

PUBLIC ACCESS TELEVISION: *ALTERNATIVE VIEWS*

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A community will evolve only when a people control their own communications."
--Frantz Fanon

The rapid expansion of public access television in recent years provides new possibilities for progressive individuals and groups to produce video programming that cuts against the conservative programming that dominates mainstream television in the United States. Progressive access programming is now being cablecast regularly in such places as New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, Madison, Urbana, Austin, and perhaps as many as 1,200 other towns or regions of the country. In this article, I shall discuss public access television in the context of the new possibilities for left intervention in broadcast media which access television makes possible, and shall provide examples of progressive programming based on a media project that I am involved with here in Austin.¹

Cable, Public Access, and the Possibility of Left Intervention

When cable television began to be widely introduced in the early 1970s, the Federal Communications Commission mandated in 1972 that "beginning in 1972, new cable systems {and after 1977, all cable systems} in the 100 largest television markets be required to provide channels for government, for educational purposes, and most importantly, for public access."² This mandate suggested that cable systems should make available three public access channels to be used for state and local government, education, and community public access use. "Public access" was construed to mean that the cable company should make available equipment and air time so that literally anybody could make noncommercial use of the access channel, and say and do anything that they wished on a first-come, first-served basis, subject only to obscenity and libel laws. Creating an access system required, in many cases, setting up a local organization to manage the access channels, though in other systems the cable company itself managed the access center.

In the beginning, however, few, if any, cable systems made as many as three channels available, but some systems began offering one or two access channels in the early to mid 1970s. The availability of access channels depended, for the most part, on the political clout of local governments and committed, and often unpaid, local groups to convince the cable companies, almost all privately owned, to make available an access channel.³ Here in Austin, for example, a small group of video activists formed Austin Community Television in 1973 and began broadcasting with their own equipment through the cable system that year. Eventually, they received foundation and CETA government grants to support their activities, buy equipment, and pay regular employees salaries. A new cable contract signed in the early 1980s called for the cable company to provide \$500,000 a year for access and after a difficult political struggle, which I shall mention later, were able to get at least \$300,000-\$400,000 a year to support Austin Community Television activities.

A 1979 Supreme Court decision, however, struck down the 1972 FCC ruling on the grounds that the FCC didn't have the authority to mandate access, an authority which supposedly

belongs to the U.S. Congress.⁴ Nonetheless, cable was expanding so rapidly and becoming such a high-growth competitive industry that city governments considering cable systems were besieged by companies making lucrative offers (20 to 80 channel cable systems) and were able to negotiate access channels and financial support for a public access system. Consequently, public access grew significantly during the early 1980s.

Where there are operative public access systems, individuals have promising, though not sufficiently explored, possibilities to produce and broadcast their own television programs. Here in Austin, for example, there have been weekly anti-nuclear programs, black and chicano series, gay programs, countercultural and anarchist programs, an atheist program, occasional feminist programs, labor programming, and a weekly Left news magazine, Alternative Views which has produced over 500 hour-long programs from 1978 to the present on a wide variety of topics.

Two surveys, one undertaken by the cable company, and another commissioned by it, indicate that from 20,000 to 30,000 Austin viewers watch our show each week, and that public access programming in general receives about 4.7% of the audience; a recent cable company survey indicated that the viewership of access was on a par with the local PBS station. National surveys of viewer preferences for cable programs also indicate that public access is a high priority for many viewers.⁵ Thus there is definitely a receptive and growing audience for public access television, and the possibility of making alternative television programs by the Left should be a much higher priority for radical media politics.

Alternative Views

The program that I've been involved with, Alternative Views, has gained a national reputation and a large and loyal audience. We began in 1978 with little television experience and no resources, but immediately began producing a weekly program, using video equipment and tapes at the University of Texas, and the broadcast and editing facilities of Austin Community Television. In fact, a group wishing to make access programming need have no technical experience or even financial resources to begin producing public access television where there is an access system in place that will make available equipment, technical personnel, and video tapes. A very few systems charge money for use of facilities, or charge a fee for use of air time, but due to competitive bidding between cable systems in the 1980s for the most lucrative franchises, many cable systems offer free use of equipment, personnel, and air time, and occasionally they even provide videotapes free. In these situations, radicals can make use of public access facilities without technical expertise, television experience, or financial resources.

