The Praxis of Access:
Access and Global Activism

BY JOHN W. HIGGINS

The 1920s & 1930s. Around the world, media-visionaries struggle toward a dream involving a relatively new media outlet: radio. The vision sees radio devoted to shared communication among people, rather than a one way transmission device for selling commercial products held by a few companies. In Germany, Bertolt Brecht reflects the vision, stating "Radio could be the most wonderful public communication system imaginable . . . could be, that is, if it were capable not only of transmitting but of receiving, of making the listener not only hear but also speak, not of isolating him but of connecting him." The global movement is but a recent manifestation of grassroots-oriented, democratic media. In the U.S., the general population shares the belief that radio should stay commercial-free — dominated by the educators and non-profit groups who developed the new medium. The commonly held perspective sees radio as a tool to uplift and unify the nation's people, rather than an instrument of crass commercialism. The movement builds on the work of radical film makers and photographers, struggling against domination of information by the mainstream film industry.

The 1940s & 1950s. In the U.S., struggles to utilize media technologies for non-commercial, grassroots communication focus on the emerging technologies of FM radio and broadcast television. Across the globe, community-based radio stations emerge, based on local social movements. In 1947 the tin miners' union in Bolivia starts broadcasting from a chain of stations in the mountains. Over the years, the miners defend their stations from a variety of threats—including government troops attempting to shut down the miners' voice. In 1949, community radio is born in the U.S. in the form of progressive KPFA in Berkeley, California during an era of anti-communist hysteria and government repression. Soon after, the Pacifica network is born.

The 1960s & 1970s. The options for democratic, grassroots media expand to include the emerging technology of portable video equipment for the creation of community-based programs. Those testing the limits of the new medium include activists, artists, and long-standing community-based documentary film groups. Experiments with the new medium take place, among other places, in Britain, Mozambique, France, Chile, and the U.S. Canada's success with using film and video for social change, the "Challenge for Change" program, is noted by activists intent on adapting technology to the purpose of progressive social change.

At this same time in the U.S., the 20-year-old technology of cable television is moving from rural to urban areas, providing a window of opportunity for the distribution of community-based communication. An unusual alliance of cable company executives, media activists, and government regulators forges an agreement that will open the door for community television channels—known as "access channels"—for public, educational, and governmental use.

The social environment of the late 1960s and early 1970s cultivates the sense that social institutions are ineffective and a centralized broadcast media are particularly culpable in perpetuating social inequities. Cable television is cast as a technology that will help bypass centralized control of information, and provide alternative sources of information and opinion to an information-starved public. Access channels will help the de-centralization of information and authority, and reinvigorate the social fabric of the republic—developing an involvement in the workings of the democracy at the grassroots level. This is to happen by including everyday people in the creation of television programs and the discussion of current events of significance to the community certain to be the focus of these programs.

Within this social environment emerges the Alternate Media Center, created by George Stoney and Red Burns, and fed by the accumulated knowledge of the "Challenge for Change" program and similar experiments involving media for social change from around the world over the decades. One program of the Alternate Media Center places interns with cable companies across the U.S., to utilize access channels and develop facilities that will become neighborhood meeting centers, based around community media.

These interns, in the parlance of the development discourse, become "animateurs"—"social animators"—"change agents." They foster structures and practices based on group-held interpretations of representative democracy. They share a vision of a more equitable society run less from the centralized positions of corporate and governmental power; and more from the grassroots—where everyday people have more of an impact on their day to day lives and the direction of the human race.

By the mid 1970s, the interns soon find themselves accompanied by a growing number of interested individuals and groups intent on using media as a tool with which to change society. These social and media activists form an organizing group, the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers (NFLCP), to share experiences, promote the use of community access channels and facilities, and lobby for community access to a variety of distribution channels and the democratization of media systems. The NFLCP (renamed the Alliance for Community Media) begins publication of a newsletter which later becomes the *Community Television Review* (*CTR*, renamed *Community Media Review*, *CMR*) to share ideas and help strengthen the bonds of community within the group. The organization continues forging links with allies in the long-term struggle for the democratization of media and establishment of a more equitable society—globally and locally. In so doing, the Alliance continues a tradition of global social activism described in this essay in the 1920s and '30s.

