Re-thinking 'Access':
Cultural Barriers to Public Access Television

by
Bill Kirkpatrick

Ph.D. Candidate, Media and Cultural Studies
Department of Communication Arts
University of Wisconsin--Madison
3302 Harvey Street
Madison, WI 53705
(608) 238-6656
mwkirkpa@students.wisc.edu

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Bill Kirkpatrick is a doctoral candidate in Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He sits on the Broadband Telecommunications Regulatory Board and volunteers as a cablecaster for Madison's public access channel, WYOU Community Television..

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I would like to address what I see as a disconnect between the *principles* of public access and the *philosophy* of public access. On the one hand is the founding principle of free speech--democracy of the airwaves, everybody's channel, *your* voice can be heard, etc. On the other, there is a dominant philosophy of civic participation in the marketplace of ideas that values a particular kind of political speech and certain notions of quality over others—with the result that "bad" or "fringe" or "vanity" programming is devalued and denigrated. Thus you can read George Stoney, in the most recent issue of *Community Media Review*, who talks about "irresponsible" users with their "thoughtless self-indulgence … wasting everybody's time" (29) or you might have read the description of the panel on controversial programming describing certain producers who are a "menace to access" and must be "defeated." It is not quite, it seems, everybody's channel after all. Instead, we find a gap where the principle of open access doesn't quite meet the philosophy of civic participation.

There are several possible ways of bridging this gap. Stoney's solution is to ease away from first principles, tolerating self-indulgence while applying persuasion and pressure on producers to conform to certain kinds of speech. Today, I will take the other approach, and argue that we instead need to ease away from privileging certain forms of political speech, not in order to say that anything goes, but in order to understand the politics inherent even in apparently "trivial" programming. In other words, before we back away from open access, let's look at why

so-called “bad” programming is considered bad, and whether there isn’t in fact a lot more good in such programming than we realize.

ACCESS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

I started thinking about this issue a few years ago when I was cablecasting at my local public access station in Madison, WYOU. During my shift, we had a program called *Metromen* that consisted of a group of highschoolers basically sitting around, talking to their friends who called in, interspersed with segments in which they pretended to wrestle in the style of their WWF heroes. Now, there is probably a show like this (or close enough) on just about every access station around the country: unprofessional, undisciplined, and unfocussed politically.

However, what I found most interesting about this show was not the content per se, but the role it came to play in the politics of the station. On the one hand, there were complaints from the public about the occasional swear word or off-color reference that popped up, and the show was used by TCI to try to strangle public access in Madison. But there were also pressures coming from the producer and staff at WYOU to make the show more "serious," more "issue-oriented," more like the original political vision of public access. The teens could dabble in wrestlemania and have their fun, but there should be some "real content" to the show—"teen issues" and the like. In short, they officially tolerated the teens’ self-indulgence while pressuring them to conform to more civic forms of speech: essentially Stoney’s preferred solution.

In some ways, these pressures to make the show more “responsible” may have been in the best interests of the station, toning down controversy during a period of franchise renegotiation. But at the same time, this episode sheds light on some of the values and ideals that continue to underlie the philosophy of access—values and ideas about culture, democracy,

speech, and society that work to either privilege or suppress certain kinds of speech, modes of expression, ideas, and speakers. Through myriad subtle and not-so-subtle ways, both visible and invisible—the raised eyebrow, the disparaging comment, the selective lack of enthusiasm for a given production—we who are involved in public access are also gatekeepers, part of the forces that limit or enable the principle of open access.

While public access practitioners have done an outstanding job of reducing technological and financial barriers to accessing the public sphere of politics, there remain *cultural* barriers to media participation that we need to better address. So first I will talk a little bit about traditional notions of the public sphere, and some of the cultural barriers that these notions fortify. Then I will discuss another way of looking at the public sphere and consider how this second model might help address some of these cultural barriers, adjusting the fit between our principles and our philosophies.

So let's start with the public sphere. Central to theories of democracy is the idea that there must be a way for citizens to come together to discuss issues of common concern so that public opinion can be formed and democratic decisions can be made. The "place" where this happens is the public sphere. Perhaps the most influential ideas about the public sphere were formed by a German philosopher named Juergen Habermas.[1] Habermas argued that the ideal public sphere would be one in which social status could be separated from public debate: we should, in effect, *pretend* to all have the same status and social power so that we can debate as equals. The way that this would work in practice is that public debate would be "rational-critical" debate—logical, unemotional, reasoned.