Many public access systems also offer training programs concerning how to use the media if a group or individual wants to make their own programs from conception through final editing. And the costs of equipment have been rapidly declining so that it is possible for some groups to even purchase their own video equipment. For the first two years the Alternative Views group literally made the program on a zero budget, using University of Texas and Austin Community Television tapes and equipment. For the next several years, we raised from \$2,000-\$5,000 a year so that we can own the tapes and make copies available to sympathetic groups. Through the imagination and efforts of our chief fundraiser, Mike Jankowski, we obtained tax-exempt, non-profit status and have applied to various foundations for grants to expand our operation. These efforts succeeded and we are now being shown in over 40 different access systems around the country and now must raise around \$6,000 a year to support the project.

Eventually, we wish to own our own equipment but for now we are able to make a weekly program using equipment available to the community. Thus progressive groups can often make use now of video equipment belonging to supportive groups or institutions, and can produce video programs for public access television and other projects on a very low budget. Indeed, financing a public access video project often requires far less money than many print media projects. Consequently, the costs of producing video tapes for public access is not necessarily prohibitive, and groups who want to explore the possibilities of producing alternative television should look into the availability of equipment in their area, or the costs of buying their own tapes and equipment.

From the beginning we were convinced that, despite little previous television experience, we were making programs that were of interest to the community and that we were gaining an appreciative audience. On our first program in October 1978 we had an Iranian student as guest who discussed opposition to the Shah and the possibility of his overthrow, and had a detailed discussion of the Sandinista movement struggling to overthrow Somoza--weeks before the national broadcast media discovered these movements. We then had two programs on nuclear energy and energy alternatives--topics that later became central for the US Left with, among other guests, Austinite Ray Reece whose book The Sun Betrayed (South End Press, 1980) later became a definitive text on corporate control and suppression of solar energy. On early shows we also had long interviews with former Senator Ralph Yarborough, a Texas progressive responsible for much legislation, like the National Defense Education Act, and learned that he had never been interviewed before in depth for television. We also had an electrifying two-hour, two-part interview with former CIA official John Stockwell, who told how he had been recruited into the CIA at the University of Texas. Stockwell discussed CIA recruitment, indoctrination, activities and his own experiences in Africa, Vietnam, and then Angola which led him to quit the CIA and write his book In Search of Enemies which exposed the Angola operation which he had been in charge of. Stockwell then went into a long history of CIA abuses and his arguments for why he thought that the CIA should be shut down and a new intelligence service developed.

We also presented a regular news section that utilized material from mostly non-mainstream news sources to provide stories ignored by establishment media, or interpretations of events different from the mainstream. We got tremendously positive responses for our show, and began regularly taping interviews with people who visited Austin as well as with local activists involved in various struggles. We began varying our format using documentary films, slide shows, raw video footage, and other visual material to enhance the visual aspect of our program. In addition, one of our members, Frank Morrow, became skilled at editing and developed some impressive montages of documentary and interview material to illustrate the topics being discussed.

Once the project got underway, we had little difficulty finding topics, people, or resources. We discovered that anyone we wished to interview was happy to come on our program, and after we began gaining recognition, local groups and individuals called us regularly to provide topics, speakers, films or other video material. We encouraged some local groups to make their own weekly shows and there have been a variety of peace, countercultural, gay, anti-nuke, chicano, anti-klan, and other groups that have done so. And we have continued to serve as an umbrella organization which has produced programs for over one hundred local groups, using their speakers and film or video materials.

Over the years we have also had hour-long interviews with anti-war and anti-nuclear activists like Helen Caldicott, George Wald, Ramsey Clark, Daniel Ellsberg, Michael Klare, David Dellinger, and many representatives of the European peace movement; we have had interviews with US New Left activists like David MacReynolds, Stokely Carmichael, Greg Calvert, and Dr. Spock; many feminists, gays, union activists, and representatives of local progressive groups have appeared on our show; and officials from the Soviet Union, Nicaragua, Allende's former government in Chile, the democratic front in El Salvador, and many other Third World countries and revolutionary movements have appeared on our show. In addition, we have shown many documentaries and films which various filmmakers and groups have provided for us, and have made some video documentaries ourselves on a variety of topics. Further, we have received raw video footage of the bombing of Lebanon and aftermath of the massacres at Sabra and Shatilla, of the assassinations of five communist labor organizers by the Ku Klux Klan in Greensboro, North Carolina, and of counterrevolutionary activity in Nicaragua.

