

Community Television and the Vision of Media Literacy, Social Action, and Empowerment

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The vision of empowerment espoused by the community television movement is explored through an interpretive study of producers at a public access cable television facility. The findings address media literacy, the dialectical nature of societal change, and critical pedagogist Paulo Freire's taxonomy of social action. The findings suggest that the application of advanced media technologies to more democratic purposes is possible with a focus on the critical use of the technological tools for social change.

Contemporary discussions of the liberating and democratizing potential of information technologies follow a tradition of utopian vision in the introduction of technologies. Barnouw traces this trend in the history of electronic media:

It should be remembered that every step in modern media history—telephone, phonograph, motion picture, radio, television, satellite—stirred similar euphoric predictions. All were expected to usher in an age of enlightenment. All were seen as fulfilling the promise of democracy. Possible benefits were always easier to envisage than misuses and corruptions, and still are. (1978, p. 176)

This article explores the utopian vision of empowerment that accompanied the introduction of portable video and broadband cable television in the late 1960s, as expressed by the "community television" or "community video" movement—primarily in the United States. In particular, I explore the notion that learning to create television programs empowers participants and critique the assumptions underlying this tenet of community television ideology. The community video vision of empowerment is compared with the actual experiences of non-professional, volun-

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teer, television producers, using data collected at a community television facility in the United States.

The Vision of Community Television

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, two emerging technologies were viewed as having the potential to address a variety of societal inequities in North American and European societies. Portable video equipment and large channel capacity cable television were embraced by proponents who extolled the empowering aspects of television when freed from corporate and institutional control and put in the hands of the general population. The use of video by non-professionals for the purposes of personal and group empowerment, community communication and development, and social change came to be known as "community television" or "community video." Community television followed long-standing experiments in community-based radio in the U.S. and around the world (Downing, 1984; Girard, 1992; Lewis, 1993). Documentation of the emergence of the community television movement is provided by Engleman (1990), Fuller (1994), Gillespie (1975), and Willener, Milliard, and Ganty (1972).

In the United States, community television was institutionalized in the 1970s in the form of "public access" cable television facilities. Public access is generally recognized to have its conceptual roots in the National Film Board of Canada's "Challenge for Change" program in the late 1960s. The program began as part of a governmental interagency "war on poverty"; film and portable video were considered communication tools by which communities could organize and mobilize themselves and were utilized as catalysts for social change (Engleman, 1990; Johnson & Gerlach, 1977; Sloan Commission, 1971).

Public access was viewed as a means to address some of the social problems of the period, many of which grew from a fundamental distrust of centralized social institutions and a widespread belief that people had lost the power to influence the direction of the society. Proponents of public access championed a nebulous vision of empowerment, which included personal enrichment, social awareness, and social activism. This empowerment was to take place, in part, through training in video production. Learning to create television programs would "demystify" the media as individuals became aware of media structure and influence. Participating in the production of television programs would lead to a "media literacy" as individuals learned how to "read" and "write" media codes. These production and interpretation skills would not only allow persons to become more discriminating viewers, but allow them also to actively speak out in the media—contributing to a so-called electronic "marketplace of ideas."

U.S. public access was influenced by social and media activists, video artists, and the "counterculture" of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These joined an unlikely coalition of groups from business, academic, and government circles to promote cable television and public access. Streeter summarizes the utopian vision shared by these groups:

Cable . . . had the potential to rehumanize a dehumanized society, to eliminate the existing bureaucratic restrictions of government regulation common to the industrial world, and to empower the currently powerless public. (1987, p. 181)

Guerrilla Television, by Michael Shamberg and the Raindance media collective (1971), embodies the philosophy of the video movement of this period from one perspective within the "counterculture." Here they illustrate the concept of a liberating video tied to social action:

Community video will be subversive to any group, bureaucracy, or individual which feels threatened by a coalescing of grassroots consciousness. Because not only does decentralized TV serve as an early warning system, it puts people in touch with one another about common grievances. (1971, p. 57)

European community television activists shared a similar utopian vision, as exemplified by Willener et al. when describing video experiments in *Videology and Utopia: Explorations in a New Medium*:

We shall . . . try to abstract from our videological praxis the basic conceptual, schematic, and sociological framework that this field seems to us to need, at the same time revealing, through the articulation of the process, the potential for transformation that can be liberated by video. (1972, p. 113)

Today, community television continues as an active practice across the globe, providing the general public with opportunities specific to each locale: access to video production equipment, training in the use of this equipment, and/or distribution outlets for their completed video programs (Dowmunt, 1993; Lewis, 1993; Thede & Ambrosi, 1991). In the U.S., distribution of community television programming is primarily through local cable television channels—nearly 2,000 communities are served by such facilities (Ingraham, 1991). Dedicated for use by the public, or set aside for government or education (PEG), these access channels produce over 20,000 hours of original programming each week (Alliance for Community Media, 1997). PEG access channels are funded primarily through the fee paid by the cable company to the local franchise authority for use of the public right of way; some of these funds are then allocated to access facilities.

