy environment more conducive to democratic communication.

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<sup>1</sup>Todd Gitlin chronicles the debilitating effects of media framing on the 1960s New Left student movement in his book *The Whole World is Watching*. He defines media frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual" (Gitlin, 1980, 7).

<sup>2</sup>In 1968 the first consumer video camera, the Sony Portapak, went on the market. Barnouw (1993, 287-289) notes that consumer video equipment, with its relatively low cost and ease of operation, inspired production activity among a new and diverse range of people.

<sup>3</sup>Some notable projects not discussed in this study include: Dyke TV in New York city, a lesbian video collective whose programs are shown in over 60 cities across the country; Black Planet Productions (BPP) in New York City, a collective which produces *Not Channel Zero: The Revolution, Televised*, a news and cultural affairs program focusing on African American and Latino concerns; The Mirror Project in Somerville, Massachusetts, which encourages teenagers from diverse ethnic backgrounds to document their everyday life experiences; *Alternative Views* from Austin, Texas, a news and public affairs program which provides a radical information alternative to mainstream media; and Free Speech TV in Boulder, Colorado, a distribution network which sends progressive programming to more than 60 access channels nationwide.

<sup>4</sup>Approximately 40 labor shows appear regularly on local public access stations around the country (Alvarez, 1996, 7). Some other prominent labor shows on access include: *LaborVision* in St. Louis, Missouri; the *Labor Video Project* in San Francisco, California; *Labor at the Crossroads* in New York, New York; *Minnesota at Work* in Minneapolis, Minnesota; *This Working Life* in Southern California; *Arkansas Works* in Little Rock, Arkansas; and *Labor Link TV* in San Diego, California.

<sup>5</sup>Struggles that occurred in what the labor movement referred to as "the war zone" included the United Auto Workers (UAW) strike against Caterpillar, the United Rubber Workers strike against Bridgestone-Firestone, and the Staley Company's lockout of the United Paperworkers International Union (UPIU) in

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Decatur, Illinois; the UAW strike against Caterpillar in Peoria, Illinois; and United Mine Workers of America strike against Peabody Coal in Southern Illinois.

<sup>6</sup>Over the years, satellite groups have formed in San Francisco and San Diego, California, and in other locations. This study, however, refers only to the New York group. The satellite groups are not presumed to share the same organizational structure or even, necessarily, the same goals.

<sup>7</sup>This discussion of the current organizational changes at Deep Dish is based on interviews with Deep Dish personnel and on a report written by DeeDee Halleck for the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.