

PUBLIC ACCESS TELEVISION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

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

Genuine democracy requires the participation of individuals in matters of concern to their common social and political life. During an era in which mass media of communication arbitrate political and social reality and wield tremendous power over how individuals see the world and live their lives, the democratization of the media becomes an issue of paramount importance. Democratic media require media that further democracy and that allow individuals access to their fellow citizens. Genuine democracy requires individuals who, minimally, are informed concerning the political issues and processes in their country, and, maximally, who participate in public debate and decision-making. One could argue that in the United States today, neither of these preconditions are met and that the U.S. is thus suffering a crisis of democracy (Kellner 1990).

In this article, I shall argue that public access television provides one of the few real existing possibilities for alternative television, and the best possibility for using the broadcast media to serve the interests of popular democracy. I will draw upon over ten years as an activist in public access television and will attempt to show how access television can be used to promote genuine democracy.

Public Access Television

The rapid expansion of public access television in recent years provides new possibilities for progressives to counter the conservative programming that dominates mainstream television. Innovative access programming is now being cablecast regularly in New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, Madison, Austin, and perhaps as many as 1,200 other towns or regions throughout the country.

When cable television was widely introduced in the early 1970s, the Federal Communications Commission mandated 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." This mandate suggested that cable systems should make available three public access channels for state and local government, education, and community 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 in order to say or do anything that they wished on a first-come, first-serve basis, subject only to obscenity and libel laws. Managing the access channel required, in many cases, setting up a local organization to manage the access system, though in other cases the cable company itself managed the access center, providing the equipment and personal to make access programming.

In the beginning, few, if any, cable systems made as many as three channels available. Some systems, however, began offering one or two in the early to mid 1970s. For the most part, the availability of access channels depend 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 access channels available. In Austin, Texas, for example, a small group of video activists formed Austin Community Television in 1973 and began cablecasting 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, the access system was able to get at least \$300,000-\$400,000 a year to support Austin Community Television activities.

In 1979, however, a Supreme Court decision struck down the 1972 FCC ruling on the grounds that the agency didn't have the authority to mandate access -- an authority which supposedly belongs to the U.S. Congress (@U(FCC vs. Midwest Video Cor., 440 U.S. 689), discussed in Koenig 1979). 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 of 20 to 80 channel cable systems; in such an atmosphere, city governments were able to negotiate access channels and financial support for a public access system. Consequently, public access grew significantly during the 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, feminist programs, labor programming, and a weekly progressive news magazine, @U(Alternative Views) which has produced over 400 hour-long programs from 1978 to the present on a wide variety of topics, providing a conduit for "alternative views" usually excluded from the broadcasting spectrum.

Alternative Views

Alternative Views began in 1978 and while the producers had little television experience and no resources, we immediately began producing a weekly program by using video equipment and tapes at the University of Texas, as well as 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 access programming where there is an access system in place that will make available equipment, technical personnel, and video tapes. A few systems charge money for use of facilities, or 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; occasionally they even provide free videotapes. 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 original conception through final editing. The costs of equipment have also been rapidly declining, so that it is possible for some groups to even purchase their own video equipment (I provide details on how to organize public access production later in this paper).

From the beginning, those of us involved in @U(Alternative Views) were convinced that our programs would prove of interest to the community and indeed we gained a large and loyal audience. @+{2} On our first program in October 1978, our guest was an Iranian student who discussed opposition to the Shah and the possibility of his overthrow; we also had a detailed discussion of how the Sandinista movement was struggling to overthrow Somoza -- weeks before the national broadcast media discovered these movements. We then had two programs on nuclear energy and energy alternatives with, among other guests, Austinite Ray Reece whose book @U(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 legislation like the National Defense Education Act, and we learned that he had never been interviewed before in depth for television. We 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 @U(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 provided arguments why he thought that the CIA should be shut down and a new intelligence service developed.