Most of this material would not be shown on network television, or would be severely cut and censored, thus the only real possibility today of having alternative television is through the public access/cable television. Obviously, progressive groups who want to carry through access projects need to develop a sustained commitment to radical media politics and explore local possibilities for intervention. We began here with a small group, mostly of graduate students, and, given the high degree of turnover in a university community, only two of us have been active throughout the entire project. Over the years, we have had several individuals working with us regularly, helping us with production, fundraising, publicity, and other projects.⁶ The first few years we had some internal conflicts concerning topics, format, organization, etc. but worked through these problems and have functioned rather smoothly in our internal politics during the last few years. External problems, however, have emerged, both here in Austin and elsewhere in the United States that I shall call attention to in the conclusion.

Public Access Television: Problems and Challenges

Once progressive public access television became more wide spread and popular here in Austin it was, of course, subject to political counter-attacks. The establishment daily newspaper in town, for instance, The Austin American-Statesman, published frequent denunciations of public access television to the effect that it was controlled by the "lunatic" fringe of "socialists, atheists, and radicals" and was not representative of the community as a whole--a lie since many conservative church groups, business groups, and political groups also make use of access. The allegedly poor technical quality was attacked along with the "irresponsibility" of many of the programs (in fact, technical quality has been constantly improving). In 1983, these criticisms were repeated in editorials and in articles on Austin Community Television in the more liberal monthly magazines Texas Monthly and Third Coast. At this point, the criticisms became threatening since Austin Community Television was applying for a five-year renewal of its contract as access manager, and certain interests in the community were attempting to eliminate ACTV and find another access manager and system controlled by city government and local media interests. After an intense political struggle, the city cable commission and city council approved the renewal of the Austin Community Television access management, and for the time being our access system remains in the control of the community and open to whoever wants to use it, either on a regular basis or occasional basis.

Struggles like these indicate that the Left can successfully mobilize coalitions and alliances and be an effective force in local politics. Here in Austin, a "progressive coalition" has

successfully beaten business-oriented candidates in city council elections and has won referendums on community issues in over half of the electoral struggles in the last five years or so--whereas business interests previously completely dominated local politics. One progressive politician, who had been on our program in a couple of his campaigns, won election to the city council in 1987 on a budget of around \$14,000 and made considerable use of access television.

Other US cities have not been so fortunate. The cable company in San Diego reportedly took over their access center after gaining a long-term renewal of their contract; a company recently bought out the San Antonio cable company and threatened to refuse to honor the terms of the previous contract which mandated several access channels; Warner Communications in Dallas threatened to renege on earlier contract obligations, and then sold the franchise creating an uncertain access situation; and many cable companies have never provided access channels while others rigidly control the access channels and would probably not permit a program like Alternative Views to be broadcast. And we have also heard many stories recently of cable companies taking over access and leasing the time to commercial interests rather than making it available to community groups.

Many cities do have relatively open access channels, however, and where it is possible the Left should start using this vehicle of political communication and should start attempting to develop a national public access network where tapes can be exchanged and circulated. Beginnings in this direction have been discussed among various groups, including our own, which has now developed a national network. We began in Spring 1984 distributing Alternative Views program tapes to access TV contacts in Dallas and San Antonio, and in Fall 1984 we added Fayetteville, Atlanta, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, and Urbana, Illinois to our evolving network. We then made contact with access systems and groups in other cities all around the United States and have been shown in New York, Boston, Portland, San Diego, Marin County, California, Fairfax and Arlington Virginia, Cincinnati, San Francisco, Columbus, Ohio, New Haven, and many other cities.

This project involves contacting local groups or members of the access center who are interested in sponsoring our program on a regular weekly basis, and duplicating and sending packages of five tapes to access systems in these cities. {In fact, groups or individuals who would be interested in sponsoring our program in their areas are invited to write us at the address below, and we would also like to hear from individuals or groups who have programs that they would like to include in our series, or who have ideas about a possible progressive access network.} Administering the project has required the heroic labor of Frank Morrow who has managed to provide as many as thirty different access centers with our tapes and to keep track of what has gone where.

In discussions with Dee Dee Halleck of Paper Tiger Television in New York at the Union for Democratic Communications conference in Washington in October 1984, several access groups explored the possibility of leasing weekly satellite time so that progressive access programming could be beamed all over the country. This would mean that the millions of people who have home satellite receivers could see our and other progressive public access programming; in addition, such a project could write and call various access systems around the country to try to get them to cablecast the program, or to tape and replay it later, which could be sent up by satellite on a weekly basis. Preliminary inquiries suggest that renting satellite time for access programming is not prohibitively expensive, so that a grant of around \$10,000 or \$15,000

a year might make it possible for hundreds of thousands of people all over the country to receive progressive television in their homes.

