DEMOCRATIC "TALK," ACCESS TELEVISION AND PARTICIPATORY POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This study draws on the participatory political philosophy of Benjamin Barber to assess the contribution of public access cable television to political communication in the United States. In contrast to neo-liberal political theory which views government-mandated media access as infringing on the speech rights of media owners, Barber's participatory democratic theory positions direct and widespread access to the media as a vital aspect of democratic processes. Barber puts forward a set of concepts which describe the various functions of democratic "talk" and which provide a theoretical framework for understanding some of the ways in which access television functions as a political communication resource. Using interviews and original source materials, the study examines the political uses of access television by radical media projects, a type of media seldom granted access to commercial or public television. In their attempts to organise and empower communities that have been under represented or excluded from mainstream political discussions and debates, these projects perform many of the functions Barber attributes to democratic "talk." Conclusions drawn from the study suggest that access television hosts a range of democratic speech which is largely absent from professional media industries and which merits the support and protection of democratic states.

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In the late 1960s and early 1970s, citizens around the United States established centres for the production and distribution of non-profit, community-oriented television. The movement for public access cable television, or community television, attempted to realise what was widely perceived at the time as the democratic potential of cable television. Public access channels and facilities were envisioned by policy-makers and grassroots citizens groups as the electronic equivalent of a public forum or the speaker's soapbox in the public park. Today's access television channels and facilities are the tangible results of this movement. Funded by local municipal grants and cable operator fees, access television is available to the public at a minimal cost, free from the editorial control of both cable operators and access managers, and programmed on a non-discriminatory basis. Bypassing the framing devices of professional media documented by Gitlin (1980) and Tuchman (1978), access television allows individuals and groups to speak freely on topics of their choice.

The value of access to communication resources, and of public access cable television in particular, has yet to be explored fully in communication theory. Advocates of a right of access to the media frequently justify the concept in terms of public sphere theory which assigns central importance to the role of public communicative forums in democratic societies (Aufderheide 1992; Garnham 1990). Others establish the value of media access by drawing on the European social rights tradition to argue that communicative rights are an integral aspect of democratic citizenship (Murdock and Golding 1989). While both of these approaches recognise the importance of public communication to democratic citizenship, they are less attentive to the immediate ways in which media access serves and enacts democratic communication. Communication theorists have yet to explore fully the types of political speech which media access permits, or what differentiates political communication enabled by direct access to communicative resources from political communication mediated by professional media workers.

This article examines the nexus between democratic speech and media access through an evaluation of the activities of radical access television projects. Radical media are those media which challenge dominant power structures, empower different communities and classes, and allow communities of interest to communicate between and among one another (Downing 1984, 2). With their explicitly political agendas, radical media demonstrate the range of political speech which access television makes possible. In addition, radical media makers represent a class of users for whom access television is a particularly valuable resource. Generally denied access to both commercial and public television, radical media makers are able to utilise access television as a forum for progressive political communication (Stein 1998; Stein and Marcus 1996).

This study draws on the participatory democratic theory of Benjamin Barber (1984) to define the role of communication in the democratic process and to set forth a taxonomy of the various functions of "talk" in democratic societies. Barber's theory provides a useful framework from which to consider some of the democratic uses of access television. The study begins by contrasting two political theories of democratic speech. While contemporary neo-liberal theory discounts the value of media access, participatory democratic theory suggests that access is a necessary component of democratic speech. Using interviews and original source materials, the study goes on to sketch the communicative activities of seven radical media projects. Conclusions drawn from the study suggest that access television hosts a range of political

communication recognised by participatory political philosophy as vital to a well-functioning democratic society.

Defining Democratic Speech

Current debates on the nature of democratic speech reflect competing theories of democratic society in political philosophy. These theories can be categorised broadly as neo-liberal democratic theory (with roots in classical liberalism) and participatory democratic theory. A key difference between these theories centres around their respective views of representation within political processes. Whereas neo-liberal theory is content to rely on elected officials to represent the interests of citizens within a legally-structured political and economic framework, participatory theory seeks to involve citizens more directly in the democratic process (Held 1987, 4). In addition, these theories come to radically different conclusions about both the ideal constitution of democratic speech and the desirability of legally-protected access to speech forums, such as those provided by public access cable television.

