Alternative Media and the Cult of Individualism: Experiences from U.S. Public Access Cable TV

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Paper presented at the "Our Media" pre-conference of the
International Association for Media and Communication Research,
Community Communication Section
Barcelona, Spain July 20, 2002

This paper is available on-line at the Our Media website:
http://faculty.menlo.edu/~jhiggins/ourmedia

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Abstract

Community video cable television facilities in the U.S., “public access,” share basic tenets with global community media, including the desirability of a diversity of ideas and freedom of expression. Early access ideology typically drew from unproblematic notions of individual rights to “free speech”; later approaches within the public access movement have included more complex traditional or critical interpretations of freedom of speech as a social good.

Participants in public access typically draw from one-dimensional individualist concepts of free speech. Simple notions of individual rights allow volunteer community producers a mechanism by which they can tolerate deep ideological divisions, as drawn from a study of volunteer access producers. An overemphasis on Individual rights also poses problems for public access, as reflected in problematic practices such as “first come, first served.” The discussion holds significance for global participants in community media.

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Speech concerning public affairs is more than self-expression, it is the essence of self-government
U.S. Supreme Court (Red Lion 1969)

Introduction

Community video in the United States emerged from decades of global experiences with activist participatory projects in electronic media, such as the tin miners' radio network in Bolivia, community radio in the U.S., the Challenge for Change program in Canada, and the traditions of radical documentary film around the world. Within this context, public access cable television in the U.S. represents a unique achievement for community-based media around the world: the institutionalization of a process that provides people the opportunity to create video programs and air them on local cable television channels; an oasis of "free speech" and "free ideas" within a commercialized, corporate global media desert.[1]

In the United States, local governments may require cable television system operators to provide channels for public, educational, or governmental use; over 1500 communities have these PEG facilities in operation (Kucharski 2001). Eighteen percent of cable systems provide equipment and channels for the public to produce and distribute local programming (Aufderheide 2000, 128). These "public access channels" allow persons from the local community to be trained in the use of television production equipment and to utilize the channel as a means of distributing finished programs. Public access facilities were first established in

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[1] A version of this paper appears in the *Community Media Review* 25.2 as "Which First Amendment are *You* Talking About?" (Summer 2002). Both papers are drawn from the chapter, "Living Tolerance: U.S. Public Access Producers and the Practices of "Free Speech." in Community Media: International Perspectives, Ed. Linda Fuller. In press 2002. I am grateful for the many contributions and insights provided by Brenda Dervin of the Department of Communication at Ohio State University on the original dissertation study. Further insight is drawn from my experiences with public access and community radio since 1974, and my current position as Vice President of the Board of Directors for the San Francisco Community Television Corporation (CTC), the non-profit organization overseeing Access San Francisco, the public access channel and facility for the city.

the late 1960s and 1970s as a means of addressing inequities caused by monopoly-dominated broadcasting, providing everyday people an opportunity to voice and hear viewpoints and opinions not normally expressed in mainstream media (Engelman 1990; Fuller 1994; Linder 1999).

A fundamental tenet of the global community media movement, including public access, is the desirability of a diversity of ideas in relation to notions of freedom of expression. The United States particularly venerates notions of "free speech," drawing upon interpretations of relevant portions of Article I (the First Amendment) of the U.S. Constitution, which states in part: " Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech or of the press . . . "

Simple approaches to the First Amendment interpret this provision to mean that individuals have an absolute *right* to personal expression -- at times, to the extremes of "civil discourse." Long-standing traditional and more recent critical interpretations focus more on the *social benefits* that arise from open discussion in the society. In this paper I will explore one-dimensional, traditional, and critical interpretations of "free speech" and the reflection of these perspectives in public access philosophy. The manner in which volunteer community producers implement some of these free speech concepts is also explored, to help shed light on widely-held beliefs within the global community media movement

Traditional Interpretations of "Free Speech"

While the right of individual expression is guaranteed, traditional interpretations of the free speech provisions indicate that the *individual* right to speak is not as important as the benefits the *collective society* gains from an open discussion of ideas and viewpoints.[2] The opportunity of each person to express an opinion is not as important as the chance for every perspective on an issue to be expressed . . . and to be heard.