Given its foundation as an alternative to commercial, corporate-dominated electronic media, the philosophical orientation of public access differs sharply from that of mainstream commercial television. The access movement emphasizes notions of the public interest and the public sphere over profits, and public access facilities focus more on providing an outlet for access to and the expression of marginalized ideas than on audience size. In a study of controversial programming on access channels, Aufderheide (1994) documents the role of cable access in providing an electronic space for public discussion and social action. Within this perspective, community television is best viewed as a "process-based" phenomenon that is not appropriate to frame within traditional categories of mainstream television: programs, production values, and audience size (Devine, 1992; Johnson, 1994).

Groups active today in the community television movement, such as those represented by the international organization Videazimut or the U.S.-based Alliance for Community Media (ACM)¹ continue to promote the use of video and new technologies to "democratize the nation and to empower the disenfranchised" (Drew, 1995, p. 83). In particular, the belief that video and other technologies can be used in a manner to empower people and communities continues to permeate contemporary community television philosophy.

These notions of empowerment are not uncontested, however. Critiques of the empowerment dimension of the community television philosophy are explored below.

Critiques of the Empowerment Vision

Despite its roots in social activism, until the late 1980s mainstream U.S. public access focused primarily on the practice of access; discussion of philosophic precepts was uncritical and limited to pluralist "free speech" aspects of the movement. For the most part, the access movement avoided being linked with the tradition of radical political activity Downing (1990) traces in alternative media movements from the mid-18th century. Exceptions have been provided by media organizations with roots in social activism, such as the New York-based video collective Paper Tiger Television (Paper Tiger Television, 1991). Since the early 1990s, a strong self-reflective perspective has emerged within the movement, questioning long-held tenets of community television ideology.

Of the critiques of community television, the most significant argues that the empowerment vision does not address the structural changes necessary to correct societal inequities, in part because of focus on technology and its roots in liberal pluralist dogma.

Technological Utopianism

Both Slack (1984) and Williams (1974) address the failure of technological utopians to look beyond the immediate technology to the societal structures within which technology operates. Slack connects what she terms the "alternative technology movement" to the counterculture of the late 1960s and points out the shortcomings of the movement's philosophy:

A critique of technologies necessarily involves a critique of the society that uses them.

The critique remains inadequate, however, due to the movement's fascination with technology, a fascination that tends to cloud the ability to comprehend the full range of complexity operative in the relationship between technology and society. This fascination is an only thinly veiled commitment to the equation of technological growth and social progress. (1984, p. 38)

Williams (1974) argues against a "symptomatic technology" position, noting that

the weakness with this argument is that it separates technology from society rather than seeing technology as the result of the intention of certain interests within the society.

The failure to address structural inequities is applied to community television by Bibby, Denford, and Cross (1979); Garnham (1990); Mattelart and Piemme (1980); and Willener, Millard, and Ganty (1972). Enzensberger reflects the general opinion when he asserts:

Anyone who expects to be emancipated by technological hardware, or by a system of hardware however structured, is the victim of an obscure belief in progress. Anyone who imagines that freedom for the media will be established if only everyone is busy transmitting and receiving is the dupe of a liberalism which, decked out in contemporary colors, merely peddles the faded concepts of a preordained harmony of social interests. (1970/1988, p. 34)

These critiques assert that, without the broader perspective of technology within societal structures, the "symptomatic technology" or the "alternative technology" movement is easily co-opted by contributing "to the health of just that system of corporate domination that it initially reacted against" (Slack, 1984, p. 36). Garnham asserts that the "myths of video"—including claims of demystification, democratization, and a "process" rather than "product" orientation—are propagated by dominant economic and social forces attempting to market consumer video equipment (1990, p. 68). Challenges to Garnham's assertions are discussed later in this essay.