While Habermas himself may or may not be a familiar figure, there is a version of his ideas that is more common. This is the metaphor of the "marketplace of ideas" that is so central

to First Amendment theory. The idea here is that we have free speech in a democracy—a free market of ideas—and that the best idea will ultimately be the one that wins out. In this philosophy, power is seen to reside in the ideas themselves, not in the speaker or the mode of communication: good ideas will drown out bad ideas.

The marketplace of ideas metaphor has been very influential in the history of public access, and almost every key work refers to it in some form or another.[2] In fact, it is hard to even imagine having public access without thinking in these terms, because what public access offers first and foremost is access to this supposed marketplace of ideas: historically it has been about creating a public sphere to which all citizens have access, bringing about that Habermasian ideal in which not just the rich and powerful can go on television but even ordinary citizens can have their voice heard, so that the best ideas win out.

It is clear that this metaphor has gotten us a very long way, and I have nothing but respect for those who pioneered and continue to struggle on behalf of this ideal. But I also hope to point out where the limits are—how this philosophy of access can get us only so far. If public access is about access to the marketplace of ideas, then the barriers that it must confront are primarily financial and technological. Specifically, to gain access to the airwaves, you have to have the financial means and the technical know-how to get your message out. That's why public access is free or virtually free to its users; that's why there's such a strong emphasis on equipment and technical training; that's why outreach is so important to bring in representatives of various groups: We're building a public sphere to which social status is no barrier. It doesn't matter how rich you are or how well educated or what language you speak; public access will guarantee you entry into that ideal public sphere. And thanks to this vision, public access has had enormous successes over the past thirty years.

It follows from this that, because we are trying to bring about a particular ideal public sphere, certain kinds of speech are valued over others. Specifically, we tend to value the civic, rational-critical modes of speech—the public affairs shows, town meetings, etc.—over more populist speech, rude speech, vanity programming, etc. So in the example of *Metromen*, there was pressure to spend less time wrestling (which is not considered civic speech) and more time discussing so-called teen issues, ideally in a kind of rational-critical form of discourse that rarely overlaps with the teens' own preferred way of speaking. In other words, the producers of this public access show were asked to enter the public sphere not on their own terms, but on the more restrictive terms of the ideal Habermasian public sphere. Another example comes from the ACM discussion list a while ago: The thread was about call-in shows, and one participant emphasized the need to screen the callers so that, for instance, you don't have someone screaming obscenities at the mayor. In other words, it is perfectly acceptable to discuss denying access to those who do not conform to what *we* deem "acceptable" or "quality" speech.

These are not isolated examples. In fact, if you read the critics of television such as Robert Putnam, you will frequently find hierarchies of quality established in which shows like *Nightline* that emphasize rational-critical debate are deemed relatively good, while shows like *Jerry Springer* are deemed trash and not worth watching or even pathological. Such hierarchies are also active in public access, despite the principle of openness and tolerance. In a recent article in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, Donna King and Christopher Mele have argued much the same thing, taking to task prominent writers on access for valorizing "legitimate" public discourse while treating so-called "vanity" or "fringe" programming as an embarrassing waste of time. To the extent that such hierarchies are—perhaps "enforced" is too

strong a word—*communicated* by those in power at an access studio, they serve to discourage or limit certain speakers and forms of speech from being broadcast.

Now, given enough support and cooperation from the community, the municipal government, and the cable company, we can begin to solve the financial and technological barriers to access. But these cultural barriers are much more subtle and difficult to solve. They involve re-thinking not just what the access project is, not just our definitions of "quality," but even how democracy itself might work in ways that don't depend on the idealized public sphere or the marketplace of ideas.

To repeat: according to the dominant philosophy of access, we should be trying to bring about a public sphere in which we pretend that differences do not exist, in which we engage in rational-critical debate, and that we aim for some sort of consensus of public opinion through the marketplace of ideas. But, I would argue that this is not the only way society works. Public opinion is not expressed only through the official realm of politics and civic speech, and social relations are not negotiated only through public policy. I would suggest that opinions about society are just as valid when expressed through marginalized forms of speech, perhaps even more so, but—and this is key—we need to learn to read this speech for what it is. Furthermore, resistance to the existing social order—which is an important contribution to the public sphere—often takes forms of speech that are themselves opposed to that order. In such cases, rational-political debate, civic speech, propriety, and obvious relevance (obvious to the mainstream, that is) give way to oppositional and resistant forms of speech—and those forms are just as valid as any other. Instead of further marginalizing them, we must learn to see them as resistant politics in a resistant package.