The right to *hear* a variety of ideas and viewpoints is also considered a part of free

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[2] Traditional approaches to the First Amendment are represented by Lippmann (1939), Meiklejohn (continued . . .)

speech guarantees. The assumed benefits to the larger society from the open discourse is the primary basis for the free speech guarantees. To a lesser degree, there is assumed to be a measure of personal growth for the individual involved in personal expression, but this is not meant to overshadow the greater social objectives of free speech.

Among traditional interpretations of the First Amendment, Walter Lippmann reflects the majority position on freedom of speech as a social rather than an individual need with his argument:

> So, if this is the best that can be said for liberty of opinion, that a man must tolerate his opponents because everyone has a "right" to say what he pleases, then we shall find that liberty of opinion is a luxury, safe only in pleasant times when men can be tolerant because they are not deeply and vitally concerned. [sic]
>
> Yet actually . . . there is a much stronger foundation for the great constitutional right of freedom of speech. . . . [W]e must protect the right of our opponents to speak because we must hear what they have to say. . . . [F]reedom of discussion improves our own opinions. (1939, 186)

According to the traditional First Amendment scholars, “quality of speech” is more highly valued than a simple “quantity of speech.”

One-dimensional and traditional interpretations of the First Amendment reflect the assumptions of liberal democratic philosophical thought that are found within the U.S. Constitution, the drafters of which were profoundly influenced by the 18th century Enlightenment. Ruggles notes that the Enlightenment was philosophically rooted in

> “faith in the corrective of reasoned debate, and the attainability of rational, consensual truth; the scientific perfectibility of human beings and human institutions, especially through democratic rule; [and] the necessity of an informed and tolerant populace to the functioning of a democracy . . . (Ruggles 1994, 141-142).

Simple and traditional interpretations of freedom of speech are mirrored in regulations and legislation guiding the U.S. electronic media, including those regarding public access cable television.

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(1948), Mill (1859/1993), and Ruggles (1994).

Although the basic tenets of public access reflect traditional approaches to the First Amendment, the access canon has been questioned from within the movement by a growing number of critical analyses. These critiques mirror challenges by critical scholars of traditional perspectives on free speech doctrine.

Critical Interpretations

Critical scholars have questioned both one-dimensional and traditional interpretations of free speech, and the basic tenets upon which the liberal democratic tradition is founded.[3] Critiques often question Enlightenment assumptions that a single, definable, objective "Truth" exists and that this truth can be known by human beings. Beyond the issue of truth is also a questioning of process and the assumption that truth is best revealed through a dialectic clash within the "marketplace of ideas." Frederick Schauer reflects the skepticism of many critically-oriented First Amendment scholars in his discussion of the "naive faith of the Enlightenment" that truth prevails over falsehood when the two compete in the "marketplace of ideas" (1985, 134). He notes that, “Put quite starkly, truth does not always win out. . . . The inherent power of truth and reason was one of the faiths of the Enlightenment, but more contemporary psychological and sociological insights have confirmed the judgment of history that truth is often the loser in its battle with falsity” (1985, 142).

Structural arguments related to traditional liberal democratic ideals of free speech argue that a widespread belief in the dialectic emergence of truth privileges conflict models of communication that are challenged by contemporary thought in fields such as feminist scholarship (Dervin, Osborne, et al 1993, 6). Conflict models are at the heart of pluralist assumptions of the nature of power, where power (when it is acknowledged) is traditionally envisaged as being shared equally by individuals, recognizable in the form of conflict, operating within public view, and working for the common good. In contrast, critiques of such pluralist

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[3] Critical interpretations of the First Amendment and free speech are represented by Dervin and Clark (continued . . .)

precepts describe a process where power more often works covertly for specialized interests and is inequitably distributed within society.[4]

In addition to questions of truth and the nature of power, liberal democratic assumptions of individualism -- where the individual is conceived as set against society, thus challenging social domination -- are also challenged by critical interpretations. Within this framework individuals and society cannot be divorced from one another, since each depends upon the other for identity and growth.

