

Empowerment

Access Visions and Producer Realities

by John Higgins

“Even if you aren't consciously changing things by their participation, they [public access producers] change the world. Just by their choosing to put messages on the air, and that message going out, people are going to change things...it's like throwing a pebble in the pond. Every story is a pebble – and you can't even judge where those waves go. Simply the fact that those stories were told – and without access TV they would not have been – the world's been changed by what's been said...”

– “Paul,” ACTV Producer

This article continues a discussion related to the “visions” of public access I began in the August 1991 and May/June 1993 issues of the *Community Television Review*². The 1991 piece examined the ways in which visual representation is related to the politics of culture and power, and training methods which might work against the creation of “broadcast clones.”

The 1993 piece described the start of a study that focused on one of the claims made by public access proponents: that video training helps citizens empower themselves. This study has been completed recently; this article will present an overview of the research findings.³

It is important to note that in the 25 years of access practice, this is the first study to actually test the implementation of the public access vision of empowerment as it relates to the experiences of the community producer. As such, it provides empirical data regarding the impact of access to what until now have been theories supported primarily by anecdotal evidence.

The study focused on how the empowerment vision fared when put into practice at the local level, as seen through the experiences of the community volunteer producer. In particular, I was interested in the access belief that training and participation in video production led to media literacy and media demystification — which lead to personal and social empowerment.

Review of the study. The 1993 article outlined early philosophical and methodological approaches to the study, as well as critiques of access's empowerment vision.⁴ Empowerment was defined as a new awareness of one's self, of others, and of society, and the power relationships involved within each sphere as they intersect. Higher levels of empowerment moved beyond mere recognition to attempts to act upon these new awarenesses, including active attempts to change power relationships on each of these levels. The highest level of empowerment was determined to be attempts to change power relationships on the societal level, in accordance with the works of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.⁵

Empowerment within a production context included an awareness of (and, at a higher level, implementation of) the traditional canon of media production (technical, symbolic and

cultural/ideological); media organization; and non-media institutional relationships.⁶ These were identified within media education as constituent elements of “media literacy” and “media demystification.”

Definition of the ingredients of empowerment, media literacy, and media demystification helped point to a line of questioning to be followed when talking with community producers. I felt the study called for an interpretive research methodology that reflected public access's attitudes toward self-growth and change, and technology as a means to empowerment rather than an end in itself. Dervin's Sense-Making methodology fit the bill, and directed the data collection using in-depth, open-ended, structured focus group and individual interviews.⁷

Over a 9 month period in 1993 and 1994, I spoke at length with 28 volunteer community producers at ACTV 21 in Columbus, Ohio.⁸ The interviews were analyzed using deductive and inductive approaches;⁹ the findings were then compared to the theories, ideas, and beliefs of writers and access practitioners of the past 25 years.

Some of the major findings are listed below.¹⁰ It is my intent that this article serve mainly to summarize the study results. Further discussion

of the implications of these findings will then take place in upcoming issues of *CMR*.

Media Literacy. The major finding of this study is that media literacy – the “reading” and/or “writing” of media programs – is a learning outcome for all the community producers in this investigation. Media demystification – the awareness and/or utilization of media structure and influence – is an outcome for many, but not all.

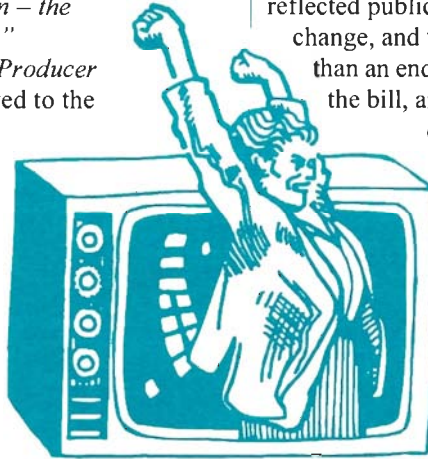
Media literacy involves shattering the apparently “seamless” nature of mainstream television. As a result of their access experience, producers exhibit the ability to evaluate program content, intent, technical elements, and the symbolic meanings found within television programs; they also are able to utilize many of these elements regularly in the program-production process.

The findings leave little doubt that, for the producers in this study, public access participation leads to the ability to deconstruct the “reality” of television. The data further indicate that these media literacy skills have value in promoting analytic and critical thinking skills.

Dealing with divisions. Producers have developed their own methods of dealing with what can be deep ideological and personal divisions within the access facility. Personal divisions are more likely than ideological divisions to cause producers to drop out of access participation. Ideological differences are offered sanctuary by First Amendment dogma.

Notions of freedom of speech. Producers overwhelmingly conceptualize freedom of speech as an individual right rather than

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Higgins on Empowerment

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a social good. In part, this reflects the traditional emphasis placed by the access movement on this interpretation of the First Amendment. Only recently has the movement as a whole begun to widely emphasize the quality of ideas for the public good over a mere quantity of ideas for personal expression.

Notions of the audience. Producers construct a notion of audience that is personal and active, rather than faceless and passive. Most producers consider their viewing audiences as they construct access programs, and producers believe that the viewing audience for access programs is underestimated. An interactive community exists among producers and the viewers of their programs.

Access as process. The findings of this study strongly support the notion that public is best evaluated from a "process" rather than a "product" orientation.¹¹ Access should not be judged simply by the completed programs it offers an audience. Instead, one of access's strongest attributes is its ability to cultivate a process by which producers move outward from themselves to include others, and the larger society — including government and other institutions and organizations.