Both traditions recognise the importance of speech to democratic processes. Neo-liberal theorists, such as Hayek (1960, 1962) and Friedman (1962), consider free speech a basic human liberty and exposure to a diverse range of opinions and debate a prerequisite for effective democratic decision making. Yet, these theorists argue that free speech and other liberties are best protected by legal limits on government intervention. Within neo-liberalism, government intervention is equated with coercion, and individuals are most free when they are left to the "neutral" and "natural" conditions of market society. Government enforcement of access policies infringes on the speech rights of media owners and operators who seek full editorial control over their communication outlets. From this perspective, government-mandated access to communicative forums violates, rather than facilitates, free speech. For neo-liberals, free speech exists wherever market mechanisms prevail, regardless of the real opportunities for speech which might exist in a given context.

Participatory democrats argue that the exercise of effective citizenship requires a participatory society which promotes political efficacy, inspires concern for collective problems, and encourages the formation of an informed community of citizens capable of self-government (Held 1987, 262). Rather than emphasise the legal limits of government intervention, participatory democrats assert that a free society is best achieved by securing the procedures necessary to maintain a thriving democracy. Participatory democrats believe that neo-liberal strictures against government action, excessive reliance on market processes, and disregard for the impact of real-world conditions on individual freedom diminish democracy. Further, representative political systems harm democracy by reducing the scope of self-government and limiting citizen participation to the passive activities of listening, thinking and voting (Barber 1984, 145; Dahl 1989, 225). For participatory democrats, state action may be utilised proactively to strengthen and extend the political processes of democratic society. In their view, government regulation of media access is legitimated by the importance of maintaining real opportunities to speak within democratic societies.

Participatory political processes are integral to the formation of public opinion in a democratic society, which depends on civic education and civic interaction to foster common purpose and action (Barber 1984, 117). Barber places communication, or talk, at the centre of these processes. The need for politics arises because, although

individuals cannot claim certain knowledge of what is best for the larger social groupings of which they are a part, they nevertheless must make choices which have public consequences. In the absence of certain knowledge, politics has a predominantly epistemological function, and talk is the means by which people come to know both themselves and the world around them. The purpose of democratic talk is to create citizens who can think as a public, make reasoned political judgements, and imagine a common future for the common good (Barber 1984, 197). Barber's conception of democratic talk is supported by media theorists who link civic education to active participation in public deliberation and debate (Abramson, Arterton and Orren 1988; Entman 1989), and who argue that social and political knowledge requires that people be able to utilise media to convey their experiences and mobilise their interests (Enzensberger 1974; Rucinski 1991).

Democratic talk broadens the scope of political communication beyond that envisioned by neo-liberal democrats, who treat speech much as they do other market commodities. Barber argues that within neo-liberal theory the dominant functions of talk in democratic societies are the *articulation of interests* among competitive individuals seeking to satisfy their self-interests through markets, and *persuasion* aimed at convincing others of the legitimacy of one's own interests (Barber 1984, 179-180). The remaining functions of political talk, undervalued or ignored by neo-liberal theorists, are essential to participatory democratic communication.[1] They are:

- *Agenda-setting* as the grassroots formulation of issues and concerns
- *Exploring mutuality* in feeling, experience and thought
- *Affiliation and affection* through the development of empathy for others
- *Maintaining autonomy* by repeatedly re-examining one's beliefs and convictions
- *Witness and self-expression* through the expression of opinions, dissent, and opposition
- *Reformulation and reconceptualisation*, or the reshaping of political definitions and values
- *Community-building* through the creation of public citizens who recognise common interests and common goods

These functions of talk provide a framework for understanding both the democratic potential of access television and the activities in which radical media projects engage.

Radical Access Television Projects: Seven Profiles

Radical media makers utilise access television to engage in political communication, not in the sense of the representative politics of neo-liberal democracies, but in the broader sense that Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 153) identify when they speak of political action as an activity which seeks to transform social relations, rather than simply to make demands on politicians and governments. The seven projects described here are notable in that they serve diverse communities and regions, utilise a broad range of strategies and goals, and see the promotion of grassroots political communication as a primary objective. Short descriptions of each project set the context for a subsequent examination of the ways in which these projects contribute to the democratic functions of speech elaborated by Barber.