The critical project, then, questions liberal democratic assumptions of truth, the structure through which truth emerges, the nature of power, and the individual/collective dichotomy. In various analyses, critical scholars have espoused a more authentic democratic society, rooted in a more robust understanding of the nature of human beings and the social formations they construct.

Public Access: From "More Speech" to "Better Speech"

Early critical perspectives addressing the public access vision of empowerment and related community television assumptions in general typically came from outside the U.S. alternative video arena (Higgins 1999).[5] Within the U.S. movement, analyses of public access as a means of promoting democratic communications typically have drawn from unproblematic interpretations of free speech provisions, emphasizing individual "rights" to speak and "more speech." In the late 1970s early 1980s the level of analyses within the public access movement began shifting to reflect long-standing traditional interpretations of the First Amendment, emphasizing a desire for quality of speech over mere quantity and the needs of the society over those of the individual.

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(1993), Downing (1999), Ruggles (1994), Schauer (1985), and Streeter (1990).

[4] Drawn from Lukes (1974), Good (1989), and Gramsci (1946/1989)

[5] In particular, Bibby, Denford, and Cross (1979); Council for the Development of Community Media (1983); Garnham (1990); and Mattelart and Piemme (1980) were early contributions to a critical (continued . . .)

For example, a traditional interpretation, which visualizes free speech as a means of promoting public discourse rather than as a vehicle for personal expression, is reflected in this statement by Andrew Blau, the former chair of the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers (now the Alliance for Community Media):

> Our experience of public access to cable over the past two decades suggests that access may have nothing to do with democracy -- nothing, that is, until the people who provide and use access connect the two. We can no longer simply assume that access to media tools and channels is enough. . . .
>
> [I]f we take seriously this link between the right to speak with and hear from others and the daily practice of democracy, then we ought to organize our access tools to foster a kind of participation that enables people to take part in the decisions affecting their community. In this sense, simply talking a lot means little. (Blau 1992, 22)

This challenge to the long-established public access assumption that many voices equal diversity reflects Lippmann's arguments described previously. Until the 1980s, such a challenge was nearly heretical within public access circles. Blau’s statement also reflects critical perspectives with its recognition that structural change is necessary in concert with media activism to affect long-term social change.

A further evolution in access philosophy in the mid 1980s included critical perspectives in the analyses of public access and access’s role in the active practice of public discourse. This included a more fully developed conceptualization of the workings of power that challenged the traditional access notion of “first come, first served” with the need for actively recruiting traditionally disenfranchised groups (Higgins 2001). The critiques from within public access, developed in a laboratory of daily practice, represent positive steps to move beyond simple assumptions of democracy and power, toward a more integrated view of access within a complex societal framework. For example, Aufderheide (1992, 2000) and Devine (1992a, 1992b, 2001) have consistently raised critical themes within their work related to community television, placing public access within discussions of Habermas’ framework of the public

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examination of the general tenets underlying the community television movement worldwide.

sphere (1962/1989). Aufderheide identifies access channels as "electronic public spaces" that "strengthen the public sphere" (1992, 59) and should not be considered within traditional media measurements such as audience numbers (2000). Devine (1992b) posits that public access provides a space for public debate within the public sphere, and argues that public access is best viewed within a notion of *process* rather than *product*. Devine further describes access as a site of cultural activism: where traditional power relationships are challenged and where human agency is cultivated as people are allowed to come to voice (1992b, 22-23), "transforming consumers into public speakers/participants, and moving them from passive into active roles of engagement in the civic life of their community" (Devine 2001, 37). The manner in which public access allows persons to speak within the context of the public discussion of issues relates to both traditional interpretations of the necessity of public discourse and to critical interpretations of power.