Blau applies the critique of technological utopianism directly to the U.S. public access movement:

We should thus be deeply skeptical about any claims that access is inherently democratizing. Such claims are made through the narcotic haze of technological utopianism that was widespread at the time when access first appeared in cable franchises. (1992, p. 23)

The sources noted above refer to a perspective of technology divorced from social structures; this view was characteristic of one of the major groups within the alternative video movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Boyle (1997) identifies two contrasting perspectives within alternative video in the U.S. in this time period: guerrilla television and community or grassroots video. The former, associated with Michael Shambert's *Guerrilla Television* (1971), was not aligned with leftist politics or a political movement but reflected a "technoradicalism [that] was conspicuously lacking in political analysis" (Boyle, 1997, p. 30). Guerrilla television's focus on product—developing the hardware of portable video as a viable medium and distributing programs to wider audiences (Boyle, 1997, p. 34)—makes this strain of the alternative video movement most susceptible to the critique of technological utopianism discussed above. In the end, guerrilla television groups faded away or became absorbed by the mainstream media industries.

In contrast, community/grassroots video groups stressed participation by community members in creating their own programs and reflected a "process" over polished

"product" orientation (Boyle, 1997, p. 34). This faction of the alternative video movement was primarily responsible for the establishment of cable access facilities, was actively engaged in political struggle, and continues to be the driving force behind the survival of these outlets today. The endurance of the community/grassroots video groups is tied to their emphasis on the larger process of social change and the use of video as a tool within this context, rather than on the technological toys themselves, as characterized by the guerrilla television group.

In summary, critics attacking the uncritical technological utopian aspects of community television either directly or indirectly assert that the community television movement represents a technological—and therefore superficial—response to societal problems. These authors do not rule out the possibility that technology might be used for progressive ends; they merely note the difficulty in doing so.

Liberal Democratic Assumptions

Additional critiques of community television in the U.S. and Europe emerge from the empowerment vision's foundation on contested notions within liberal democratic ideology. This discourse centers on the nature of truth and structures through which truth will emerge, the nature of power, and the relationship between the individual and the collective.²

A critique of pluralist assumptions—particularly those underlying the freedom of speech guarantees of the U.S. Constitution—questions the notion of a singular, objective "Truth" rather than multiple "truths" that are bounded by context and perspective. The emergence of "truths" is not necessarily facilitated by the conflict implied in discussions of competition within the "marketplace of ideas." Rather, cooperative structures may expedite a collective discovery and/or construction of "truth." This framework also questions the ability of an electronic "marketplace of ideas" to correct societal inequities.

A related argument addresses liberal democratic assumptions that overemphasize the role of the individual and pit the individual against the collective; this dichotomy overlooks the dialectic nature of the individual and of the societal grouping of which she is a part. A focus on personal rights to individual expression reflects this emphasis.

Critical scholars contest pluralist ideology conceptualizations of power as an overt force that is distributed equally within society, invariably operating for the common good. Instead, power operates covertly, is unequally distributed within society, and does not always operate in the best interests of the collective. As such, a diversity of ideas and/or "personal expression" will do little to address basic societal inequities.

Other critics connect traditional liberal democratic discussions of freedom of speech issues directly with community television, arguing that the traditional focus on community television as a vehicle for personal expression perpetuates a pluralist myth of individualism (Bibby et al., 1979; Council for the Development of Community Media, 1983; Mattelart & Piemme, 1980).

Another critique, originating from within the pluralist framework, says that public

access's emphasis on individual expression privileges the quantity of ideas in any context rather than the quality of ideas raised while discussing public issues, both political and cultural. The authors argue that a diversity of voices does not necessarily equate to a diversity of ideas (Aufderheide, 1992; Devine, 1990).

The discussion above places the romantic vision of the community television movement in a larger theoretical perspective of technology and pluralist ideology and connects it with today's claims of liberating media and data technologies.

Study of the Empowerment Vision

In 1993 and 1994 I conducted a study of the implementation of the public access empowerment vision as a method of evaluating the viability of the vision itself. Volunteer community producers at a public access facility in the American Midwest, ACTV 21 in Columbus, Ohio, were interviewed in depth to see how their experiences compared to the claims of empowerment made by proponents of public access.

Specifically, I wanted to discern: (1) whether producers of public access programs have an awareness of the media's structure and operation, including a sense of the codes of television; (2) whether this awareness of media's structure, operation, and codes assists producers in defining a sense of self, others, and society; (3) whether producers take action to implement their new awareness; and (4) whether producers identify and change relationships, particularly within the societal realm.

The first item constitutes the elements of media literacy and media demystification; items 2, 3, and 4 address increasing levels of empowerment.

Empowerment Defined

"Empowerment" as understood by the community television movement has not been clearly explicated but has been discussed in other areas of study, particularly in critical pedagogy. Drawing primarily from Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970), and including Giroux (1981) and McLaren (1986), I define empowerment as becoming aware of one's self and, through extension, of others and society in relation to the self. Higher levels of empowerment move beyond mere recognition to attempts to act upon the new awareness, including active attempts to change power relationships within the spheres of self, others, and society. The highest level of empowerment is determined to be attempts to change power relationships on the societal level, in accordance with my interpretation of Freire. Empowerment is a condition that originates from within the self, and/or the self in conjunction with others.