The Mirror Project. The Mirror Project was created in 1992 by project director Roberto Arévalo in conjunction with Somerville Community Access Television (SCAT)

in Massachusetts. The Mirror Project recruits ethnically diverse teenagers from housing projects in the Somerville area and trains them in the techniques of video production. Classes are taught in housing project space, and editing takes place at SCAT. Students meet several times each week over a four month period. During this time, each student produces a video, shot in and around the local community, which documents some aspect of their lives. Mirror Project videos have covered topics ranging from racism, teen pregnancy and inner city violence to getting a haircut, playing basketball and riding a bike. These videos are shown at SCAT, at public screenings in local housing projects, and at national and international festivals and forums.

Mirror Project videos focus on both the personal lives of the student-producers and the larger communities in which they live. Arévalo (1995) hopes that by examining subject matter which traverses the common experiences of the Somerville community, student-producers can promote dialogues between community members otherwise divided by ethnic and cultural differences. Some Mirror Project students offer their work as an antidote to the dominant portrayals of low-income communities in the mainstream media. For example, fourteen-year-old Natalia Velez's video about friendship was made to counter stereotypes about neighbourhood teens, "I decided that I wanted to show people my friend's life... A lot of people think all we do is hang around and do bad things. But we're not bad kids — we're normal" (Liakos 1992). By giving students the tools to document and exhibit their own lives in the video medium, Arévalo aims to instil in students both a sense of their own identity and confidence in the validity of their experiences and perspectives.[2]

The Committee For Labor Access (CLA). Numerous labour activists utilise access television to produce and distribute programming on labour issues.[3] In existence since 1983, Labor Beat is one of the oldest of these shows. Labor Beat is run by the Committee For Labor Access, a group of video producers, labour activists and artists based in Chicago, Illinois. CLA uses consumer grade cameras to assemble cheap and timely shows on labour issues.[4] Although CLA is loosely affiliated with a local television production union, the group is independent and receives no financial or administrative support from any unions. Labor Beat programs are shown on access television in Chicago and Saint Louis, on educational television in New York, at public screenings, and on the Free Speech TV network.

Labor Beat programs cover local, national and international labour issues. CLA perceives its audience as both members of organised labour and a broader constituency of working people. Recent Labor Beat shows examine the import of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the working conditions of Guatemalan women at a GAP factory, and a series of concurrent labour disputes which recently took place in Illinois.[5] Rank-and-file workers regularly contribute original footage and program ideas to the show. Labor Beat programs include news and analysis of strikes, demonstrations, and other labour conflicts, highlights of labour conferences and speeches, interviews with labour leaders, and oral histories and documentation of the experiences and culture of working people.

Black Planet Productions (BPP). The BPP collective was founded in 1990 by a group of African-American and Latino producers. Anxious to create a news and public affairs program for black and Latino viewers, the group began working on Not Channel Zero — the Revolution, Televised. Though BPP continues to search for new distribution outlets, the show is currently distributed on access television in New York City. One

collective member notes that access television, "if not the final frontier was at least the closest" (NCZ Untaped, 54). BPP shows have examined such topics as black and Latino opposition to the US War in the Persian Gulf, class and gender roles in the African-American community, and national reactions to the Rodney King trial verdict. The show's self-defined hip-hop aesthetic is a result of the producers' attempts to utilise creatively whatever resources are on hand. Visually, the show is characterised by the slowing down or speeding up of images, quick cutting, shooting off television monitors, and the incorporation of clips from other sources. BPP producers intend for both the content and aesthetic of the programs to prod viewers to reinterpret the symbols and messages of mainstream media.

BPP hopes its shows can provide a model for other black and Latino groups who are interested in producing alternative images and information on issues affecting their lives and communities. Rather than rely on "experts" for opinions and information, BPP turns to ordinary people, or the "regular folk that never seem to make it on the network news" (NCZ Untaped, 57). By conveying the viewpoints of ordinary blacks and Latinos, the collective aims to provide a forum for members of minority communities who rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to express themselves on television (Talking Heads 1994, 15). BPP also seeks to advance media education by encouraging the critical viewing of mainstream television texts and the construction of new media that redefine the identities and experiences of blacks and Latinos (Talking Heads 1994, 14). The collective conducts media literacy workshops and facilitates discussions of their tapes at public screenings.