Other exciting interviews included discussions with American Atheist founder Madalyn Murray O'Hair who expounded her views on religion at length and told of how she successfully produced lawsuits to eliminate prayer from schools, thus preserving the constitutional separation between church and state; with Benjamin Spock who discussed the evolution of his theories of child-rearing, his political radicalization, and his adventures in the 1960s as a anti-war activist; with the former Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Ture) who discussed his 1960s militancy and theories of black power, his experiences in Africa, and his perspectives on world revolution; and with Nobel Prize winner George Wald, former attorney general Ramsey Clark, anti-nuclear activist Helen Caldicott, and many other well-known intellectuals, activists, and social critics.

As our connections grew, we began receiving documentaries from various filmmakers and began to mix a documentary and talk-show format. 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 received very positive responses to 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 almost 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, women's and other groups that have done so. Indeed, we have continued to serve as an umbrella organization for over one hundred local groups, using their speakers and film or video materials to produce programs.

Aside from the hour-long interviews with those nationally known individuals already mentioned, other feminists, gays, union activists, and representatives of local progressive groups have appeared on our show as guests. We have also carried through in-depth interviews with 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. In addition to the documentaries and films which various filmmakers and groups have provided for us, we 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, of daily life in the liberated zones of El Salvador, and of counterrevolutionary activity in Nicaragua.

Most of this material would not have been shown on network television, or would have been severely cut and censored. Consequently, at present, it is probably true that the best existing possibility for producing 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, Frank Morrow and myself, 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. The first few years we had some internal conflicts concerning topics, format, organization, etc. but we worked through these problems and have functioned rather smoothly in our internal politics during the last few years. Nevertheless, external problems have emerged, both here in Austin and elsewhere in the United States which I shall address in the next section.

Public Access Television: Problems and Challenges

Once progressive public access television became more wide spread and popular here in Austin it became subject to political counter-attacks. The establishment daily monopoly newspaper, @U(The Austin American-Statesman), published frequent denunciations of public access television, claiming that it was controlled by the "lunatic" fringe of "socialists, atheists, and radicals" and was not representative of the community as a whole -- an interesting claim 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 @U(Texas Monthly) and @U(Third Coast). Representatives of these publications wanted themselves to get part of the access pie and thus attacked the group currently in control -- as did some members of the local public broadcasting system.

Eventually, 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 substitute 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. For the time being, then, the community remains in control of the access system which is open to whoever wants to use it, either on a regular or occasional basis. The Austin system of access has been nationally recognized as a model for other communities and in 1986 was awarded recognition as the best cable access system by the National Association of Local Cable Programmers; the same year @U(Alternative Views) was recognized by the same organization for producing the best public affairs access program in the United States. And in 1989, Frank Morrow and myself were awarded the Stoney prize for our contributions to access television -- a yearly award in honor of George Stoney, an NYU communications professor often considered the father of public access television.

Other U.S. cities have not been so fortunate. @+{3} The cable company in San Diego reportedly took over the access center after gaining a long-term renewal of their contract; a company recently bought out the San Antonio cable company and threatened to deny the terms of a previous contract which had 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; X system in X shut down their access system completely; and many cable companies have never provided access channels while others rigidly control the access channels and would probably not permit a program like @U(Alternative Views) to be cablecast. In addition, cable companies have taken over access and leased the time to commercial interests rather than make it available to community groups (such as the X system in X).

But many cities @U(do) have relatively open access channels, and where possible, progressives should start using this vehicle of political communication with an eye toward developing a national public access network in which 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 access network. We began in Spring 1984 distribution 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 to our evolving network. We then made contact with access systems and groups in 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 counties in Virginia, Cincinnati, San Francisco, Columbus, Chicago, New Haven, Durham, 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. Administering the project has required the heroic labor of Frank Morrow who has managed to provide as many as forty--plus different access centers with our tapes and to keep track of what programs have been distributed to the various centers to avoid duplication and to provide variety. {In fact, groups or individuals who would be interested in sponsoring our program in their areas are invited to write us at the address in note 3, 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.}

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 with home satellite receivers could watch progressive public access programming. Preliminary inquiries suggest that renting satellite time for access programming is not prohibitively expensive, so that a grant of around \$100,000 or \$150,000 a year might yet 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, a New York based access project founded by DeeDee Halleck, 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 which can compete with the multitude of religious, business, and other satellite outlets that tend to present the ideologies and agendas of the Right. In addition, however, access centers must be convinced to carry progressive access program; this has indeed proved possible, for Paper Tiger claims that over 300 systems carried their Deep Dish TV series. A second season of Deep-Dish television was also attempted and produced a new series of programs on selected topics, produced by various access groups around the country from material submitted.

