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***Accessing Alternative Media:
Bridging nations, the public, and classrooms
through community access television***

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Abstract

This article explores video production ideas and use of public access television as a means to enlarge critical discussion of social justice issues beyond the classroom. The paper provides an overview of public access television, examples of grassroots productions, and strategies for teachers to take back to the classroom.

Keywords: mass media, public access TV, media literacy, free speech

It virtually goes without saying that the 20th century has been host to unparalleled developments in communication technologies. From elevator music and street signs, to video games and the Internet, no one can deny that today we live in an intensely commercialized, and media saturated world. In one study, the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that young people spend an average of thirty-eight hours per week immersed in media outside of school (1999). The statistics are even more shocking if we account for accumulated media consumption over a lifetime, and especially disturbing if we are to contrast it with the hours spent in a class, actively pursuing some form of research, or participating in a movement for social justice. With each dramatic leap in communications, the realistic expectation that media technology would be used for educational applications and provide new platforms for more voices participating in the market place of ideas, seems to have become an unattainable dream. When we consider the increasing concentration of the world's media into fewer and fewer hands, serving fewer and fewer interests, namely economic, should we be surprised that our coveted rights of citizenship and free speech are being eclipsed by the demands of big business and political agendas (see www.mediachannel.org/ownership, and McChesney, Nichols, 2002). While there is a growing community of media scholars and activists willing to engage in a political dialogue in the public sphere, more often educators have sat passively on the sidelines just watching these frightening developments.

So, what is an educator to do? Though media literacy is slowly creeping into curriculums, and schools are anxious to be equipped with the latest technology, there still seems to be a very long way to go for educators, activists and students to access and use media in a progressive and productive way. The

aim of this paper is to introduce some of those alternatives, namely how citizens can produce their own programs, and share their research and critical insights with a larger audience through community access television. Hopefully after considering the options, as teachers you will no longer be satisfied with popping in a video, and letting the mass media bring the issues to you, but instead actively bring issues, creative ideas, critical thinking from where you sit and discuss back to the public sphere. In this paper I will start with an overview of community access television, then present some examples of grassroots programming, and finally some practical advice and strategy that you can take back to the classroom.

Community access, otherwise known as public access or cable access TV, owes its development to advances in portable video technology in the 1960's, and the enthusiastic support of media arts activists in North America. With citizen-based support gaining momentum in the 1970's, and the expansion of cable television companies, the United States' FCC (Federal Communications Commission) took jurisdiction over cable television and created policy which would virtually require that cable companies - in exchange for access to cables of communication - be required to provide at least three channels for public use, paid for by franchise fees which would support the local access station (for history see www.geocities.com/iconostar/history-public-access-TV.html). Protected by the first amendment right to free speech in the U.S., the station cannot censor, prohibit or reschedule programming based on content, except for material, which is considered obscene (sexually explicit). Though the creation of public access channels is a right and requirement however, it is also up to the local community to demand this access in order for a cable access facility to be created; a process, which requires contract negotiation, and a strong local government which supports the push for the facilities. The cable companies are not particularly anxious to advertise or encourage public access because it takes away from profits by giving some channels away to the public and requires significant financial contributions by the cable operator. In spite of some of the hurdles, since the 1960's community access television has spread to two thousand local communities in the U.S., and fifteen countries world-wide (Global Village CAT www.openchannel.se/cat). Although there have been some movements for independent production in Asia, not to mention the tremendous resources available, the community access system is still struggling to gain strength in Japan (PARG, ww.jca.apc.org/pmn/pac.html). This is likely a result of a lack of knowledge of these developments as well as media democracy movement.

One common misconception about community access television, is that it is the same as public television. In fact public access and public television are quite different. Whereas public TV, like NHK, is a public supported channel with the aim of being for the public, the contents and views appearing on public TV are not by the public, nor necessarily those of the public. The key difference is that public TV gets content from professionals who rely upon money coming from large institutions to produce programs. While public TV is educational and professional

in nature, because of the reliance on government and corporate funding, the content tends to take very few risks in terms of opinion, and therefore reinforces the status quo (see Ledbetter, 1977). Even on public TV in the U.S., dissent and protest is generally not allowed, but rather it is tamed and marginalized. Academics are kept out of a public dialogue when they have a message that is unpopular. As an outspoken political activist, Noam Chomsky is one of the prime examples of such media marginalization. If a world-known intellectual only rarely or never appears on public television, then is it a surprise that we do not hear about the absolute horrors of wars, in the victim's own words, or learn about particularly radical new ways of looking at the world and inequalities we often are participating in? Dissent and protest is neither good for politics nor business.

Public access, in contrast to public TV, is media for the public, by the public, and of the public. Public access TV stations provide access to anyone in the community to produce programs and air their own views for free or relatively little cost. Whereas the style and technical skill of public access productions tend to be basic and low-tech, the content and passion for issues of social concern however is extraordinary. Because of the advance of communication technologies, public access provides a unique space as an electronic soapbox or electronic town hall meeting where people are engaged in a discussion and creating viable communities at a local level.

As the variety of programming on community access is staggering, I will share just a small sample of progressive programming that serves social justice issues and cross-cultural understanding. The first two examples are broadcasts from video collectives in New York, whereas the latter two are programs which I produced in Austin, Texas.