Theory and Practice Within Public Access

The discourse continues within the U.S. access movement: witness access pioneer George Stoney's criticism of vanity-based programmers (Stoney 2001) and Bill Kirkpatrick's counter-arguments in favor of recognizing the cultural aspects of media forms and resistance (Kirkpatrick 2002). Stoney is arguing from the traditionalist perspective of the social good of free speech; Kirkpatrick argues from a critical perspective that views culture as a form of political speech that may be more than the individual self-expression it seems at face value. Note the "Rethinking Access Philosophy" issue of the Community Media Review (Summer 2002), the publication of the Alliance for Community Media (ACM), which focuses on philosophical issues, including the controversies surrounding the long-time access philosophy of "First Come, First Served."[6] Note also the spirited, wide-ranging discussion of these issues

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[6] Articles from the Summer 2002 issue of *CMR* are available on-line at http://faculty.menlo.edu/~jhiggins/acmwhitepaper/. Selected articles will be available in the future at www.communitymediareview.org.
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at White Paper sessions at ACM national conferences over the past 20 years.

Such discussions constantly raise the philosophical bar in the real-life social laboratory that is public access, testing commonly-held notions of free speech as experienced by everyday philosopher/practitioners, and moving us on to a greater understanding of the possibilities of democratic society.

The ripple effect of new ideas within access are sometimes slow to spread to a wider audience within the movement. A number of people involved in access -- administrators, staff, producers, board members -- continue to hold tightly to the one-dimensional "individual right" notion of free speech over the concept of "social good." In these circles, traditional interpretations of free speech have not yet begun to root, let alone critical perspectives on power and free speech. This mainstream approach serves a purpose, when considered as but one among several perspectives on free speech, to be drawn upon as necessary.

The "individual right" concept is easy to grasp and it doesn't need definition or discussion, since it is plugged into basic uncritical notions of American citizenship. In addition, "individual right" helps access participants negotiate the deep ideological differences between seemingly alien approaches to the world that we find at the access facility.

In a study of volunteer producers I conducted in the mid 1990s,[7] Noreen, a European-American community organizer involved in public access for six years, described the varying ideological camps at her access facility:

> *Well ... there's two groups. There's the religious right down there and there's people like me down there and then there's the ministers who don't necessarily like women and you get all these different groups of people....*
>
> *... [T]hen you get people there who wanted to do the Klan show I think last year or the year before and you get people in there and when I mentioned that when you are a camera person you are like a fly on the wall and I see two ministers talking to each other and they are saying that women shouldn't be*

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The ACM is a U.S.-based organization advocating for community media issues and promoting the use of local access channels. For information on the ACM or the *Community Media Review*, see www.alliancecm.org.

[7] For details, see Higgins (1999, 2002).

ministers. That women shouldn't be here and women shouldn't be here....

Noreen provides insights to the potential for conflict that emerge as competing groups interact within the public access facility, particularly within facilities with volunteer programs that encourage people to work as crew on other producers’ productions.

I found that producers devised a variety of methods to deal with the ideological tensions they encountered at the access facility. Primary among these strategies was evoking the dogma of freedom of expression, related to the individual “right” to speech, that allowed producers to endure ideological differences that otherwise might be personally intolerable. Internal conflict was resolved in part by resorting to someone’s "right" of individual expression: "they should be able to do that." Producers often referred to this right of expression, which seemed to be a method of coping with ideals that conflicted with their own. Tom, an African-American bus driver and Baptist minister to a small congregation who had produced 400 programs and volunteered on 300 others over his eight years with access, provided an example:

> *... like I said, I don't agree with everything that they do and they probably don't agree with everything I do. Like I said, that's what makes public access to me. We don't agree on everything but we are allowed to put forth our rights to say what we have the privilege of doing through public access. I believe, like I said, this is -- the last soapbox that we have is public access....*

Tom captured a sense of the delicate interlacing of "my rights" and "your rights" at play within the public access facility, and the subtle dance between seemingly conflicting rights.