During 1985-1986, Paper Tiger Television received grants that made possible a ten-week satellite access project, Deep Dish TV, which broadcast via satellite ten programs on such topics as militarism, agriculture, racism, Central America, children's TV, etc. to access systems and private dishes all over the country. Hopefully, this effort will eventually lead to a Left satellite channel to compete with the multitude of religious, business, and other satellite channels that tend to present the ideologies and agendas of the Right--if access centers could be convinced to carry the program, and indeed Paper Tiger claims that over 300 systems carried their Deep Dish TV series. I would like to conclude, therefore, with some comments on how the Left might make use of public access television in situations in which there already exists cable television and at least the technical potential for public access.

How to Produce Local Access Programming

First, groups must explore the availability of an access channel and approach the people in charge of it. Proposals should be made concerning the type of programming that the group wants to produce, and the group must see if equipment, training, and tapes are available to use. Many video activists and public access systems are more open to Leftist projects than the establishment media (this is, at least, the US experience as radicals have regularly produced programs in such places as Austin, New Orleans, New York, Madison, Pittsburgh, Appalachia, Montana, etc.). If an access system exists, alliances must be made with access and video people and then the projects should be developed.

Next, a group must decide if they wish only to produce occasional programs or develop a regular weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly series. We began producing weekly one-hour programs as soon as we got the access channel to agree to cablecast our program, and developed our programming organization, philosophy, and projects as we went on. In some cases, it might, however, be better to have more fully developed projects outlined before one begins. We do believe, however, that it is best to attempt to undertake a weekly program, played at the same day and time every week, in order to build up an audience. Talk show format is, of course, the easiest to adopt and might make a good beginning though more imaginative uses of video should be developed as experience and expertise expand. Many groups and individuals are happy to provide copies of their films and video cassettes for broadcast on public access, and this is also a good way to begin if the films and duplicating equipment are available. Then as the project progresses, the group may want to begin developing its own documentaries and perhaps to mix documentary, film, and discussion formats through editing in titles, slides and other images, to make use of the video format.

Once the project gets underway, the group should consider incorporating as a nonprofit corporation and applying for tax-exempt status from the IRS, which helps in fundraising activities (as donations are tax-deductible) and makes possible purchase of nonprofit bulk-mailing permits, which can be useful for fundraising and communicating with the audience by mail. We have regular fundraising benefits, solicit contributions, have a support group which contributes money to us yearly, and apply for various local and national foundation grants. A steering committee of the Alternative Information Network (our umbrella organization which Mike Jankowski founded) meets to discuss finances, programming, and the political effects of the program. We have regular fundraisers and people who help us with publicity, and those most

active in producing the program on a weekly basis meet regularly to plan programming and to attempt to improve the show. Frank Morrow and I regularly produce the show and do the interviewing, a revolving group of people provide news reports from left media and regular in-depth analysis of issues such as US policy in Central America, the arms race, the CIA and FBI, civil liberties, and other issues of importance, and a support group helps us with publicity, fundraising and the like.

To make such a project possible, however, requires the full-time commitment of one or more individuals like Frank Morrow who produces the program, and who does the editing, provides liason with Austin Community Television, manages the access network, and promotes and works on the program in a variety of ways. Such sustained commitment is necessary to ensure the success of an access series, as are contacts and cooperation with local political groups and individuals, who regularly contact us and send representatives to discuss their local organizing and political efforts.

Indeed, we do not see our program as a substitute for political organization and struggle, but rather as a vehicle for local political groups to use the media to provide information about their struggles and to involve people in their efforts. Almost every group of the more than one hundred who have appeared on our Alternative Views programs reports that they receive many phone calls and letters indicating interest in their activities and that appearing on public access television is a useful organizing and recruiting tool. We also show our tapes in high schools, on the university campus, and make them available to local groups. Our tapes on Central America, for instance, have been frequently shown in churches and elsewhere as part of educational and organizing efforts, and we make our tapes available to groups who want to use them for organizing and educational purposes. We also make ourselves and those who appear on our program available to groups to discuss the issues we deal with, specific programs, or public access television itself, and have been asked to appear on panels at conferences all over the country. Thus we see public access programming as a useful tool for political education and organizing that goes beyond broadcasting and reaches into community politics and organizing.