Reassessing Access Philosophy. It's helpful to occasionally revisit the "big picture" of access within the broader context of global social movements and activist ideology. For one thing, the long history of

alternative media shows us that a grassroots medium can survive and flourish only if linked to and nourished by accompanying social movements. Whether it is a movement focusing on the environment, civil rights, women's issues, media activism, labor concerns, affordable housing, peace issues, etc., it helps to remember that community media are just the tool—not the ends in itself.

It helps to remember, too, that access facilitators are political agents of social change, helping social movements better utilize the tools of media.

This is harder to keep in mind when focused on the day-to-day activities that keep access operating. The need for "how-to" information that can be applied to immediate problems within the access environment often dictates that we close off thoughts about the bigger picture until a more convenient time—a "later" that often never arrives.

Yet, for survival sake, that "later" should be "sooner." The burnout that can accompany community media facilitation at times can be assuaged by taking the necessary pause for introspection: basically, who are we? Why do we do what we do? What are the philosophies behind community media, and how are the day-to-day practices supporting these philosophies? What assumptions underlying the philosophies have changed for each of us personally —or for the movement?

The Praxis of Access

To grow, people or organizations need to discuss and question shared values and assumptions—vigorously and regularly—recognizing that expansion will often come from those ideas and beliefs most likely to challenge our own. This is the "praxis" of access: a cycle of practice and reflexivity resulting in changed practices....and evolving values and beliefs regarding the nature of access.

The maturing of the NFLCP/Alliance and the community media movement's basic philosophies, can be traced from the pages of *CTR/CMR* and other publications concerned with grassroots, democratic media. In particular, *CTR/CMR* indicate an evolution from pure idealism and naiveté...to more robust ideologies, grounded in both theory and practice.[1]

Over the past two and a half decades, the contents of the *CTR/CMR* were concerned primarily with the techniques of access operation: the "how-to's" of managing the facility, training, negotiating franchise agreements, effectively utilizing volunteers, etc. Organizing and lobbying efforts on behalf of community media were discussed. Often there were references to a widely accepted access notion, such as "an individual right to say what she or he wants." These notions—the underlying belief system of access, drawing from traditional pluralist assumptions about the nature of power, democracy, and freedom of speech—were rarely probed... until around the late 1980s.

Starting at this time, the NFLCP/Alliance went through a vigorous period of critique, questioning basic access concepts. The reevaluation was reflected through the pages of *CTR* and *CMR*, scholarly publications, and "White Papers" presented at national conferences. Access philosophers such as Bob Devine, Fred Johnson, Patricia Aufderheide, Andrew Blau, Dirk Koning, and DeeDee Halleck, among others, reflected a concern with unproblematic assumptions of early access philosophies, and posed new interpretations regarding the significance of access within a shrinking realm of public discourse. The publications matched periods of attention at national conferences on White Papers—single presentations by long-timers in the access movement addressing philosophical issues in community media. The presentations led to on-going discussions regarding the nature of access and the future direction of community media.[2]

Some of the concepts and issues explored during this period of reevaluation included fascinating discussions regarding:

▲ The shift in First Amendment interpretations away from the individual right of a speaker to the collective right that ideas be voiced and heard;

▲ Movement away from the notion of "one person, one vote," based on unfounded assumptions of equal power in the society;

▲ A shift away from the notion of "first come, first served," based on how this concept helps to maintain existing inequalities of power in society;

▲ The importance of access within the concept of the "public sphere" (the realm where people are able to discuss items of public importance);

▲ Access is best conceptualized as a process involving community dialog rather than as a product involving polished "TV" programs, mass audiences, or technological toys;

▲ The many meanings of "community"—not all of them warm and fuzzy—and how the definitions impact concepts of public access;

▲ Media education as a means of "reading" and interpreting the world within notions of power and social change;

▲ The impossibility of political "neutrality" on the part of community media and access facilitators ("political" in the framework of power rather than partisan politics);

▲ The manner in which training methods are political, in that they force people to view the world through a particular cultural/perceptual "lens;"

▲ Attempts by mainstream media to portray "camcorder commandos" as threats to individual privacy.