In addition to drawing on basic notions of individual rights, producers in the study negotiated differences by refusing to work as crew members with producers with whom they had serious ideological differences. But ideological differences were handled differently than personal differences. Tom’s framing of free speech “rights” also allowed him to separate ideological differences from the human being with a problem he encountered at the facility:

> *... And when they [volunteers] come on I just try to share with them, and now there are certain shows or programs that I won't work on. Anything that's contrary to Christ, I'm not gonna work on it. I mean it's just that everybody knows that and I've helped a man put his starter up. He was a program -- his*

program was not with Christ but I helped him put his starter on. I ain't gonna help him with his program though [laughing]. But his choke broke down and I helped him with his starter [laughing]. Crawled right up under it and helped him with it, but I'm not gonna help him with his program.

As indicated by the study, an uncritical notion of free speech framed simply within a context of "individual rights" does provide a measure of tolerance for people as they encounter unfamiliar people and ideas. While recognizing the significance of these basic notions, access should actively cultivate an understanding of and appreciation for the wider aspects of First Amendment ideology -- such as the traditionalist notion of "social responsibility" -- among producers, staff, board members, and the community.

Reassessing the Access Mission

An overemphasis on individual rights eclipses the more important goals of free speech for the good of the society. Within this goal of social responsibility, producers of "vanity," "narcissistic," or "self-absorbed" programming might turn their attention to helping other, yet-unheard voices express their views.

Within some access communities, there has been an increased recognition of the need for greater discipline and more responsibility on the part of access participants. This latter perspective seems to be a consideration of some access administrators who have encountered difficulties with producers pushing the limits of the individual right to speech as applied to public access -- including "hate speech" and graphic pornographic and/or exceedingly violent programming.[8] These access leaders have attempted to cultivate an atmosphere where the

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[8] On the San Francisco public access channel, a few community producers exhibit the extremes to which the notion of free speech as an "individual right," rather than a social good, might be applied. Some producers include hard core violence and pornography within their shows, in part simply because "it's my right," and despite possible repercussions to the channel's existence.

In 1999, the San Francisco Community Television Corporation, a non-profit community-based organization, took over management and operation of the public access channel and facilities. Prior to 1999, the corporate cable system operators who ran public access cultivated individual fiefdoms based on seniority, dominated by "first comers" who have insisted their rights include a lock on prized prime-time positions in the program schedule. This has been the legacy in San Francisco of the "individual rights" interpretation related to "first come, first served." The CTC has begun nurturing values more in line with (continued . . .)

emphasis is on assisting others, including previously silenced voices, to "speak" and be heard, rather than exercising one's own "rights" to expression.

While the U.S. community television movement as a whole reflects more complex positions regarding notions of "free speech," there is no reason to believe that such perspectives will be considered or embraced by access staff and community participants any more rapidly than by the U.S. general population.[9] Community television leaders might move the discourse forward with high profile discussions of the access mission and the nature of democracy; such a progressive development would be in keeping with the framework of "access as process" espoused by Devine (1992b), Higgins (1999), and Johnson (1994), emphasizing access's ability to encourage participants to an expanding involvement in the social sphere.

Moving forward to an expanded understanding of "free speech" and social responsibility in the post-September 11 world in the U.S. involves a reassessment of ideological perspectives -- by talking at every opportunity about the basic ideas of the community media mission; the many meanings of the term "free speech"; the need for self-discipline and the sharing of resources, knowledge, and skills to create a true public discourse on our community television channels.

Such an endeavor would allow public access, as an institutionalized form of community media in the U.S., to remain as a vibrant living laboratory, contributing an enhanced understanding of the nature of "free speech," the manner in which the concept works in everyday practice, and its importance to the lifeblood of a democratic society.

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the basic concepts of community media as understood by participants across the globe.

[9] Similar perspectives on "more speech" seem to be held by some participants in the burgeoning Independent Media Center (IMC) movement, which includes a significant involvement of digital technologies to distribute alternative programming via the Internet and satellite television. The IMC movement started in Seattle in Fall 1999, giving a voice to global anti-corporate protests against the World Trade Organization. Since then, dozens of centers have been established across the world in concert with a renewed activist movement against globalization. See www.indymedia.org and Halleck (2002).

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