Beyond the "Night of the Broadcast Clones"

Visions of Empowerment, Media Literacy and Demystification

"They explained to me that this new television that they were going to create, and were busy creating, was, as they said, a voice for the voiceless. And those words are so much worth remembering. I would say that we have achieved some success, but reaching the voiceless has to be a purpose of this movement and a purpose of the people who are in it."

– Ralph Lee Smith

By John W. Higgins

In the August 1991 issue of CTR I discussed some issues close to the hearts of many public access and media literacy advocates: In what way is visual representation related to the politics of culture and power? Are there training methods by which we can encourage new models of visual representation to match the exploratory content of public access programs? In short, how can community television escape from the "Broadcast Clones" syndrome: where access programs merely mimic the form of broadcast television, and therefore end up reproducing the same tired power relations found in mainstream television?

This article continues that discussion by focusing on the specifics of the vision of public access, and the point at which that vision moves into implementation: training. At this time I am conducting a study that investigates whether or not the vision actually does what it says: help citizens empower themselves through video training.[1] While the results are not yet complete, the inquiry has led through an interesting maze of intersecting ideas that community television and visual literacy proponents may find interesting.

Empowerment: What is it? As part of this study, I've recently sifted through 25 years of literature related to public access, produced by the alternative video movement, scholars, cable companies, government agencies, and research think tanks. In two and a half decades, all of these sources have talked about something called "empowerment," but very few have defined it. No one has really studied systematically whether such a thing as "empowerment" is a consequence of participation in the production of public access programs.

Granted, there is anecdotal evidence that something is going on that "looks like" something that may be empowerment.[2] However, if public access to video communication is to survive and flourish, it will be necessary to provide policy makers with more specific documentation of its uses and benefits.[3]

So what is the empowerment that is proposed by public access? In most of the public access literature, you have to read between the lines. And this sort of reading is much easier when the "vision thing" is put into a historical context.

The Vision of Public Access. In the late 1960s and early '70s, an old idea — that some social injustices might be addressed by technology — was given a new focus: portable video. The idea went like this: With the new portable video equipment for program creation, and the emerging broadband cable television for a distribution system, the inequities of a monopoly controlled broadcast media system would begin to be addressed. Everyday people would have their voices heard through the electronic media, and others would be able to hear the rich diversity of perspectives their neighbors had to offer.[4]

The "diversity of ideas" that was to be encouraged by public access also involved other utopian visions — in particular, that of individual and group empowerment. In this vision, empowerment meant becoming aware of one's self, others, and society, and after one had a "voice," actively working to influence society.[5]

This empowerment was to take place, in part, through video production training. 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 "visual literacy" as individuals learned how to "read" and "write" media codes. These skills would allow persons not only to become more discriminating viewers, but would also allow them to actively speak out in the media and shape their social world. Thus, they would discover their own "voice."

This vision of empowerment through public access video training was shared by practitioners, academics, and others. It is a vision widely accepted today — to the point that its assumptions are often considered sacrosanct, unquestioned within the movement itself.[6]

Empowerment Defined. The underlying concepts of the public access vision of empowerment have much in common with the areas of visual literacy, media education, and critical pedagogy. In particular, the media education and critical pedagogy literatures 1) more fully describe "empowerment," 2) delineate the ingredients of empowerment within a video training context, and 3) suggest a direction for training methods which might help advance the concept of empowerment.[7]

Based on the contributions from these sources, I have defined empowerment as similar to Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's "praxis": practice and reflection. Empowerment, therefore, consists of awareness, self-reflection, and action. This awareness includes a recognition of one's self, others, and society, and the power relationships involved within each
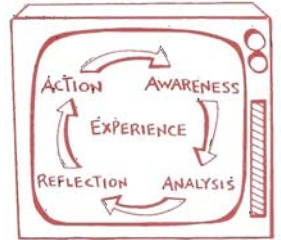
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On Training

". . .Training in video should always be carried out within a framework of general training in social communication: the role of video and television is thus relativized with respect to other mass media or traditional means of communication. This approach using an overall framework allows participants to put each workshop, whatever its technical or conceptual content, into a perspective that includes the other stages of the communication process, from conception through dissemination to critical reception of the media.

– Alain Ambrosi, from Video the Changing World

and as they intersect. Through self-reflection, a person sees how these relationships affect him or her. Recognition then leads to individual and/or group action to influence the personal and social realms.

Ingredients of Empowerment Through Video. That's the vision of empowerment that emerges from the public access, media education, and critical pedagogy literatures. Within a video production environment, the concept becomes a bit more concrete. The definition suggests that a trainee or producer is aware of mainstream and alternative approaches to the following elements:

➤ the technical elements involved in program construction, (e.g., audio, lighting, editing, etc.);

➤ the symbolic codes that are behind this program construction (e.g., a close up conveys the idea of talking face-to-face with someone);

➤ the values and beliefs these codes represent (e.g., talking close enough to stare into someone's eyes is socially acceptable);

➤ media structure, including ownership, economics, program distribution, and the organization of the production team (e.g., using a traditional top-down organizational model for the production group);

➤ the influence of media on society, and society on media (e.g., the impact of advertising and capitalism).