I would like to discuss next, therefore, some of the ways in which individuals might make use of public access television in situations where there already exists cable television and at least the technical potential for public access.

How to Produce Local Access Programming

First, individuals and groups must explore the availability of an access channel and approach the people in charge of it. The individuals and group should make clear what type of programming they want to produce, and inquiries should be made concerning what equipment, training, and tapes are available from the access center. Next, a group must decide if they wish only to produce occasional programs or develop a regular weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly series. @U(Alternative Views) began immediately producing weekly one-hour programs, and we developed our programming organization, philosophy, and projects as we went on. In some cases, however, it might be better to have more fully developed projects outlined before one begins.

In many ways, it is preferable, however, to undertake a weekly program, played at the same day and time every week, in order to build up an audience. A talk show format is, of course, the easiest to adopt even though more imaginative uses of video might be developed as experience and expertise expand. Paper Tiger Television in New York, for example, combines critique of various types of corporate media by media critics with imaginative sets, visuals, editing, etc. A labor-oriented program, @U(The Mill Hunk News), in Pittsburgh combines

news reports of labor issues with documentary interviews with workers, music-videos, and other creative visuals.

A progressive alternative television project can also draw on the many progressive films and videos already produced. Many groups and individuals are happy to provide copies of their films and video cassettes for broadcast on public access, and if the films and duplicating equipment are available, this is also a good way to begin. Then, as the project progresses, the group may want to begin developing its own documentaries and perhaps mix documentary, film, and discussion formats through editing in titles, slides and other images, in order 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. This will help in fundraising activities since the donations then become tax-deductible; it also makes possible the purchase of nonprofit bulk-mailing permits, which can be useful for fundraising and communicating with the audience by mail. An access project can be funded through have regular benefits, solicitation of contributions, various local and national foundation grants. A few access systems actually pay for programming but this is unfortunately a rare exception. Indeed, developing progressive access systems will eventually involve struggling for funding from the access system and the city government. Then, members of access groups could be paid for their activity and they would have a budget to purchase cassettes of films and video programming from independent producers. In this way, both public access television and independent film and video could be established on a financially secure foundation.

Of course, public access television is not a substitute for political organization and struggle, but is rather a vehicle for participants and local political groups to provide information about their activities and to involve people in their efforts. Almost every group of the more than one hundred who have appeared on @U(Alternative Views) programs report that they have received many phone calls and letters indicating interest in their group and that appearing on public access television was a useful organizing and recruiting tool. Public access videotapes can also be made available to high schools, the university campus, churches, and other 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 specific issues, programs, or public access television itself. We regularly appear as well on panels at conferences all over the country to discuss public access. Thus we see public access programming as a useful tool for political education and organizing that goes beyond regular broadcasting by reaching into community politics and organizing.

While public access television is still in a relatively early stage of development here in the U.S., and is just beginning in Europe, it contains the promise of providing a different type of alternative television. Despite obstacles to its use, public access provides the one opening in the commercial and state broadcasting systems that is at least potentially open to progressive intervention. It is self-defeating simply to dismiss broadcast media as tools of manipulation and to think that print media are the only tools of communication and political education open to

progressives. 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 U.S. politics. The Right has been making effective use of new technologies and media of communication, and for progressives to remain aloof is a luxury that they can no longer afford. The possible breakup of conservative hegemony of the 1980s confronts progressives with both new challenges and dangers. But if the Left is to produce a genuine alternative to the Right, progressives must increase their mass base and circulate their struggles to more segments of the population. After all, most people get their news and information from television, and the broadcast media arguably play a decisive role in defining political realities, shaping public opinion, and determining what is or what is not to be taken seriously. If progressives want to play a role in U.S. political life, they must come to terms with the realities of electronic communication and develop strategies to make use of new technologies and possibilities for intervention.