Empowerment within a production context is defined by drawing from the field of media education, as represented by Buckingham (1991), Halloran and Jones (1984), Masterman (1980), and Sholle and Denski (1994). This body of work helps identify the constituent elements of "media literacy" and "media demystification," including

an awareness of the traditional canon of media production (technical, symbolic, and cultural/ideological), media organization, and non-media institutional relationships. The definition of empowerment suggests that, at a higher level, a producer is able to act on this cognition—perhaps by including a new skill or comprehension in a production. Greater levels of empowerment connect awareness and action within production to the larger society; the producer is then able to recognize the nature of these elements as human constructions and, consequently, changeable. The highest level of empowerment in this area is action that consciously addresses power relationships in the production realm (e.g., working as a collective rather than a hierarchical production team) or social sphere (e.g., producing programs intended to address social inequities).

Mechanics of the Study

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. The study required 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. Such a methodology was provided by Dervin's Sense-Making (Dervin, 1983, 1989, 1992, 1998), which allows for the application of a theoretic of personal empowerment within a self-directed learning experience and provides a means to follow the theoretic of change over time. Sense-Making directed the data collection using focus groups and in-depth, open-ended, structured individual interviews.³

Over a 9 month period in 1993 and 1994, I spoke at length with 28 volunteer community producers at ACTV 21 in Columbus, Ohio.⁴ Sample selection and analysis followed procedures for qualitative investigation as discussed primarily by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Patton (1990), and Strauss and Corbin (1990). Informants were selected through purposive maximum variation sampling techniques. Deductive analysis involved coding and analyzing responses in keeping with categories derived from the literatures 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. The findings were then compared to the theories, ideas, and beliefs of writers and access practitioners of the past 25 years.

Findings

The public access vision of empowerment states that video training leads to media literacy and media demystification, which leads to a new awareness of self, others, and society, and to action to integrate this new awareness on any of these levels. An attempt to change power relationships on the societal level is considered the highest level of empowerment.

The major findings of the study that directly address this vision include:⁵

- Media literacy is an outcome of the community television experience for all the producers taking part in the study. Media demystification is an outcome for many, but not all.
- A new awareness of self is an outcome of the public access experience for some of the respondents; most also experience a new awareness of others. An understanding of one's self is enhanced by a heightened awareness of others and of a broader society.
- Producers are not changing society through direct, Freirean-defined action and reflection. Rather, societal change within the context of the community television facility involves a more subtle interrelationship between the individual and the collective, where a transformation on the personal level affects the society.
- Community television participation does encourage a process by which producers move outward from the self to others, and to society—including government and other institutions and organizations. Community television is best conceptualized within this context of process.

Discussion

Media Literacy and Demystification

The major finding of the study is that media literacy is an outcome of access participation for all the participants; media demystification is a result for many producers.

All the producers interviewed for the study are able to recognize and evaluate program content, intent, and the technical elements found within television programs—elements of media literacy, as outlined earlier. All began to look at television in a different light after their access training; in effect, they developed an ability to deconstruct, or “shatter the seams” of, the television reality. Thea provides such an example. In her case, recognizing the “seams” of television has helped her develop an “eye” for media. She also acts on this awareness in certain circumstances:⁶

Thea: . . . I think a lot of my influences came within my first year of public access and it was when I was taking—when I was starting to work on other people's productions and seeing what they were doing in the studio and seeing the different camera angles and movements and working in the control room.

I started getting interested in watching TV and seeing how they did things, watching camera angles, watching edits, that sort of thing. How smooth it went, how choppy, you know.

Talk shows on ACTV, I would compare them with talk shows on regular television and things like that, or even when I went to the regular movie theaters. I still do this. I'll get up and if they don't have it focused on both sides of the screen I'll immediately go to the front office and ask them to focus it because it will drive me crazy, and I've never done that before.

I guess it helped me develop an eye even if it is not as professional as those people who work in television. It just helped me appreciate it and develop an eye for some things. (B3)

Thea is indicating an awareness that television programs are made, not born—deconstructing the seemingly natural television program and breaking the program into component elements available for critique. As with Thea, most producers not only exhibit an awareness of the elements of media literacy but also demonstrate a tendency to reflect and act upon the elements of media literacy in some way in their lives—often demonstrated by utilizing these elements within the programs they create.