An analogy might be helpful here. When Public Enemy raps about racial tension and conditions in the inner cities, a large segment of mainstream society rejects it as garbage, as so much irritating noise: profane, obscene, devoid of musicality, etc. But the same message of oppression and unrest, wrapped up in a polite documentary, with the bad words bleeped out and the conventions of documentary dutifully followed, wins our approval as honest, hard-hitting political speech. Why? Because it is a form of speech that *we* understand, that *we* are comfortable with, that bows to the mode of politics that *we* like, and if that form doesn't speak to the producers or their intended audience, then the problem must lie with *them*, not us. It is not *our* fault for misunderstanding the political speech in a rap song, but *their* fault for not encoding that political speech in the form we desire. In fact, Public Enemy's music contributed significantly to the public sphere in articulating opposition to racial oppression, in helping the dispossessed make sense of their lives, and in resisting the social relations that contribute to the unspeakable conditions of the inner city. The barriers of understanding that lead many to miss this fact are purely cultural.

To return to public access, to call something "fringe" or "vanity" programming is to dismiss the speaker because we don't understand the speech—whether or not we are even being spoken to. Instead of valorizing rational-critical debate, the realm of "official" politics, the discussion shows and the earnest documentaries, we need to understand and appreciate the politics in *all* forms of speech. So in the example of *Metromen,* we have a show that isn't devoid of politics, and it doesn't need to be "corrected" by injecting "teen issues." It is, in fact, all about teen issues: issues of identity as they try on different personas; issues of inclusion and exclusion as they negotiate friendships and social networks through the medium, obvious issues of sexuality and masculinity, and issues of resistance to adult authority and control as they use *their*

language, pursue *their* interests, and mobilize *their* cultural artifacts like wrestling and rap music to challenge their subordinated social position. To call them irresponsible and self-indulgent means that we want them to resist power using power's tools instead of their own. By recognizing their contribution to the public sphere, however, we can begin to close the gap between our principles and our philosophy. If we questions the taste hierarchies born of our commitment to the Habermasian definition of politics, then we can begin to confront the cultural barriers that impinge on the principle of open access. Public access is valuable because it fosters democratic participation, yes, but it is also valuable precisely because it is divisive, disruptive, and transgressive—and even because it is trivial, banal, and inane. As a forum for those lacking in the social and economic power to use other media, public access needs to be defended *especially* for speech that strikes the mainstream as ridiculous or dangerous.

OTHER CULTURAL BARRIERS TO ACCESS

So much as to the taste hierarchies that form a cultural barrier for public access television. What other cultural barriers might we think about? In order to have more time for discussion, I will only present two here:

The first is the meanings given to public access in the mainstream media. Unfortunately, people don't come to a television show with a clean slate: Things like the channel that the show is on and the reputation of the "brand," so to speak, work to contextualize a program long before it is seen—or not seen. For example, I'm sure many of us have had the frustrating experience of telling people, "You've got to watch this show," but because the show is on PBS or public access, you know they'll never watch it. Why? Because they think that only certain kinds of people watch those channels, that what those channels offer is not for them. And even if this is patently

ridiculous, given the variety to found in both of those outlets, how do these ideas get created and circulated in the first place? More importantly, what preconceptions do people have about public access that influences whether and how they will watch anything on it? For the beginning of an answer, let me show some brief clips of scenes from some big budget movies and tv shows dealing with public access.[3]