Alternative Views. Alternative Views is a news and public affairs program that combines documentary, news and talk show formats to provide an information alternative to the mainstream media. Since 1978, co-hosts Frank Morrow and Doug Kellner have produced more than 550 shows on topics ranging from labour unions and foreign policy to ecology and holistic medicine. Kellner (1990, 214) views access television as an invaluable resource for political education, community politics and organising. The show presents news reports and summaries culled from the alternative press and lengthy interviews with political activists and intellectuals. Alternative Views guests over the last 17 years have included the American atheist leader Madalyn Murray O'Hair, antinuclear activist Helen Caldicott, and former Attorney General Ramsey Clark. Alternative Views also has promoted their show as a forum for progressive individuals and groups who contribute show ideas, speakers, documentaries, and news footage.

Alternative Views originates on public access television in Austin, Texas. The show is also distributed by mailing tapes to access stations around the country in a process known as "bicycling." Alternative Views currently is shown on over 85 cable systems nation-wide, reaching 285 cities and over 9,000,000 households. Developing a national distribution network on this scale has been a difficult and time-consuming endeavour, especially without a staff and on a budget of less than $5,000 a year.[6] Morrow maintains the network by working with people in remote cities who are willing to sponsor the program's cablecast on their local access channels. Although show production has slowed down considerably in the last year, Alternative Views continues to air regularly on Austin access television and on cable access channels throughout the country.

Paper Tiger Television (PTTV). Paper Tiger Television is a Manhattan-based media collective staffed by a volunteer group of artists, activists and media professionals.[7]

The collective produces a weekly television series which critiques mass media programs, publications, and trends. The earliest PTTV shows were produced in 1982 and featured communication scholar Herb Schiller speaking on the agenda-setting and gatekeeping functions of the New York Times. The Schiller shows became the model for subsequent programs hosted by a variety of media writers, critics and scholars. The shows' on-camera "readings," or critical analyses of media texts, aim to give viewers a better understanding of the different factors which shape the products of the commercial culture industry. An early introductory segment for the series states that the show sought to demystify the information industry and to promote democratic communication by helping viewers develop a critical perspective towards media. The collective's strategy is premised on the notion that critical viewers will eventually become assertive citizens who demand that the media be utilised for more democratic purposes.

Since it began, PTTV has produced over 200 shows. Programs have included critical explorations into the history of American advertising and product placement, soap opera narratives, and Asian images in US cinema. Recently, Paper Tiger has begun producing tapes on contemporary political issues and events which emphasise the discrepancies between people's lived experiences and their media representations (Marcus 1991, 32). Programs on the 1989 miners' strike against Pittston Coal Company, the gentrification of New York's Lower East Side, and the media strategies of the Christian right are examples of this recent focus.

Deep Dish TV (DDTV). Deep Dish TV began in the mid 1980s when members of PTTV began testing the viability of a public access satellite network. Seeking to create a national infrastructure for progressive television programming, collective members thought satellite technology might prove an efficient, manageable and cost-effective alternative to the cumbersome process of mailing tapes to individual access centres. In 1986, Paper Tiger produced a series of magazine-style shows on progressive social issues and offered the series, via satellite and free of charge, to public access stations and home dish owners. The series was picked up and telecast by over 250 stations. The experiment seemed to indicate new opportunities for national distribution of access programming and for the development of a full-time, satellite network. DDTV separated from Paper Tiger to become a fully independent organisation.

Deep Dish aims to produce and distribute programming which challenges the conservative orientation of mainstream TV and allows people to present their own views on the issues affecting them (DDTV Network Directory 1988, 3). DDTV programming also seeks to model the communication potential of access television, satellite technology, and alternative programming to progressive artists and activists. Series co-ordinators assemble independently produced work from around the country into programs organised around a central series theme. Programs juxtapose the work of seasoned video producers with the more amateur productions typically associated with access television. Production formats vary widely, including everything from documentary to narrative to experimental video. DDTV series draw on diverse regional and cultural perspectives to examine topics such as health care reform, the growth of prisons and incarceration in the US, and contemporary threats to civil liberties.

Free Speech TV (FSTV). In 1995 Free Speech TV began "bicycling" progressive programming from its office in Boulder, Colorado, to public access stations around the country. Like Deep Dish TV, FSTV aims to build a national network of such programming.

> *Recognizing that public dialogue is essential to building a just and democratic society, Free Speech TV fights for progressive voices on television and the emerging information superhighway* (Free Speech TV promotional brochure 1995).