There are, of course, risks that time and energies spent in other projects may be lost in occasionally frustrating media politics. But these risks must be taken if progressives want to intervene more effectively in the changing technological and political environment of the future. And so to ensure that we get the full free flow of information that an informed democratic citizenry needs to participate intelligently in the political process, I believe that we need an expanded system of public access television which could be funded from revenues received from cable systems (as is currently the case in Austin, Texas and elsewhere in the country). In fact, even more spectacular alternatives exist in the new satellite television technology and other new information technologies which contain the potential for a greatly expanded democratic communication system.

Satellite Television and Some Utopian Proposals

During the mid-1980s, there was a rapid growth of the SS television industry. In 1986, however, the SS networks began scrambling programs so that individuals were forced to buy decoders and pay monthly subscription rates. While this development significantly slowed down the growth of the SS television industry, still there are more than two-and-a-half million SS dishes operative in the U.S., and satellite television continues to provide a technological foundation for a national system of alternative television, for a democratic, innovative, and diverse television system. A combination of cable and satellite technologies would make possible the creation of a truly excellent system of communications. But this would require an immediate halt to satellite scrambling and allow a free flow of information and entertainment to satellite dishes. While the U.S. government has consistently followed a communications policy in the field of international communications based in a "free flow of information" policy, the government has not allowed a free flow to its own citizens by sanctioning scrambling. The scrambling process has gone so far, that even most PBS channels have scrambled, as have the American Arms Forces Services television, as well as some CBS transponders. Why the government would want to scramble its own services makes no sense whatsoever, nor is it clear how it is in the "public interest" to allow the scrambling of network television, or for that matter any television channels. Once again, commercial interests ride roughshod over the public

interest with the FCC and Congress sanctioning the process or sitting by and allowing the most powerful corporate interests to control the communications spectrum.

Reversal of this process and the allowing of an unscrambled satellite system, however, would make possible a truly diverse and plural system of broadcasting. And so here is my proposal: in an age of cable and satellite television, with over 60% of the nation wired for cable and with over two and a half million homes with satellite dishes, why not make a satellite transponder available to various groups who want to broadcast their political views and information. There could be a public interest satellite channel -- provided to representative groups free of charge -- so that democrats, republicans, labor, blacks, hispanics, women, gays, and any number of other groups could present their political views and programs everyday. Once all representative groups with a specified number of members or supporters were given an opportunity to use the satellite channel, time could be allotted according to the number of members in the group applying for access. This national political channel could then be picked up by every cable system in the country and people could be assured of getting real debate over issues of public concern.

Since I am not a free marketeer, I would imagine that to be effective such a channel would have to be legislated as a required channel for cable systems to broadcast to ensure its maximum distribution. This would be easy to implement and relatively inexpensive to maintain as every cable company in the country has satellite reception dishes and most have satellite transmission dishes which could be used by the various groups of the public interest satellite channel free of charge. Eventually, the channel could be expanded to make possible a genuine public interest system of democratic communications. The government could dedicate an entire satellite to public broadcasting and make available the twenty-four transponders currently on each satellite to the various groups which would constitute the public broadcasting system. This would require that individuals had home satellite dishes but this too is viable as prices would inevitably fall. Such a revitalized and democratized public broadcasting system could greatly expand the current spectrum of ideas and information and would allow voices so far excluded from the media to discuss issues of interest and importance.

So here are the steps needed to transform and democratize our broadcast system: 1) expand and democratize the current public broadcasting system; 2) expand and strengthen the public access system; 3) use cable and satellite television to produce new public broadcasting channels open to groups currently excluded from national communication; and 4) develop an entire satellite and cable system of broadcasting which would allow every group, alternative voice, and political opinion to be broadcast. Steps 1 and 2 could be undertaken immediately and steps 3 and 4 are both technologically and financially feasible. Yet developing such an alternative democratic communications system would require educating the public and government about the real possibilities for democratic communication inherent in cable and satellite television.

If we do not radically transform our media system, things will only get worse. The rule of the slick, the manipulators, and the handlers will continue and our democracy will be further imperiled. In the words of Max Weber: "The question is: how are freedom and democracy in the long run possible at all under the domination of highly developed capitalism? Freedom and

democracy are only possible where the resolute will of a nation not to allow itself to be ruled like sheep is permanently alive. We are 'individualists' and partisans of 'democratic' institutions 'against the stream' of material constellations" (Weber in Gerth and Mills 1975: 71).