The definition of empowerment also suggests that, in addition to these cognitive elements, a trainee or producer should be able to recognize that all of these elements are human constructions and can be changed. Here is where the question of self-reflectivity enters: the empowered producer is seen as someone who also is able to position himself or herself in relation to the above elements.

For example: Does the producer choose to reproduce the traditional means of video representation by consciously using established norms of video production? These rules sometimes reflect traditional values toward women, expressed symbolically. Where does she place herself with regard to these values? Does recognizing these rules and the values behind them, as well as her own relationship to the rules and values, lead her to lobby to change them in her video program? In her daily life? In short, does the process and content learned from working with video equipment carry over into other aspects of the trainee's life?

This is the construction of empowerment that I am working with in this study. It is worth noting that empowerment is not something that can be given to another person; empowerment is a condition that originates from within the self. In other words, no one gives you a voice; instead, you find your own voice.

Mechanics of the Project. Basically, I'm investigating whether or not community producers have a perception of the video production experience which is similar to the definition of empowerment described prior, or another of their own construction.

For this study, I am talking with community producers in structured, open-ended individual and group interviews. The research methods are based on the concept 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 or her now-changed life path.[8]

This theory, called "Sense-Making," directs that any investigation of information use within community television must be oriented from the point of view of the user (i.e., the community producer), and not from the perspective of an outside observer (i.e., the researcher or access center staff). Sense-Making interviews allow the community producer to construct a personal universe, and to interpret that universe for the researcher. Ultimately then, questions of empowerment will be decided by those being interviewed: the community producers.

The results of this study should begin to emerge in the fall of 1993. The results will be specific to the producers interviewed, and not generalizable to the entire national community of public access volunteer producers. Nonetheless, the study will provide the community television movement with significant data that will help evaluate claims of empowerment, media demystification, and visual literacy that have circulated for over two decades.

I expect that this study will also illuminate issues related to empowerment. For example, those public access training methods which encourage a sense of empowerment will probably emerge. Issues worth studying in the future will also become evident, such as: Do access center management and staff, particularly trainers, buy into the empowerment vision of public access? Do training programs consciously reflect this value of empowerment? Do viewers of public access programs experience something related to empowerment?

Praxis: Practice and Reflection. These and other questions point to the desirability of forging deeper bonds between the communities of public access practitioners, and scholars and researchers operating in the area of practice-based theory. Indeed, it was such a coalition of divergent groups that helped public access to cable television get its start in the late 1960s.

It is appropriate at this time for both parties to step back from the experiences of the past two and a half decades and evaluate the progress in implementing the public access vision of empowerment. Anecdotal evidence from within the access environment indicates that something resembling empowerment is taking place there; theories and methods from the academic arena assert that this empowerment is detectable within the confines of a research study. It seems to be a natural alliance, with the interaction

between practitioner and academic enriching the lives and work of both.

Realistically, however, working together will require a stretch for both factions, given that one is oriented primarily toward action, the other toward reflection. Having operated within both camps, I am familiar with the stereotypes held at times by each, as well as the individuals who help give the stereotypes such credibility. But it is the union of the two approaches that Freire had in mind when he described praxis as "the action and reflection of men [sic] upon their world in order to transform it."

This transformation of the world was the vision behind the emergence of public access television. The vision holds that empowerment can be nurtured, in part, through media literacy and demystification. It is this goal of social transformation that continues to lie behind the words, "a voice for the voiceless."

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Notes

[1] This study is part of my doctoral dissertation, currently in progress. The sources cited in this article are only a sample listing of references. I am grateful for the many contributions and insights provided by Brenda Dervin of the Department of Communication at Ohio State University.

[2] An illustration of this is provided by stories relayed in the "Access = Diversity" issue of CTR (September/ October 1992).

[3] An example of data collected in the area of audience and access is the work of Frank Jamison and Western Michigan University's National Clearinghouse for Community Cable Viewership Research.

[4] For an account of the emergence of public access on cable television as a result of the combined efforts of proponents in the cable industry, academics, video and social activist groups, and government, see Streeter (1987). For a history of public access, see Gillespie (1975) and Engelman (1990). For a history of the NFLCP, see Bednarczyk (1986). For classic examples of the utopian vision of portable video, see Shamberg and Raindance (1971) and Willener, Milliard, and Ganty (1972).

[5] The concept of film and video used for social change was an integral part of the National Film Board of Canada's "Challenge for Change" program, as described by Stoney (1986) and Gillespie (1975).

[6] In fact, critiques point to at least three problems with the public access vision: 1) the vision is too dependent on technology as a cure-all; 2) it does not address the necessary structural changes in society necessary for authentic change; 3) there is no real attention paid to the process by which the vision is to be implemented.

I am basing these critiques primarily on Slack (1984); Willener, Milliard, and Ganty (1972); and Williams (1974).

[7] Media Education and Critical Pedagogy were discussed more fully in my August 1991 article, as were the general approaches to training practices these areas indicated.

Within Media Education, authors of note include Buckingham (1990), Masterman (1989), and Sholle and Denski (1993).

Critical pedagogy is concerned with the content and process of teaching and learning. It is founded primarily on the works of Paulo Freire (1989, writing in 1970). Recent contributions have come from Giroux (1992) and McLaren (1989).

[8] This is a rough sketch of Dervin's Sense-Making (1989).

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