* *Myths of the Military* is a production of the New York City video collective known as Paper Tiger TV. Like many of its progressive programs, Paper Tiger takes on the subject of the military by hitting the streets and talking to people who have been in the military, telling their own stories of what war and life in the military really means, in addition to sexism and racism in the ranks. A key feature of the program is a thorough exploration of how society and media shape a positive and heroic image of the military, as a means to ensure a public that not only consents, but celebrates war.

* *Media Manipulation by the Youth* channel in New York City centers around a student based group who explain their frustrations with the tyranny of media. The students talk at length about the unattainable images of perfection that make it difficult to accept reality when it comes to seeing themselves or the opposite sex. As a special project of the New York City community access station, the Youth Channel is a perfect example of what is possible if you give students a camera.

* *Asians and Asian-Americans in Film* is a production of Asian American Austin, which is made up of community members, students, and academics, at the University of Texas at Austin. This particular program was produced primarily by university students during a period of two months, and grew out of their interest in learning more about media images of Asians. The program was set up as a studio discussion in which the four member panel discussed the history of Asian images in Hollywood, stereotyping and new directions in independent film. During two months, a documentary (on Asian representations in film) and many films were screened as a means to prepare the panelists for discussion. Several montages of movie clips and street interviews with students were included in the studio program to liven up the discussion.

* *The Nuclear Legacy: India and Pakistan* is another production of Asian American Austin. In contrast to the previous program, which was produced by students, this program was produced primarily by academics. In the hour-long program, five individuals from South Asia talk about the costs and outcomes of nuclear proliferation in the region. This program received a great deal of praise from the community, particularly because the members of the panel were South Asians who knew the subject deeply, and could articulate the issues while respecting other panel members point of view.

In my own case, working to produce Asian American Austin was the first time that I realized the remarkably democratizing potential of cable access television. The access station housed a wildly eclectic bunch of independent community and media activists who gave life to principles of democracy and the potential of citizens. In order to produce Asian American Austin I had to go through a short training program at the station. Once trained, the crew and volunteers would meet every two weeks for programming meetings where we would discuss our ideas. I would be responsible for helping bring the ideas from the members together, doing some research, inviting guests, and arranging volunteers for the shoot. Every two weeks we would go to the studio and shoot two thirty-minute programs. Though sometimes a challenge, I tried to avoid being a gatekeeper to ideas, but instead considered myself as a facilitator for the members to produce shows. I tried to keep a distance from content decisions such as never scripting a show or telling the host what questions to ask, though I did provide materials and research to inform the host of a subject when appropriate. The program received support from an Asian community organization, local restaurants, and also a grant from the university.

In addition to the types of programs just mentioned, there is virtually no limit to what you can do with a video camera and students hungry to make a video. The bible on community media, *Hand-held Visions: the Impossible Possibilities of Community Media* by DeeDee Halleck (2002) is an indispensable

tool for media activists and educators. Some of the ideas that have come out of my own experience as an educator include:

- * group research papers on video,
- * documentary or investigative research reporting,
- * debates or panel discussions,
- * advertising parody (see Adbusters, www.adbusters.org)

How can you begin productin your own videos? Starting anything new is usually the most difficult because it is filled with unanswered questions. Keep things simple though. The best place to begin is to look around at what you have got, rather than what you don't. Does your school have a video camera? A computer? Some editing equipment? Increasingly, more and more money is being provided to schools to promote media usage, including even the hiring of full or part-time media staff to help teachers use the equipment and help produce media. Find out where your school is headed and how they intend to be a part of media literacy and bridging the digital divide. Perhaps you can initiate some talk and consider some options to gain funding so your school is equipped. Remember that discussion is the first step toward any funding process.

Beyond the doors of the school find out whether your community has a public access station, or is working on getting support to build one. If you don't have local public access, you start small by using the facilities that you already have at school, and then branch out to widen your network. That may mean making informal connections with other schools and teachers you can find on the web to start a video exchange and to get ideas. If you don't like the state of mass media, and the idea of public access TV sounds exciting, get involved. Help support the building of a community access station in your local area (see Alliance for Community Media, www.alliancecm.org)

In the best scenario, where there is a cable access station, start by looking at the programming that already exists and volunteer on a production you like in order to get a feel for the whole process. This is a perfect way to start making contacts among producers who have a similar point of view or agenda. They will most likely be very happy to have an educator (and potentially students) in their midst because this means that their volunteer and research pool is bigger. While I seriously doubt that many people would have the time or expertise to produce an on-going TV series, clearly there are opportunities to collaborate with producers or organizations that are already providing programs. All in all it increases the overall quality of programs coming out of the station when educators join in. If we educators and students are not involved in public access, we really can only blame ourselves for the poor quality of media productions, lack of media democracy in our communities, and the hegemony of the mass media.

Don't forget that perhaps one of the best resources for ideas and support is your students. Students are quicker to access technology and already have an interest in media. It is even possible that they already use editing software on their

computer. All you have to do is find one or two capable students to get on your way and possibly make a club or a collective on campus that would help support media activities to make a bridge between the class and the public.

Finally, don't be afraid of technology or your students. One of the biggest lessons I have learned in the course of teaching is to trust my students and have fun. We must avoid the big brother syndrome, thinking that we have to control the whole process and the ideas. Isn't this the problem that we already have with the mainstream media? Media is collaborative and dynamic! Share power and expertise with them. More often than not, they will be giving more to you in the process than the traditional arrangements of the classroom. This has definitely been my personal experience over the years teaching. I encourage you to consider new ways to integrate video production in your classes, and as a new way to reach out to the public.

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