

# REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGINS AND MEANINGS OF MEDIA ACCESS

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Access to the media has been considered important for a variety of reasons: for informing citizens, for stimulating community development, and for supporting minority and cultural expression. Policy statements and initiatives related to access dominated media discussions, particularly in the 1970s and early 1980s. Since then, however, scholarly attention to these matters seems to have subsided.

The purpose of this essay, and of this theme issue of *Javnost/The Public* generally, is to re-open discussion of, and concern for, media access. Based on impressions from the Euricom Colloquium recently held on access to the media, there may be value in reviewing some of the established interpretations given to the term. By way of introduction, then, I present a number of illustrations of media access considered for various levels and types of media. Some of these efforts at creating media access have also contributed to defining the concept and relating it to other notions such as participation, pluralism and diversity. These efforts have not, however, produced much cumulative result or been an explicit source of inspiration for further empirical work. For this reason, it is important to sketch this work in order to share a sense of what has been accomplished to date. This review of theoretical progress is found in the second section of the article. Finally, I propose researching current and anticipated access initiatives. To rectify the current ad hoc approach, I suggest directions for the nature and focus of this activity, and creation of a pan-European body to stimulate and co-ordinate such a research programme.

## Illustrations of Access

Access to the media is but a specific application of a more general concern regarding access to societal institutions and political processes. There is considerable literature treating issues such as access to public institutions as well as to various political decision-making organs (Colebatch 1975; Schaffer 1973). The Access to Information Act in Canada is one example of effort to codify citizen access to information held by government offices (Keane 1991, 133-134). To

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the extent that media access refers to the availability of information, however, access is as old as mass communication itself. The early history of newspaper and book publishing is very much the history of groups in societies struggling to gain access to information, often economic or religious in nature (Emery 1962).

**Access to National Broadcasting.** With the advent of electronic media, during the early days of radio and later television, there was again widespread concern for making these media available — accessible — to a large public. Here, concern was partially related to distribution of the technology, but also strongly based on what the technology could mean for people once they owned radio and, later, television sets. Again, access to information was propagated and embedded in concern for general educational development and an informed citizenry (Head and Sterling 1987).

Concern for media access took on particular prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. The opening chapter of a reader compiled by Emery and Smith (1972) during that period is devoted to a series of statements by half dozen of the more prominent scholars and communication specialists of that era.<sup>1</sup> One of the issues discussed in this series was the need for increasing diversity of information and opinion in the media, and in providing more balance in perspectives and presentations. Another issue was examination of the role government should play in insuring access. The Fairness Doctrine, equal time regulations and opportunity to reply are all examples of government interventions into (broadcast) media activities in order to ensure access to the media themselves. One of FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson's (1972) proposals — encouraging citizens to become involved in the public hearings for station license renewals — is an example of gaining access to policy-making within media. This issue goes beyond mere access to information and towards access to the machinery of policy.

Perhaps one of the more salient and theoretically driven arguments which came out of Britain in this same period, the early 1970s, was articulated by Groombridge (1972) in *Television for the People: A Programme for Democratic Participation*. He suggests that participation by citizens within western democracies can be stimulated by encouraging involvement in broadcasting, especially television programming. Groombridge goes considerably further in sketching the terrain of access than the Americans noted above who, by and large, envision access within a legal framework related to the First Amendment. Groombridge refers to various elements of access: access to information along with access to the media themselves for the purpose of developing self expression and awareness, and mobilising others. He envisions such media access within a broad, life-long educational perspective.

Also in England, the BBC initiated the first and longest running access television programme in that country — *Open Door*. Launched in 1973, it continued until a decade later when the formula was revised and a new version, *Open Space*, was introduced. The central aspects of the original initiative included allowing non-professionals from outside the BBC to be involved in programming: "editorial control was handed over completely — and this was unique — to allow people 'their own say in their own way'" (Oakley n.d. 2).<sup>2</sup>

This early BBC experience with nationally organised access programming eventually led to the realisation that many of the issues and topics were better suited to smaller geographic units — broadcasting at the regional or local level. The director of the initiative suggested channelling groups and individuals into the most appropriate of three levels which he identified as: video closed circuit and local radio for community use, regional radio and television, and national broadcast television (Bonner 1976a; see also Bonner 1976b).