Indeed, the very future of democracy is at stake and requires development of a democratic communications system to be revitalized and even survive. If radical transformation of the system of communications and broadcasting is not undertaken immediately, democracy in the United States will become even more imperilled and segments of the society are going to be condemned to a Third World information order, lacking access to information, communications, and social power. Indeed, empowering individuals to participate in a democratic society must be an important part of a democratic communications system.

Other possibilities for expanding a system of democratic communications reside in new computer and information technologies. Indeed, it is possible that there will be a merger of entertainment and information centers in the homes of the future with all possible print media information accessible by computer and all visual media entertainment and information resources available for home computer/entertainment center access. But the threat -- and likelihood -- is that this information and entertainment material will be thoroughly commodified, available only to those who can afford to pay. Consequently, it is necessary to begin devising public alternatives to these private/corporate information/entertainment systems of the future.

Given the growing importance of computers and information in the new techno-capitalist society, new information networks and systems must therefore be an essential ingredient of a progressive communication system. The computerization of America is well underway and possibilities are growing for new information networks and computer communication systems. These technologies make possible, as I suggested earlier, computerized polling and voting in elections and referenda which would give citizens much more input into the formation of public opinion and decision-making than they currently have.

New public information networks and centers are also necessary so that citizens of the future can have access to the information needed to intelligently participate in a democratic society. Already vast amounts of information are computerized, but much of it is commodified and accessible only to those who can purchase it. Thus every community needs a Community Information Center, much like the libraries of the past, where a public institution will subscribe to all of these information services and make them available to the public free of charge. Such a Community Information Center could also provide free computer training classes so that all individuals can attain the requisite computer skills and literacy for the new information age. The Community Information Center could also provide a community bulletin board and information system so that individuals with home modem-devices could tap into the new information systems and receive needed information free of charge.

National information networks could also be established via modem where individuals and groups could communicate with other groups and individuals via national bulletin boards and information systems. Many cities now have a diversity of computer bulletin boards and many national groups and services like Peace-Net which link them are already setting up

information distribution systems. Such systems should be expanded, democratized, and open to all.

The information and communications revolutions pose both threats and promises to American democracy. So far in its history, capitalism has been the major threat to democracy (Wolfe 1973 and 1977; Cohen and Rogers 1983; Bowles and Gintis 1986), and some of the major struggles of the last decades have been between property rights and democratic rights, the rights of capital versus the rights of the people. This contradiction -- as I have argued throughout this book -- is at the center of our communications system as well and so far capitalism has prevailed over democracy -- to an alarming degree in the 1980s -- so that the United States has really never had a democratic system of mass communications, by the people, for the people, and of the people. Instead television and other mainstream media have been used by the capitalist class to maintain their hegemony.

Ultimately, the struggle for a democratic communications system is therefore the struggle for a democratic society. The technologies and possibilities are there. It is a matter of imagination, will, and struggle to realize the democratic potential that still exists in a system organized for the hegemony of capital in an era of conservative political rule. Yet liberation from the yoke of capital remains possible as does the possibility of imagining how a truly democratic society could be organized. Such vision remains utopian but in the words of Bertolt Brecht: "If you think this is utopian, then I would please like you to reflect on why it is utopian" (1967: 130).

***This article is excerpted from my forthcoming book Television and the Crisis of Democracy. I am grateful to Steve Bronner for discussions of issues in the book and to Frank Morrow for more than ten years of discussion and participation in the issues discussed in this article.

@U(Notes)

@+{1} For an earlier discussion of the need for a radical media politics and intervention in the broadcast media, see Kellner, 1979; 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, though a third volume on @U(Liberation and Socialism) will contain studies addressing this issue. 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. A directory of access systems put out by the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers, @U(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.

@+{2} 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. 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. Thus there is definitely a receptive and growing audience for public access television, and the possibility of making alternative television programs by progressives should be a much higher priority for radical media politics.

@+{3} It is difficult to get up-to-date information on the state of local access projects. Journals like @U(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 @U(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.

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.

@+{4} On my proposals for a reinvigorated public broadcasting system, see Kellner 1990.

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