Rather than co-ordinate a magazine-style series, FSTV programs a number of series in their entirety. 1995 FSTV programs were produced by the Committee for Labor Access, Dyke TV (a lesbian collective), America's Defense Monitor (a watchdog group monitoring the US Defense Department), Globalvision and Greenpeace. FSTV programming addresses social issues from a perspective generally excluded by mainstream TV. FSTV programs have focused on such diverse topics as human rights abuses, former President George Bush's Iran-Contra connections, gay and lesbian rights, and trade union organising.

FSTV hopes to become a full-time, satellite network and to establish an ongoing, progressive presence in national political debate. At present, FSTV's network of access affiliates covers sixty cities and reaches a potential audience of about five million viewers. FSTV also utilises a World Wide Web site to promote its programs, to disseminate additional information on series topics, to host discussion forums, and to link FSTV viewers with other activist organisations. FSTV's access television network and Web site are meant to function as complimentary outlets for the expression and organisation of progressive politics.

Radical Media and Democratic Talk

Radical access television projects strive to enact many of the functions of talk identified by Barber. The purpose of talk in a democracy is to transform private values into public ones "through the process of identifying and empathising with the values of others" (Barber 1984, 137). While effective democratic communication ultimately requires forums for speech which are open, widely utilised and highly visible, this paper is concerned only to show that access television provides an opportunity and space where important forms of political speech can flourish. In considering the types of speech in which radical access television projects engage, the paper leaves aside questions of the political efficacy or reach of this forum. To date, the impact of radical media projects on political and social discourse has been minimal at best. The reasons for access television's marginal impact — most likely structural, political and economic- are largely beyond the scope of this paper and have been addressed elsewhere.[8] Access television's failure to single-handedly change the democratic culture of the US does not detract from its achievements as a forum for democratic speech. Nor will the paper attempt to present an exhaustive catalogue of the ways in which the projects described here contribute to democratic talk. Rather, I will paint the democratic functions of radical media in broad strokes, adding detail and definition when the activities of specific projects provide clearer illustration of Barber's analytic categories.

Agenda Setting. Agenda-setting refers to the determination of which issues or problems become subject to political decision making processes. Agenda-setting limits the possible outcomes of decision making by predetermining the range of options, or items, on the agenda (Barber 1984, 181). The institutions of neo-liberal democracies consign the formulation of issues and problems to political representatives and other political or policy professionals. Communication scholarship on agenda-setting has been carried out largely within this framework. Scholars have argued that the media influence the public's political agenda, while the public has little effect on the formulation

of those agendas (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Radical media projects attempt to expand citizen participation in agenda-setting. For example, the Committee for Labor Access and Black Planet Productions seek to redefine the agendas of particular communities by publicising the perspectives of ordinary people within those communities. Black Planet Productions confronts viewers with the opinions of ordinary African-Americans and Latinos, rather than calling on a single "expert" spokesperson to represent the views of the entire community. CLA often recruits videographers who are on the front lines of labour disputes, giving rank and file workers a forum in which to express views which are decidedly different from those of union bureaucracies (Duncan 1996, 24) .

Both Free Speech TV and Deep Dish TV endeavour to contribute to the formation of national political agendas. Free Speech TV aims to facilitate discussion and organisation within progressive communities and to establish a national and consistent presence for progressive voices in public debate. Deep Dish TV searches out marginalised perspectives on contemporary social issues and attempts to link these to larger political forums. For instance, in its 1994 series on health care reform, DDTV surveyed grassroots health care organisations and activists and developed programs specifically tailored to address their concerns. This strategy was intended to reach out to groups not previously involved with access television, to increase the use-value of Deep Dish programming for activist audiences, and to link access television programming to national political debates. The series was aired during congressional debates on health care reform in the hope of expanding the range of debate and influencing the policy outcomes.[9]

Exploring Mutuality and Affiliation and Affection. While neo-liberal democratic talk focuses on bargaining over individual differences and persuading others of one's point of view, participatory democratic talk values the open-ended exploration of common thoughts, feelings and experiences (Barber 1984, 182-183). Exploring mutuality is a way of coming to know and recognise the commonalties we share with others. Affiliation and affection refer to the affective and emotive uses of talk which stimulate not only understanding, but also care and concern for others. Affiliation and affection are often noncognitive; they can be conveyed through tone, inflection and other emotive aspects of expression. Both of these functions of talk make possible the transformation of private interests into public ones by forging empathy among individuals who recognise their commonalties and connections.

