

A Guide to Philosophical Discussions of Community Media

BY JOHN W. HIGGINS

In the early 1990s I was a graduate student with an extensive background in commercial and community-based media, working on a dissertation about public access. Fred Johnson of Media Working Group put together a conference in Cincinnati, Ohio, that brought together two groups with interests in community media: scholars and practitioners. Between breaks, Dirk Koning from Grand Rapids pulled out a elaborately folded, origami-like piece of paper and asked me to choose “Pee Wee’s Magic Word of the Day.” (“Pee Wee’s Magic Word” was a feature of a popular children’s television program; when the secret word was mentioned throughout the show, all people and objects went wild.)

I chose a section of the folded paper; it lifted to reveal the word “hegemony.” When I chose another, the word “pedagogy” was revealed; another showed “counter-hegemonic video.” We laughed uproariously—the scholarly presentations had been rather stuffy and pretentious and, in some instances, unnecessarily obscure and jargon-laden. Nonetheless, the conference was successful in bringing together scholars and practitioners interested in promoting the ideals of grassroots, community-based, democratic media, and rooting the emergent theoretical perspectives on lived practice. The meeting was one event that helped cultivate “public intellectuals,” or “organic intellectuals,” or “philosopher practitioners”—people who engage the world through practice, reflect on the broader impact of such actions, with a theoretically and politically based consciousness about the implications of action and thought.

I think about that experience in Cincinnati at times. Access participation tends to cultivate public intellectuals from many different walks of life, involved in many different capacities within access: producers, staff, viewers, board members,

administrators. We need a space to gather and theoretically frame our access experiences, to place them in larger contexts—political, social, or philosophical, to name but a few. It doesn’t take an advanced degree to participate in these discussions. But it can help to have a guide to the conversation.

Philosophical discussions related to access at times draw on shorthand terms in order to convey complex ideas in a

fully realize goals of equality and participatory democracy. They provide a more robust understanding of the nature of politics and power within society than the one-dimensional views portrayed on our nightly network newscasts.

The American mass media train us not to think too deeply about our lives, our beliefs, our relationship with the world. The corporate media promote anti-intellectualism and do little to encourage inde-

pendent analytical or critical thought. Access participation shatters this model—encouraging a process of exploration of and engagement with ourselves, our communities, our world. We see that starting with the discovery of our own voice—or helping someone discover theirs—we can shape our world, we can make a difference.

Here is a brief guide to some of the concepts behind the discussions:

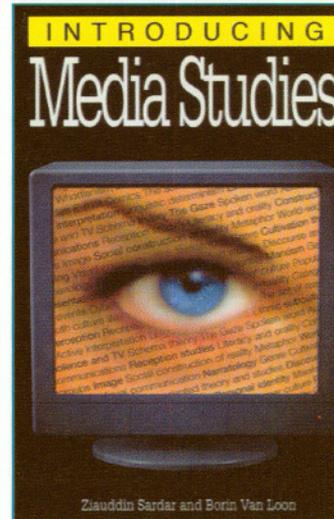
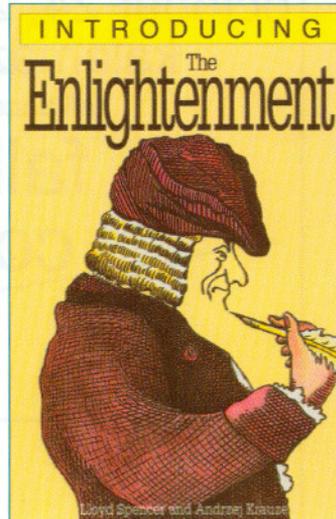
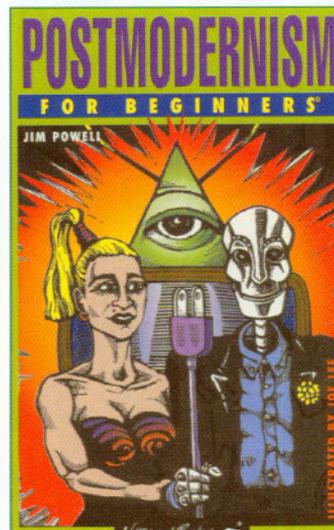
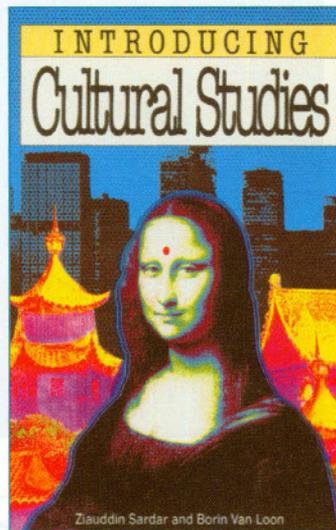
The Enlightenment