These findings are in sharp contrast to Nicholas Garnham's argument that "the great advantage of the 'process' defense of video from the point of view of its advocates is that it cannot be tested."¹² This study indicates quite the contrary: not only are the process-based aspects of the access experience testable, they permeate the findings of this project.

Access as a process addresses the criticisms that video training in the access context focuses on technology as a panacea for social ills. Instead, video training and participation is recognized as a means to an end, rather than the objective itself.

Access, empowerment and societal change. Empowerment and societal change within the access context are also best discussed within the above framework of an ongoing process rather than an end product. Within this context, societal change involves a dynamic relationship between the individual and the collective society. A transformation on the personal level affects the collectivity.

This study finds that empowerment builds from the personal and extends outward to include others. As one's life is changed by a transformed sense of self, the lives of others around are touched as well. Society, comprised of groupings of individual "selves" and "others," is subtly changed as a result.

The findings argue against Paulo Freire's overemphasis on action in the societal realm as the highest level of empowerment. Producers are not changing society through direct, Freirean-defined action and reflection; however, they are involved in a more subtle form of societal change. In this model, the essence of social change includes a dynamic relationship between the individual and the collective.¹³

Conclusions. It is important to note that the results of this study may not be generalized to all access producers across the U.S. Given the methods used, the results are applicable only to the participating ACTV producers. However, the study does

provide a foundation on which to compare other producer experiences with public access television.

These results probably come as no surprise to access participants. The significance of these findings is that, for the first time, these benefits of access participation have been documented by a rigorous study. As such, they have importance in the formulation of public policy and facility operations. These and other aspects of the study will be addressed in future *CMR* articles.

The findings of this study indicate that public access's impact on societal change is not as direct as some proponents argue. Participation in video production does not necessarily lead to increased social activism, or empowerment in the traditional Freirean sense. However, public access does provide a foundation which encourages individuals and groups to believe they can make a difference on the broader society, and to take actions to address structural inequities within the society.

"...There is a lot of people that come in there and they'll take the classes and they don't understand just what the television media is about. We're not out there doing the same as Channel 4 News. We are out there trying to present a thought or an idea most times. We are

not professional people. We are engineers, housewives and everything else but we're trying to learn how to cope with our society as far as the media...to better understand it, to use it, to make — to have fun a lot of times. Produce a program that has some context that will give someone else the philosophy that you have. Hopefully it is a good show."

— "Daniel," ACTV Producer

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1. This article is an abbreviated version of a paper presented at the ACM conference in Boston, 1995: "Does Access Really Empower People?"
 2. Higgins (1991a, 1993). The concepts in the 1991 CMR article are more fully elaborated in Higgins (1991b).
 3. This research was part of a dissertation study for my doctoral program at Ohio State University (Higgins, 1994). The sources cited in this article are only a sample listing of references. I am grateful for the many contributions and insights provided by Brenda Dervin of the Department of Communication at Ohio State University, as well as professors Steve Acker and Thom McCain. This study is available for purchase from University Microfilms International (UMI); P.O. Box 1764; Ann Arbor, MI 48106. US: (800) 521-0600, ext. 3781. Canada: (800) 343-5299. Michigan, Alaska, and Hawaii: call collect (313) 761-4700. Check the bibliography for publication information.
 4. A preliminary look at these critiques is discussed in the 1993 article. The primary critique of the public access vision is that the vision does not address the structural changes necessary to address societal inequities. I am basing this and other critiques primarily on Garnham (1990), Mattellart and Piemme (1980), Slack (1984), and Williams (1974). Critics argue that public access represents a technological - and therefore superficial - solution to societal problems. It is further argued that such solutions rest upon pluralist assumptions regarding the nature of truth and structures by which truth will emerge, the dichotomy of the individual against society, and the nature of power. These arguments tie into discussions of the First Amendment, and criticize access as privileging the quantity of expression over the quality of ideas. For further discussion see Aufderheide (1992), Devine (1990), Good (1989), Lukes (1974), and Streeter (1990).
 5. Freire is considered the leading spokesperson in the area of critical pedagogy (1989, writing in 1970); other authors include Giroux (1992), and McLaren (1989). "Pedagogy" refers to the manner in which people teach and people learn. It includes both the content and structure of the learning experience.
 6. The definitions of empowerment within a production experience are drawn from the works of critical pedagogy and media education. This latter area includes authors such as Buckingham (1990), Masterman (1989), and Sholle and Denski (1994).
 7. These are more fully discussed in the 1993 article. For further discussion, see Dervin (1989).
 8. I am grateful for the assistance provided by the people (past and present) at ACTV 21, in particular Carl Kucharski, Laurie Cirivello, Suzanne Patzer, and the many community producers who helped me with this project.
 9. Informants were selected through purposive maximum variation sampling techniques. Deductive analysis involved coding and analyzing responses in keeping with categories derived from the literature of access, critical pedagogy, and media education. Inductive analysis analyzed themes judged to be emerging from the data provided by the community producers; these themes were directed by the research questions. Analysis followed procedures for qualitative investigation as primarily discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Patton (1990), and Strauss and Corbin (1990).
 10. Some of the findings not addressed in this article include: new awareness of self and others, the importance of the volunteer "credit" system, the desirability of greater participation by producers in the access management structure, the producer's notions of "community," survival as a motivating force in the access facility, and the economic empowerment possibilities available through access participation.
 11. The process nature of public access has been argued by Robert Devine (1992b), and Fred Johnson (1994).
 12. Garnham (1987), 67.
 13. Note that a focus on personal transformation as part of social change is not a pluralist obsession on individualism, but a dialectical process of interaction between the individual and the collectivity.

If Access is your privilege, then this is your responsibility...

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