To conclude: Public access television is still in a relatively early stage of development here in the US and is just beginning in Europe. Despite either the absence of public access or obstacles to its use in some parts of the country, where it exists it provides the one opening in the commercial and state broadcasting systems that is at least potentially open for Left intervention. Thus progressive groups and individuals who wish to communicate their ideas and visions to a mass audience should consider how they might use public access television in politically progressive ways. It is defeatist and self-defeating simply to dismiss broadcast media as tools of manipulation and to think that print media are the only tools of communication open to the Left. For most people get their news and information from television which plays a decisive role in defining political realities, shaping public opinion, and determining what is real and legitimate, and what is not to be taken seriously or is to be viewed negatively. If the Left wants to play a role in US political life, we must come to terms with the realities of electronic communication and develop strategies to make use of new technologies and possibilities for intervention. Surveys have shown that people take more seriously individuals, groups, and politics that appear on TV, and progressive use of television will thus help progressive movements and struggles gain legitimacy and force in the shifting and contradictory field of US politics. The Right has been making effective use of new technologies and media of communication and for the Left to remain distant from broadcast media, or to contemptuously dismiss television, is a luxury that the Left can no longer afford. The current situation of the breakup of Reaganism confronts the Left

with both new challenges and dangers, and if we want to survive and expand, we must increase our mass base and circulate our struggles to more segments of the population. There are, of course, risks that time and energies spent in other projects may be lost in frustrating media politics; but the risks should be taken if the Left wants to grow during the 1980s and 1990s begin to intervene more effectively in the changing technological and political environment of the future.

Notes

*Thanks to Judith Burton, John Hess, Mike Jankowski, Les Levidow, and, especially, Frank Morrow for detailed comments on earlier drafts which helped with revisions. The Alternative Information Network has been amassing material concerning radical media politics and progressive use of public access television and other new media of communication for production of a future book on these topics. Readers who have material on these topics, or who would like to correspond with us, can write us: Alternative Information Network, PO Box 7279, Austin, Texas 78713. [2002: This project, like many alternative media projects, has disbanded.]

1. For an earlier discussion of the need for a radical media politics and intervention in the broadcast media, see Kellner, 1979 and 1981; Downing, 1984; and Mattelart/Siegelaub, 1979 and 1983. The latter collections contain a vast amount of material on left media politics and projects; unfortunately, there is no interventionist consideration of the potential progressive uses of public access television.

2. On the early history of access in the United States, see Shapiro, 1976. On the history of alternative media, see Armstrong, 1981. On attempts by the broadcast industries and government to suppress access, and for liberal proposals for a more democratic communications system, see Johnson, 1970.

3. A directory of access systems put out by the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers, The Video Register, 1983-84 claims that there are over 700 access facilities operative in the United States. Some of these systems, however, are limited to a channel which present teletype of time, weather, and announcements of local activities. Thus, it is quite difficult to ascertain how many full-blown access centers are operative; it is clear, however, that the number is growing.

4. On the 1979 Supreme Court decision, see Koenig, 1979.

5. A survey by the ELRA Group of East Lansing, Michigan indicates that access is rated the fifth most popular category of television programming (ahead of sports, women's and children's programs, religious programs, etc.); and that 63% of those surveyed had an interest in access programming. Local surveys in Austin have confirmed that access programs have a potentially large audience.

6. Those who wish to support this project, can send tax-deductible donations to the Alternative Information Network, PO Box 7279, Austin, TX 78713. [2002: The project is now disbanded]

7. It is difficult to get up-to-date information on the state of local access projects. Journals like Access, The Independent, Alternative Media, Community Television Review and newsletters

like those published by The National Federation of Local Cable Programmers and other local access groups have some material, but it is hard to get an overview. Material on ten access projects in the mid-1970s is surveyed in Anderson, 1975, which also has suggestions on how to develop grass roots video projects. Material on early access projects can be found in issues of Radical Software (1970-1975), in Shamberg, 1971, and Frederiksen, 1972; a good review and critique of these projects is found in Jacobson, 1974). Suggestions on how to set up an access system and provide quality community programming is found in Price and Wicklein, 1972); information on setting up a community media center is found in Zelmer, 1979; and a booklet by Ianacone, n.d. provides "A Citizens Guide to Forming a Media Access Group" though it does not really focus on how to develop a public access program. The National Federation of Local Cable programmers also provides guides concerning how to produce access television as do some other sources. We would appreciate receiving copies of such guides as frequently people write us and ask us for material on how to set up an access center or how to produce an access program, and we are forced to refer them to material which might not be up-to-date or directly relevant to their interests.

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