The 18th century European philosophical movement upon which the founding philosophies of the U.S. constitutional system were based. The Enlightenment—the “Age of Reason”—applied “scientific,” rational thought to all areas of life: morality, politics, social, religion, philosophy, and science. The Enlightenment venerated the role of the independent, aloof, “objective” philosopher.

Liberal democratic, republican; pluralist thought

Generic terms referring to the Enlightenment-based principles underlying the U.S. constitutional system. Whether discussing “right” or “left” or “centrist” political stances, the big picture of U.S. political philosophy is a republican (representative) based system, encouraging grassroots participation with an equality of rights (democratic), inclusive of diverse groups and thought (pluralist) and liberal (progressive, reform-oriented—from the perspective of the era of the Enlightenment) in approach.

Ideas related to the “marketplace of



short period of time. Some of the more philosophically-based critiques of access and community media may seem a bit alien to the uninitiated; they are based on political and philosophical thought emerging primarily from the experiences of World Wars I and II. These schools of thought challenged many of the philosophical assumptions of the European and American democracies in order to more

fully realize goals of equality and participatory democracy. They provide a more robust understanding of the nature of politics and power within society than the one-dimensional views portrayed on our nightly network newscasts.

ideas," "one person, one vote"—or "first come, first served"—stem from these roots.

Critical

Not the same as "analytical." In this context, "critical" refers to an analysis that includes power (political) relationships, may be self-reflexive in approach, and seeks social change. The term also identifies a particular approach to scholarly study that includes and transcends subject areas such as communication, sociology, anthropology, politics, economics, etc. Critical theory disputes much of what it sees as naïve (unproblematic, under-theorized) assumptions of the Enlightenment, while supporting the goals of personal and societal transcendence.

For example, a critical approach might argue that the best way to achieve a "diversity of ideas" might not be from the Enlightenment-based "clash of ideas in the marketplace," but from a more cooperatively-based model.

Critical thought emphasizes the role of the "organic intellectual"—the practitioner/philosopher who, guided by a political and philosophical awareness, is able to act within the world, reflect alone and with others on the effect of those actions, and re-direct action accordingly—to change the world.

Power

Notions of power are at the heart of critical thought and critiques of the Enlightenment. "Power" means issues of dominance and acquiescence, of which traditional politics ("liberal democratic"/"pluralist" discussions) are only a small part. An analysis of power within personal relationships, the media, or society, includes an exploration of which groups rule, which groups are subjugated, how the situation got to be this way, what ideals and practices hold the unequal power relationships in place, how the situation might be envisioned differently, and what actions might be taken to change the situation. These steps are applied from the micro to the macro levels, from personal to societal situations.

A critical analysis of "first come, first served," for example, would argue that the policy perpetuates unequal power relationships in the society—since the people or groups most likely to first come through the door are those who already exercise some influence (power) in the community. The policy of "first come, first served"

would be seen as politically naïve in that it attempts to restructure societal power relationships (giving unheard voices an opportunity to be heard), but actually ends up reinforcing the status quo.

Hegemony

A key concept in the notion of power. Formulated by Italian activist and philosopher Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s, the concept attempts to explain how power actually operates within society. Hegemony is the ability of the dominant group(s) to exercise social and cultural leadership over subordinated group(s) — AND to maintain power over the economic, political, and cultural direction of the larger society. This dominance is achieved through social and cultural means, not by direct coercion of subordinated groups.

An active, shifting set of group alliances, hegemony is said to work best when hidden. We consent to work with the dominant group, often against our own self and/or group interests. Hegemony identifies culture as a site of struggle between groups; in particular, the media reinforce ideologies that help the dominant group stay in power, since the media serve to maintain the status quo.