Radical media projects often document the subjective viewpoints of individuals. Their programming offers insight into both how individuals understand their own interests and how they perceive the world around them. The Committee for Labor Access contributes to these functions of speech when it records the oral histories of labour activists or documents the daily lives of laid-off workers. The Mirror Project does so when it reveals the commonalties between ethnically-diverse members of the same community. A sampling of Mirror Project videos include a young Latina talking about how pregnancy changed her life, a Vietnamese teen reflecting on work life and drug addiction, and a Haitian boy sharing the joys of his room. In the latter video, titled "Living Large," the boy shares his feelings about racial prejudice.

> *I don't know what's up with prejudiced people. We're all on this Earth. God made us, 'cause God's the man. He's straight up...To all those prejudiced people, y'all can just step. Y'all stupid...'cause all of us just wants to be friends and all.* (St. Louis 1993/1994).

The boy describes his world in his own terms and language; his monologue is open-ended, subjective and emotive. Access television provides an open forum for a type of political communication which allows individuals to communicate their feelings, and not just their arguments, about the issues that concern them.

Maintaining Autonomy. Individuals derive autonomy through a constant process of re-evaluating their opinions and values. The only legitimate opinions are those which have been actively considered and reconsidered. As J.S. Mill (1859/1993, 41) noted in his historic essay on free speech, an individual's opinion "however true it may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth." Radical media engage in this function of speech by positing alternative constructions of social reality which challenge dominant stereotypes and representations. Paper Tiger Television programs utilise political economy and critical cultural theory to critique media content and to call attention to the disjuncture between media representations and people's lived experiences. Alternative Views brings audiences into contact with controversial political figures who are given the opportunity to speak at length on their views. Since radical media do not have to cater to sponsor preferences or viewer ratings, they are freer to present views that do not already resonate with the public.

Witness and Self-expression. Witness and self-expression denote the public articulation of dissent, frustration and opposition to political decisions and circumstances. In a democratic society, individuals must be able to attest to other than the prevailing viewpoint, as well as to the effects of collective political choices on their lives (Barber 1984, 192-193). Indeed, these functions of democratic speech frequently are counted among the core values justifying constitutional protections for freedom of speech (Emerson 1970). Access television allows diverse groups a space in which to construct their own representations and to publicly express minority or opposition views. All of the projects examined here produce and disseminate dissenting viewpoints. The Committee for Labor Access is typical in this respect. CLA trains labour activists in television and radio production and includes worker-produced segments in their series in an effort to give voice to "the lives, experiences and struggles of working people" (CLA 1996). Several other projects, including The Mirror Project, Black Planet Productions, and Paper Tiger Television, conduct workshops on low-budget, video production in order to give ordinary people the tools necessary to express themselves through the television medium.

Reformulation and Reconceptualisation. All participatory democratic functions of talk involve the reformulation and reconceptualisation of social and political terms and values. As Barber (1984, 193) argues, each citizen must possess "some control over what the community will mean by the crucial terms it uses to define all the citizens' selves and lives in public and private." Communities must be able to reformulate and reconceptualise the way they understand and remember the past, the meaning of contemporary terms, and their visions of the future (Barber 1984, 194-196). This function of talk highlights the role of communication in creating and recreating social reality, or what Carey (1988) has termed the ritual view of communication. In the ritual view, a common culture is maintained through "sharing," "participation," "association," "fellowship," and "the possession of a common faith" (Carey 1988, 18). To be effective, political thought cannot deal in static categories and preconceptions, but must be

amenable to new interpretations and analyses as social contexts and perceptions change.

Radical access television projects contest social meaning from within a dominant sphere of political communication - television. These projects attempt to highlight the ways in which mainstream television distorts and biases the potential diversity of debate and representation. Access television permits the *reformulation and reconceptualisation* of television texts and messages in the very site in which these constructions are disseminated. The Committee for Labor Access engages in this function of speech when it utilises worker-produced television in an effort to increase workers awareness of the anti-labour biases of commercial media (Hercules 1987, 12). Paper Tiger Television and Black Planet Productions encourage this activity when they employ production techniques that critique mainstream television's content, form and aesthetic. These and other alternative media expose dominant social meanings to new interpretations and understandings through the transformative power of talk.