While media literacy focuses on representation through images, media demystification concentrates on “reading” the structures and functions of the media in order to understand that television programs are constructed by individuals and groups with specific economic, cultural, and political interests. Most producers are able to recognize and evaluate the structure of media organizations and systems as well as connections with larger social systems. Meredith provides an example of demystification. She describes the realization that ACTV producers were helped by their access experience when they sat down in discussions with city officials:

Meredith: . . . we had people at [Channel] 21 who had been working there for years who were, because of their experiences at 21, more informed and were able to empower other people, inform other people. And I would see this at the meetings where we were sitting down face-to-face with people directly related to the city government and other governmental bodies and to see how 21 producers were just that much far ahead because of their connections with 21. Whereas before or without that connection they perhaps would not be as equipped to handle themselves as well as they did at these meetings in terms of informing people of what's going on. What I mean what's going on—I mean in all sorts of areas, not just with cable, with things happening in government that relate to us, people in cable, access as well as some of the broader channels, the commercial channels. People were quite informed because of their dealings with the kind of programs they do, the kind of people that they have to come in contact with in order to get their programs done. (B7)

Meredith indicates an awareness of the differences between public access and the mainstream media (particularly the corporate cable channels), she also exhibits an awareness of the negotiation process involving the city government, cable company, and access facility. An analysis of her comments also suggests that participation within community television has the potential to draw producers into a larger sphere of grassroots, corporate, and governmental politics, suggesting a process nature of the community television experience discussed later in this article.

Meredith's comments are illustrative of the responses of the producers; they exhibit an awareness of the differences between the mainstream media and public access television as media systems; all video media are not lumped together in the eyes of these producers. By their public access participation, producers are able to see and act upon differences in the media systems, indicating their ability to recognize and act

upon perceived relationships that are based on power—in this case, the political negotiations involved between the cable company, the city government, the access facility, and the producers using the access facility.

It is my evaluation that the producers in the study meet the criteria for a test of empowerment at low to moderate levels within the areas delineated by media literacy and demystification: awareness, reflection, and action based upon cognition and reflection. The highest level of empowerment, action to change relationships within the societal realm, is not fully indicated here and is discussed below.

The major finding of the study—that media literacy and demystification are an outcome of the public access experience for the producers in the study—supplies empirical data to what heretofore have been theories supported primarily by anecdotal evidence. The finding supports claims that media practice aids the acquisition of the skills of media literacy and demystification.

Within the community television vision, media literacy and demystification are not ends in themselves; rather they are steps on a path to empowerment: awareness of one's self, others, and society, and actions to change relationships on these levels, particularly on the societal level. We turn now to these aspects as they are reflected in the experiences of the community volunteer producers.

Awareness of Self, Others, and Society

The data indicate that many producers become aware of previously unknown personal qualities, or become more accepting of themselves, as a result of their access participation. Some respondents describe a period of coming to terms with parts of themselves. For Trent, a former addict, the awareness of self is related to his recognition that working on a show about crack cocaine was difficult because of his addiction to the drug:

Trent: . . . It was hard to do the show because of the fact that I had to go back into those areas. I had to look deep into myself. I had to look at myself and I had to go through the process of looking at an overwhelming desire, a temptation. Trying not to walk that side of the street which she called walking on the wild side. I had to try to stay in my creative mind and my creative mode and stay on the right side. . . . (b9P1a)

Self introspection is common to the data; Tom's response is typical of the connection made by producers. In his case it is also related to his view of other people:

Tom: . . . [W]ell it was something revealed inside of me to give me a more positive look at myself, more of a positive look at the neighborhood, a positive look at other people. I believe that this helped me strengthen myself. Irregardless, television is a powerful thing, you know, and it helped me to be a stronger person, I believe. . . . (b1P4a)

The data indicate that an increase in positive self-image is related in part to the completion of a creative work and the acquisition of technical skills not previously

attained. This positive self-esteem is not automatic; it is often acquired after overcoming difficulties that erode self-esteem (Alfred b2P1a; Denise B1, b1P4a).