Of particular significance to access practitioner/philosophers is the notion of resistance to the hegemonic process: that there will always be resistance to the hegemonic process; opposition and alternatives can always be counted to spring up.

These alternatives will usually be "trashed" ("marginalized") by mainstream thought, which is dominated by the hegemonic group.

Pedagogy

An expanded conceptualization of "teaching" and "learning" that recognizes both processes take place at the same time. Rather than being limited to just institutional schooling, pedagogy refers to the way we learn about the world, and how we teach others to perceive the world. Within the critical perspective, these processes are considered sites of intense power and ideological conflicts.

Resources

I was led to graduate studies by a fascinating comic book that raised intellectual questions within a fun format. So, I place a lot of stock in illustrated books—sort of like hefty comic books with thought-provoking content. For a fun exploration of some of the ideas presented above, try the illustrated/comic book series "Introducing..." or "...For Beginners." Some of these include:

Introducing the Enlightenment, by Lloyd Spencer and Andrzej Krauze. Cambridge: Icon. 2000.

Introducing Media Studies, by Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon. New York: Totem. 2000.

Introducing Cultural Studies, by Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon. New York: Totem. 1998.

Postmodernism for Beginners, by Jim Powell. New York: Writers and Readers. 1998.

Where in the World...

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people around the world who are dedicated to dialogue and democratic exchange. In 2003 there will be a World Summit on the Information Society at the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in Geneva. For the first time groups from civil society will take part. In the past it has only been business and governments. There is a growing movement to have democratic communication finally on the agenda of this international organization which, among other activities, assigns the global orbital slots for satellites. I hope that Alliance members will find out about this meeting (www.comunica.org) and become involved in this effort. At a recent meeting to prepare for this summit at UNESCO in Paris, I proposed that the ITU consider requiring all military satellites to have a proportion of their transponders dedicated to peace. It's about time. Of course that will take a long struggle. In the meanwhile we can begin at home, on our own channels.

DeeDee Halleck is a University of California San Diego professor emeritus, long time media activist, and author of the recent book, Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media. She can be reached by email at dhalleck@weber.ucsd.edu

This article will be presented in a White Paper session at the 2002 national conference of the Alliance for Community Media in Houston, Texas.

Resources for the Access Practitioner/Philosopher

ORGANIZATIONS

Our Media, Not Theirs

A one day gathering of scholars and practitioners of alternative media from around the world to discuss practical and theoretical issues within "alternative," "radical," "community," "citizens" media. The focus is primarily on the Americas and Europe. The 2001 conference was in Washington, D.C.; the 2002 gathering is scheduled for July 20 in Barcelona. Information and papers from the conferences are available on the Our Media website: faculty.menlo.edu/~jhiggins/ourmedia

Union for Democratic Communication

This organization brings together activists in academics and community-based media to explore issues within alternative media. Visit www.udc.org