Community-building. The overarching function of all participatory democratic talk is community-building through the creation of active citizens who recognise common interests and goals. Bringing communities together on a regional, national or global level for deliberation and debate is a concrete means by which new technologies can contribute to democratic political processes (Abramson, Arterton and Orren 1988; Tehranian 1990). Yet, Aufderheide (1992, 58-59) points out that while access television's value resides in its ability to develop community, this outcome occurs in small and incremental ways and cannot be detected by ratings or other criteria used to evaluate commercial media. Although this function of democratic talk would seem to elude measurement, local and national community-building remains a primary goal of radical access television projects. The Mirror Project seeks to build community among local Somerville residents, while Free Speech TV and Deep Dish TV attempt to link communities of interest on a broader level. FSTV directs interested viewers nation-wide into a World Wide Web site where they can deliberate and organise around progressive issues. DDTV targets new audiences and producers across wide geographic regions for inclusion in the series and works to educate progressive individuals about the potential political uses of the television medium. These and other access projects contribute to community-building by incorporating the ideas and perspectives of many individuals and groups into their shows and by allowing different communities to explore and exchange views on the topics and issues that concern them.

Conclusion

The value of access to the media in a democratic society is at a fundamental level a question for political philosophy. From the perspective of neo-liberal democratic theory, media access policies are antithetical to democratic speech. Public access to commercial media systems destroys democratic speech by infringing on the speech rights of media owners. In this scheme, the types of communication which access policies make possible are inconsequential. Participatory democratic theory offers another way of evaluating the value of media access and access television. Participatory democratic theory assigns speech a central role in democratic processes and procedures and is capable of discerning the contributions access television makes to democratic speech.

The functions of democratic speech which Barber identifies, *agenda-setting*, *exploring mutuality*, *affiliation and affection*, *maintaining autonomy*, *witness and self-expression*,

reformulation and reconceptualisation, and *community-building*, depend on direct access to communicative forums. Free from economic and editorial constraints, access television provides ordinary citizens with the resources and facilities necessary to participate in democratic talk. Like Habermas's (1962/1991) ideal conception of the public sphere, access television constitutes a protected space which lies between the realm of the economy and the state. In this space, individuals are able to represent themselves and their perspectives directly to others, to engage in subjective communication, to organise public forums around issues that concern them, and to begin to partake in communication processes which are necessary for self-governance.

Public access cable television offers a ready-made site for theoretical and practical investigations into the relationship between media access and democratic communication. In addition to theorising the contributions of media access to democratic speech, communication scholars should explore further the structural and institutional conditions necessary to promote the efficacy of access television as a political institution. There are many questions academics might ask. How can locally produced and distributed access programming be linked to larger forums of public opinion formation? What kinds of support mechanisms are necessary to sustain access channels? How do access policies influence the quality and reach of cable access programming? What do international comparisons of access television across different countries reveal about the relationship between institutional arrangements and the success of access television as a public communicative forum? By what legal rationale can media access policies be extended to other media beyond cable television?

The radical media projects examined here demonstrate that access television opens up possibilities for democratic speech that are absent from commercial and public television. Yet, these projects are struggling to secure the structures, funds and resources necessary to reach larger audiences and to make themselves heard within larger spheres of opinion formation. Participatory democratic theory suggests that the protection and extension of spaces like access television must be a high priority for democratic societies. Stable funding mechanisms and national institutions for program support and distribution are needed to strengthen the position of access as a political forum and to translate participatory democratic talk into public consensus on the common good.

Notes:

1. For an extended discussion of these functions, see Barber (1984, 180-198).

2. Telephone interview with Roberto Arévalo, Director of The Mirror Project. Somerville, Ma, August 25, 1995.

3. Nearly 40 labor shows appear regularly on U.S. access television stations (Alvarez 1996, 7).

4. Phone interview with Larry Duncan, Co-producer and Founder of Labor Beat. Chicago, August 1995.

5. These involved conflicts between the United Auto Workers and Caterpillar, the United Rubber Workers and Bridgestone-Firestone, the United Paperworkers International Union and the Staley Company, and the United Mine Workers of America and Peabody Coal.

6. Personal interview with Frank Morrow, producer of Alternative Views. Austin, Texas, August 17, 1995.

7. Several other Paper Tiger groups exist. This study refers only to the New York group.

8. This issue has been explored by Aufderheide (1992) and Rice (1980-1981).

9. Phone interview with Cynthia Lopez, Program Director at Deep Dish Television Network. New York, August 1995.

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