The data suggest that new awareness of self is related to an understanding or appreciation of others; our understanding of ourselves is enhanced by a heightened awareness of others. Noreen illustrates the influences that working with others within the public access setting offer the producers. In her case, she learns a great deal from working with African-American women:

Noreen: . . . [It was] helpful just listening to them and listening to their concepts and their different ways of looking at things in that when I deal with the African-American culture of course I have stereotypes but they were talking about things that were even different than things I had thought that weren't stereotype things that I had gone past and they were talking about a whole different level. And I think that whole different level needed to be on ACTV. That really needed to be there. That just being able to experience that part of it was really rewarding. . . . Being able to hear it and have the opportunity to have women talk like that openly. Just—it doesn't usually happen when you get with African-American women they usually talk your language, instead they were talking their language and I was the one that was just there to sit on the side. . . . It was just interesting. I just really appreciated that opportunity to learn what they had to offer. (b6P4a)

Daniel describes a different perception of homosexuals after working on a gay-oriented show:

Daniel: . . . probably at that time . . . I would have not have had anyone that I could talk to about situations involving gays. They were probably all faggots and lesbians, not people. And one of our bad things in this world it seems to be we want to label people and not necessarily because they deserve it but just because they're different. It has opened up a lot of the inside. To them there is no big deal on it. We are the ones making the issue, more than they are. If we can't handle it then it's gonna get worse. . . .

[If you see gays as people] you can treat them better. You understand them. You don't necessarily believe their same ideas but you understand how they're doing it. And when you come up against someone now that you know is anti whatever—if you know something about it you can step in and say "Well you know that really isn't right. That is not completely true." Try to keep the walls from being built. Maybe not so much tear them down but keep the walls from being built as quickly as they have been. . . . (b9P4a)

Noreen and Daniel provide examples of the manner in which producers relate their access experiences to an awareness of others. Daniel also gives an indication of the manner in which producers view the relationship between themselves and a broader society when he describes the impacts of his access participation on society:

Daniel: . . . I guess I'd have to have difficulties saying that I've seen impacts on society in general. Unless I consider the impact that it's had on me, my feelings of society. See, it has opened a lot of doors. It got me in a lot of places I normally would not have gone, and done a lot of things I normally wouldn't do. It opened a few eyes of mine. I

don't know how society is affected by what I do other than I make up society eventually or enough of us do.

... I don't know that I have made that much change in the community or the Columbus area or the society in general, other than maybe have changed some of my outlooks on the community and I guess as a whole we're all part of that society so what changes I make may not be great. But it does have some bearing on how I interface in with the rest of society which I would hope would have an impact. ...

... public access as far as I'm concerned has changed me which is part of society in what small little way I've got then that does change society to a point. There is a lot more of them than me [laughing]. ... (B12).

Daniel states repeatedly that his impact on society stems from the impact on himself, as a part of society. "Society" is an entity that consists of himself and the collective "others." His sense of agency as an individual is related to his ability to work as a part of the collective. His comments direct attention to arguments that the individual and the collective are not separate, but are interconnected—an argument presented by critical scholars against the pluralist dogma of individualism (Dervin & Clark, 1993; Streeter, 1990).

As suggested by the data, low and mid levels of empowerment—awareness of the self, others, and society, and reflections upon these—build from the personal and extend 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. This subtle shifting of personal awareness occurs more often within the study than does a conscious effort at changing the power relations within society—usually interpreted as an overt challenge to power.

The Process of Social Change

Few producers in the study indicate a conscious desire or attempt to change relationships in the societal realm. As discussed previously, Freirean pedagogy considers the highest level of empowerment to be action that addresses power relationships in society, based on awareness and self-reflection. Based on this criteria, little empowerment at its highest level is taking place within the community television experience of the producers in the study. However, that which is taking place is interesting and meaningful, as indicated by some of the actions taken by producers judged to be challenging power relationships within society:

- Noreen created a program on the homeless when the local newspaper had no stories about homelessness (B3).
- Tom produces a program with the stated purpose of addressing problems in society (b4P1a).
- Thea addresses questions in her programs that are ignored by the mainstream media (b3P4a).

- Trent created a program with the express purpose of influencing city government to restructure the three access channels (B5).

It is not clear from the data that producers were engaged in actions to change societal power relationships as a result of their access experience. At the least access did not hinder their ability to affect such change.

While some producers were consciously working to change society, another respondent voiced skepticism that many other producers might be crusaders for social change:

Roslyn: I don't know if anyone's really that deep into it, like really change, but I see ACTV as more of an entertainment. I don't see anyone trying to change the world. (F4, Access Vision)

This notion is contested by at least one other producer. Paul believes that a lack of focus on overt social change did not necessarily rule out the possibility that societal change was taking place:

Paul: ... Even if you aren't consciously changing things by their participation, they [public access producers] change the world. Just by their choosing to put that message on the air, and that message going out, people are going to change things—no I don't agree with that—or I guess I do, and tell friends—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. It's like any other criticism—to a degree—how much, how watched is it, how much do people learn? How much is the world changed? ... (F2, Access Vision)

Paul's comment follows Gaventa's Freirean-based argument that all actions that break a state of passivity and quiescence are a challenge to the status quo (1980, p. 209). Drawing from this logic, their very participation in community television places public access participants in a position in which they challenge the authority of the traditional media structure: who produces, and who receives, media messages.