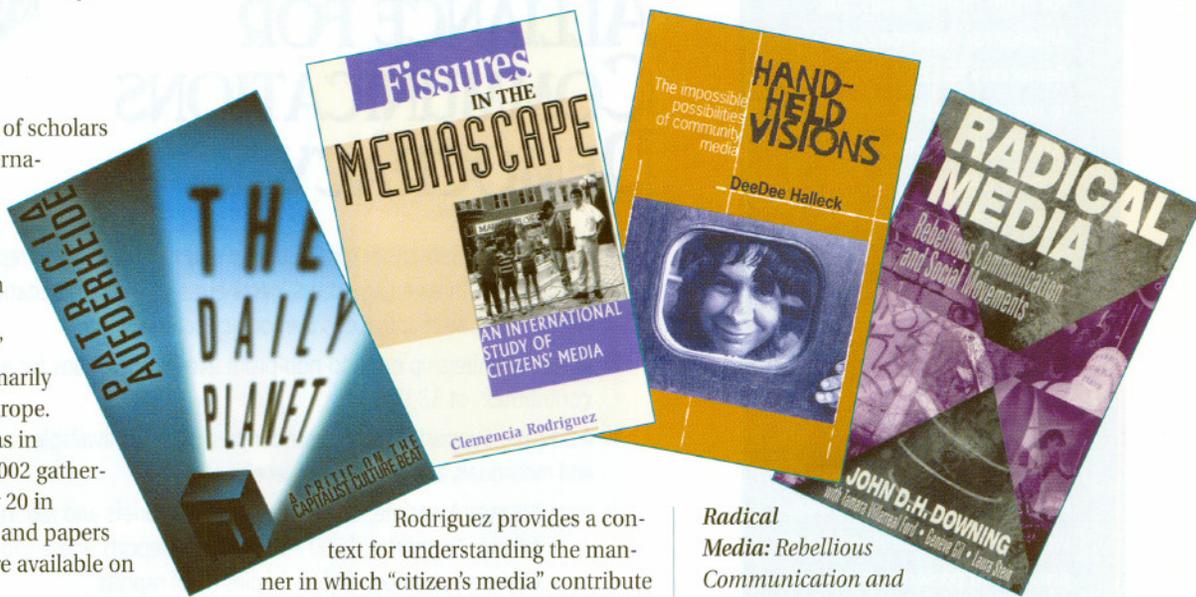
BOOKS

The Daily Planet: A Critic on the Capitalist Culture Beat, by Patricia Aufderheide. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

This collection of essays by cultural critic and public intellectual Pat Aufderheide explores a range of issues related to the practice and culture of media in the U.S. and around the world. Topics include film, broadcasting, the Internet, media literacy, public policy, as well as access cable television's contribution to the public sphere. International concerns concentrate on cinema and grassroots video in Latin America.

Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens' Media, by Clemencia Rodriguez. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2001.

Rodriguez presents four international case studies in grassroots electronic media, framing the discussion within the context of the democratization of communication and the survival of cultural identities. She explores numerous instances of "citizen's media" around the world, and focuses on instances in revolutionary Nicaragua in the 1980s; Catalonia, Spain; Colombia; and Latino radio in the U.S.



Rodriguez provides a context for understanding the manner in which "citizen's media" contribute to social change.

Hand-Held Visions: The Uses of Community Media, by DeeDee Halleck. New York: Fordham University Press, 2002.

Media activist and film/video maker DeeDee Halleck shares stories and thoughts from her three decades of experience with community-based media in the U.S. and around the world. The essays that make up this book are drawn from diary entries, articles, conference keynote addresses and presentations. Halleck thoughtfully combines people's stories, case studies, personal experiences, and theoretical frameworks to make the case for grassroots-oriented media and national/international policies that encourage community media. Topics touch on the origins of Paper Tiger TV, Deep Dish Network, and Gulf Crisis TV Project; public access cable television as an international model of community-based media; women and media; international examples of alternative media; and the Indy Media Center movement. The book includes a timeline of technology and alternative media — a helpful tool for anyone exploring the history of media industries and media activism in the U.S.

Jamming the Media: A Citizen's Guide: Reclaiming the Tools of Communication, by Gareth Branwyn. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997.

Branwyn explains how to use public access television, the internet, film, radio, 'zines, and other media—from conception, through production, to distribution.

Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements, by John Downing, with Tamara Villareal Ford, Genève Gil, and Laura Stein. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001.

Downing, et. al., present a theoretical framework in which to consider "radical," "alternative" media, including notions of audience, power, hegemony, community, and the public sphere. Organizational models of radical media are discussed. Various media in Europe and the U.S. are explored, including print, radio, video, the Internet, community radio, and public access television.

The Video Activist Handbook. 2nd ed., by Thomas Harding. London: Pluto Press, 1997.

Harding provides examples of video activism around the world, as well as skills and strategies for pursuing social change using video as a tool.

PUBLICATIONS

Community Media Review. 25th Anniversary Issue (24.2: Summer 2001). This issue of CMR, a publication of the Alliance for Community Media, highlights the 25th anniversary of the Alliance (formerly the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers). Historical and philosophically-oriented articles trace the roots of access in the U.S. and the continuing use of grassroots-based, democratic media in the struggle for a more equitable society. A must for everyone interested in the roots and current state of affairs of the community access video movement in the U.S.

To order, visit www.alliancecm.org.