Cycles of attention to practice and reflexivity and the evolution of basic philosophies are the norm for a maturing organization—or individuals, for that matter. The "how" is helpful in establishing an effective practice; the "why" is necessary in evaluating one's own practice, making appropriate corrections, and moving forward. Praxis, the connection between practice and reflexivity that sees an on-going interplay between the two, is particularly significant for individuals and organizations engaged in the process of social change.

Modern Global Activism

At the heart of the activist movement that was the nascence of community television channels in the U.S. was a continuing global grassroots struggle against the concentration of economic and social power, and the consolidation of corporate media power—with its ensuing stranglehold on information. Today there is a resurgence of global activism favoring similar goals of local determination and community empowerment that have been expressed since the early part of the 20th century, and for centuries prior to that. This renewed climate of activism is now giving birth to yet another form of and approach to media activism: the Independent Media Center (IMC) movement.

In November 1999, this renewed global activist movement flexed its collective muscle. Extensive demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle signaled a resurgence

of global protest against the concentration of economic and social power. Protests have continued around the world against organizations seen as instrumental in the concentration of global power.

A key element of the movement has been the emergence of local IMCs—to distribute information and bypass the gatekeepers of the mainstream media. IMCs are sprouting up around the world, as evidenced by the growing number of centers listed on the IMC website at *www.indymedia.org*.

The IMC movement presents a unique mixture of video, audio, print, internet, and satellite mediums. In the US, there are some connections between Indy Media Centers and the cable access movement, but the field is ripe for additional collaborations. The links will not always be easy—at times, access seems out of touch with its activist roots, particularly to youthful social and media activists; institutionalized, entrenched, engaged in bureaucratic politics at the local and national levels...with notions of political "neutrality" that seem incongruous to these constituencies.

The challenges and opportunities provided by a resurgence of activism and additional alternative media channels indicate another growth stage in the access cycle of praxis. Technologies such as the Internet and broadband offer sites of current and future struggle. The opportunity to enlist additional partners in a long-term campaign for social justice and media reform at the global level has expanded.

In the 1930s, Brecht spoke about radio. He could easily have been speaking about the struggle for cable access, or broadband access or Internet access, when he said: "...By continuous, unceasing proposals for the better employment of the apparatus in the interest of the community, we must destroy the social basis of that apparatus and question their use in the interests of the few."

Access cable television in the US is a part of a wider global movement for social change. We can renew the cycle of praxis by connecting with and celebrating access's long-standing roots in social activism and by sharing this story of struggle with volunteers, staff, board members, viewers, city officials, and beyond. The story strengthens in the repetition...and the ripples continue to spread back and forth across the globe.

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Notes

1 In the early 1990s, a research project led me repeatedly through every article in all available issues of the CTR/CMR, seeking discussions that would address the philosophical basis of access. Of particular help was the 10th anniversary issue and Susan Bednarczyks' accounting of the NFLCP history. I am indebted to many people in the NFLCP/Alliance over the years for sharing their visions of community media, starting with my stint as an intern in the national office in 1982. In particular, thanks to Bob Devine and DeeDee Halleck, whose insightful works and valuable feedback have helped me refine my own philosophical perspectives of community media. Thanks, too, to Brenda Dervin of Ohio State University for a broader framework in which to conceptualize the access vision.

2 White Papers from 2001-2003 Alliance conferences are available at www.mediaprof.org/acmwhitepaper . The summer 2002 issue of the CMR, "Rethinking Access Philosophy," includes white papers from 2001 and 2002.

This article and white papers available at:
www.mediaprof.org/acmwhitepaper