Clearly, there is not much that any of us can do to change how Hollywood depicts alternative media. But it is important to understand the meanings that access has already accrued long before anyone watches it, and to promote access with that cultural barrier in mind. In other words, in addition to facilitating the speaker's access to an audience, we need to work to facilitate the *audience's* access to public access. Here I'm speaking specifically about teachers, outreach directors, orientation leaders, and others who are in a position to challenge how students watch television and the lens through which they view access. I have seen a lot of representatives from access and community radio stations speak to students, and they talk a lot about volunteer opportunities and the ability to make their own tv shows, but I've never heard them talk about what access might mean to the students as an audience. The same applies to most orientation sessions at public access stations, in which the emphasis is on production rather than reception, perhaps missing an opportunity to stress that public access isn't just something you make, but also watch. In other words, strange as it might seem, we often lose sight of the fact that public access television is also television, a medium that is embedded into the culture in particular ways, and that people watch television for all kinds of reasons, taking all kinds of meanings and pleasures from it. But I've never seen these spokespersons for access emphasize that watching access might require a different set of reading practices, and I've never seen them challenge the students' expectations of what television is supposed to be. Even the excellent

CMR issue on media literacy (24:1, Spring 2001) discusses literacy only in terms of either a producer's fluency in the medium, or in terms of evaluating televisual messages for their truth content. But we also need to teach "access literacy" from the point of view of pleasure and esthetics, a point too easily overlooked if we concentrate on the "marketplace of ideas" metaphor or the pursuit of an ideal public sphere. For example, when I tell my students how a single minute of ER costs more than the entire annual budget for WYOU, they may not run out and flip to channel four right away, but they do begin to get a sense of what public access manages to accomplish on no money, and that is, I believe, a first step toward realigning their reading practices. I also like to show them the access coverage of election night 2000 in which WYOU gave out the exact same information as the other newscasts, but with a remarkably different sensibility that the students often respond to better. Through this, they begin to get a sense of the different pleasures that access can offer.

In addition to the speaker's access to public access, and the audience's access to public access, we should also think about the audience's access to the speaker and what cultural barriers that presents. One of the things that access does is make speakers visible, knowable, subject to social knowledge and ultimately to social control. This places severe limits on the range of speech that is practically (if not theoretically) possible: the more controversial or marginal the message, the more vulnerable the speaker becomes. There are, simply put, a lot of people and points of view for whom visibility is undesirable or even dangerous, for whom too much is risked and too little gained by allowing the public access to their ideas, causes, lifestyles, etc. The social access to a speaker that public access allows should not be underestimated when thinking about what we can or cannot accomplish, especially in smaller communities. Furthermore, many people may have no interest in sharing their point of view, nor in adding their

voice to the marketplace of ideas. We need to think more about what access can do for them and how—can our philosophies accommodate more outreach to the fringe and local origination to fill the gaps on the margins of the community?

CONCLUSION

I have tried to identify several cultural barriers to the success of the access project. My argument is that these cultural barriers constitute a disconnect between access principles and philosophies, but that there are things we can do and adjustments we can make to help bridge this gap. These means rethinking how the public sphere operates, using a more generous understanding of political speech and the different cultural forms it can take. It means helping producers realize *their* vision, not Habermas'. It means helping audiences question and adjust their cultural expectations of television, teaching new reading practices to counteract the mainstream bias against public access. And finally, it means thinking about the citizens and points of view that our culture cannot openly accommodate, and how they too might benefit from the principle of open access wedded to the philosophy of social betterment through politics in all its guises.

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Notes

[1] See for instance *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. While Habermas revised his ideas about the public sphere over the years, this work 1962 work remains one of the seminal works in public sphere theory. It should be noted that this book was not translated into English until 1989, and thus cannot be considered a direct influence on early public access advocates per se. However, many of Habermas' ideas about democracy and the media were part of a larger school of leftist thought that *was* influential in the 1960s and 1970s, most notably through the work of Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Enzensberger, and it was Habermas who applied these ideas to the concept of the public sphere.

[2] The marketplace of ideas metaphor is highly flexible, and has been invoked on both the left and the right with varied emphasis depending on the ideological position of the speaker. Thus, those on the right tend to erase the question of power in order to use the metaphor to sustain a market-populist ideology, while those on the left make issues of power central in order to highlight disparities in access and equality within social discourse. It is this latter version that, I am claiming, was most influential in the movement for public access.

[3] At this point I showed scenes from various movies that featured public access television stations: *To Die For, Public Access, Wayne's World*. Others would be episodes of *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. The point is that none of these representations depict public access as it is typically lived and thought about by its practitioners. Indeed, with the possible exception of the dudes in *Wayne's World* and the character of Jesus in *South Park*, public access is shown as a forum for social deviants, murderers, sociopaths, losers (e.g. Homer Simpson), etc.