This conceptualization lies outside the definition of empowerment drawn from Freire and adopted for this study, since it involves actions that may not be based on awareness or critical reflection. However, this aspect of empowerment sheds light on the nature of Freirean empowerment and societal change as a process that begins with individual and collective transformation, and that unreflective actions may play a role in initiating this metamorphosis.

The study's relatively few instances of overt attempts to address inequities in society might be interpreted to indicate that the empowerment vision of community television is not viable at its highest level: that of social change. A rigid application of the empowerment taxonomy would support the conclusion that the direct social action through video production espoused by community television proponents is

not taking place. However, such an inflexible application of the definition of empowerment misses the complex subtleties at play within the data.

The data suggest that the process of social change is immensely complex and involves a dialectic relationship between the individual and the collective, where an enhanced understanding of one's self and others is related to a greater understanding of the constructed nature of society and the individual's and group's ability to change social structures. This rich interplay between individual and collective is more helpful in understanding the nature of societal change than the hierarchical model with a concentration on radical social action.

Community television participation may be understood best from within this framework of process: providing the potential for social change and action. Gaventa outlines the process through which passivity might be shattered and social change promoted. He concludes:

Because they have the potential to serve as a catalyst in this dynamic process, many community action or community education programmes may be more significant for social change than they at first appear. (1980, p. 209)

Such would seem to be the case with participation in community television. As discussed earlier, the data in the study indicate a process by which producers seem to move outward from the self to others and to society in terms of their awareness and reflections upon this awareness. Community television is unique in that it also provides the opportunity for persons with no apparent previous interest in social change to connect with larger social issues and movements. Many of the producers began their work with access television with very specific individual purposes in mind. Over time, they then became aware of an expanded context of access within society in which their participation was significant. Meredith exemplifies the movement from the personal to the broader framework. She recognizes the necessity of being informed of public issues:

Meredith: . . . I learned at that time that up to that point I . . . was happy to be with [Channel] 21 but had taken it for granted. That it's not enough to go down there and bring in your tapes that you had just shot on location and start editing and submit them, that that's not enough. You have to really read a lot, be informed, read the newspapers because there are things out there that can threaten public access.

. . . This is helpful to me because now that I know I am also aware that I know about it. If I know about it I can do something about it.

. . . Well, that then leads me to find ways that I can empower myself and other people, and if we're empowered we can make public access even stronger and better, and if it's stronger and better then that means that our society is that much richer. (b7P4a)

Meredith exemplifies the potential for social change offered by public access. If her expanded awareness regarding the role of public access and its potential to change lives is viewed strictly from the Freirean perspective, there is little evidence of the highest level of empowerment: action to change power relationships in society.

However, if societal change is conceptualized as a continuum rather than a hierarchy, the expanded awareness described by the producers begins to take on added significance. Their reflections become part of a process of societal change that begins at a personal level. This is not part of a pluralist obsession with individualism: rather it eliminates the false dichotomy between conceptions of the individual and the collectivity and posits a dynamic process of interaction between the individual and the collectivity.

This does not contradict Freire; it merely redirects attention away from the *goal* of societal change and toward the *process* by which this change takes place. Freire does not specifically address the necessity of action within the personal realm, although he alludes to it in some of his later work (1996). However, self-reflectivity does imply at least a modest amount of personal orientation—toward oneself and others.

Community Television as Process

The community television vision of empowerment has been criticized as naive—in that it believes that technology is able to resolve structural societal inequities. The evidence accumulated within the study indicates that the community television vision may not be in practice the naive ideology it appears in theory. Awareness and actions of producers either have the potential to address or do directly address structurally based societal inequities. Most producers in the study have experienced at least one moment they define as changing their world to see a world of infinite possibilities. From a dialectically based perspective of empowerment as process, this defining moment of a world of infinite possibilities is a step in the direction of societal transformation.

The process nature of community television has been contested by Garnham (1990), who states that "the great advantage of the 'process' defense of video from the point of view of its advocates is that it cannot be tested" (p. 67). Indeed, the study indicates the contrary. The process-based aspects of the access experience permeate the findings of this project. The findings in the study affirm the perspective of Devine (1992) and Johnson (1994) that community television is best conceptualized as a process rather than within traditional frameworks of "television," "programs," and "audiences." The findings also support Rodriguez's notion of the dynamic nature of empowerment within the context of alternative media as a "multi-layered and multidimensional phenomenon" (1996, p. 67).

Community television as process conceptualizes constant change within individuals and the collectivities within which they participate. Community television 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 seen as a means to an end rather than the objective itself, where individuals and groups become confident in awareness and skills necessary to shape the world of television and move on to sculpt the social world. The process orientation is

important when considering future applications of technology for social purposes, such as those suggested by the new media and data technologies.

Application

The findings of the study provide some hope for those attempting to adapt technologies developed for control and marketing for genuinely democratic purposes. Yesterday's "liberating technologies" were video and cable television; today's "emancipatory technologies" are the computer, data networks, and enhanced media. The rhetoric today regarding the new media echoes the uncritical aspects of the nascent community television movement. However, even in its least critical moments, the community television movement is able to help participants see through and move beyond the cynical marketing strategies of mainstream media that promise liberation, empowerment, and enhanced democracy. The movement provides a space that nurtures genuine grassroots, democratic participation in the society that aids in the process of personal/collective social change.

I believe the community television movement's ability to provide a democratic space stems from its creation as a response *against* the mainstream media; the movement continues to retain a sense of its historic roots in social change. It has always pictured itself as *different than* mainstream media, thus encouraging an analysis by participants of the corporate mainstream and comparisons with grassroots, participatory media. As the community television movement evolves into a community *media* movement, incorporating access to information networks and databases, the wealth of experience in using technology to help persons transform society will continue. The commitment by the movement to ensure grassroots access to telecommunications technology is reflected in the ACM's *Community Media Review*, which frequently publishes articles relating access issues to cyberspace.

Successful adaptation of corporate technologies to critical purposes depends upon a focus on the goals of empowerment and social change, not on the technological toys that are a means to those ends—and that provide a potential opiate. The study indicates that the community media movement does allow a space for the nurturing and creation of structures that fall outside the corporate vision for technology.

Conclusion

This article has explored the empowerment vision of community television and concluded that participation in the creation of television programs enables persons to become more discriminating viewers; encourages awareness of and reflection upon one's self, others, and society; and provides a foundation that encourages individuals and groups to believe they can impact the broader society.

Indirectly, community television does provide some measure by which the social structure is addressed by participants. Rather than direct, radical action, participation

in the creation of media programs encourages a more evolutionary growth of outward movement from individual to collectivity, transforming both in the process. Community television, then, does fulfill to a limited degree some of the goals the movement adopted during its inception in the late 1960s and early 1970s: social change through public participation in the electronic media.

The community television experience is of note when considering the promise of the advanced media technologies: with a critical focus on applying the tools to social change and truly democratic purposes rather than the tools themselves, there is hope for the application of computer, data, and enhanced media technologies toward the creation of a more equitable society.

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Notes

¹ The ACM was formerly called the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers (NFLCP). The name was changed in 1992.

² These critiques of pluralist assumptions draw from Dervin & Clark (1993), Good (1989), Lukes (1974), Marcuse (1965/1983), and Streeter (1990).

³ Sense-Making is based on the premise that humans generally seek information when they encounter an obstacle, or gap, of some kind that blocks their life path. To bridge that gap, people move from their path and seek information, methods, and new approaches that they find helpful. Once the gap is bridged, the individual generally returns to his now-changed life path. For further discussion, see Dervin (1983, 1989, 1992, 1998) and Savolainen (1993).

Sense-Making provides an actor orientation and a set of self-reflective tools that the informant utilizes during the interview process. This self-analysis element encouraged by the Sense-Making process is analogous to aspects of empowerment described in the study. As such, in addition to Sense-Making's application in the field of information seeking and use, its theory and procedures made it ideal for this study.

Dervin (1983, 1989, 1992) notes that Freire also informs Sense-Making, making this methodology particularly appropriate to this project.

⁴ Anecdotal evidence within the practitioner discourse of public access has described a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences on the part of persons involved in public access. The people taking part in this study reflected a similar heterogeneity.

Focus groups consisted of 6 females and 18 males; 9 participants were primarily of African descent and 15 were primarily of European descent. Individual interviewees consisted of 5 females and 4 males; 5 were primarily of African descent and 4 were primarily of European

descent. Participants included adults who had never finished high school, persons with high school diplomas, and persons with university graduate degrees. Some respondents were without jobs or held positions in the mainstream media. Others worked as bus drivers, legislative assistants, high school teachers, data entry operators, computer specialists, ministers, engineers, entrepreneurs, musicians, and letter carriers. Income levels varied, cultural backgrounds were mixed, parental work histories were widely diverse, and respondents spanned ages 20 to 63.

⁵ Further discussion and additional findings are detailed in the original study (Higgins 1994).

⁶ The selections used in the discussions here are illustrative samples of producer responses. Reference indicators refer to sections within the interview protocol.