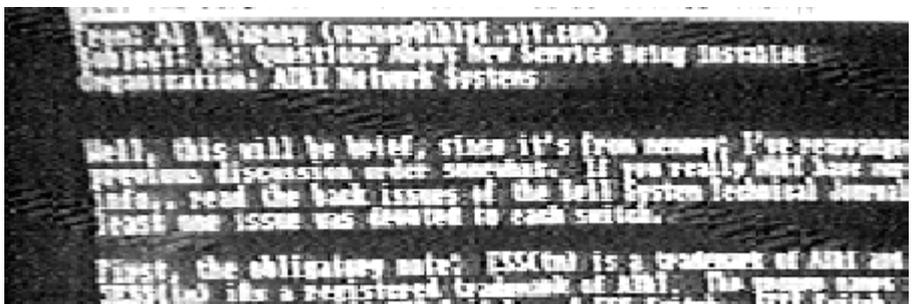


# from vtr to cyberspace

jefferson, gramsci and the electronic commons



by mark surman  
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# From VTR to Cyberspace

published by Mark Surman © 1994

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**Those of us who recognize that change comes in increments of one, five, ten, and twenty-five, need no convincing that public access TV will provide the nucleus for a post bureaucratic, vaguely anarchic video pajama party.**

*Kika Thorne*  
*member of the SHE/tv video collective*

I spent most of my younger years looking for anarchy and the joys of a video pajama party. But I never found them — at least not in the flat bland-lands of television on which I grew up. As someone who started working in the electronic glitz biz at the tender age of 16, my TV world was filled with mindless American violence imports, poster girl posing technicians, the dawn of the three minute pop music commercial, and a great deal of frustration. For one moment in my early TV years, I naively attempted to insert my peace activism into the virtual violence that I sent over the airwaves for a living. I produced one little low tech commercial, advertising one very small peace event. It ran once and then it was pulled. The only answer I ever received to my million “whys” was a big “because”.

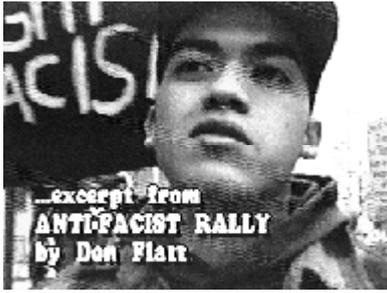
Ever since, I have been trying to bring my activism to every communications space that would give me a few minutes to speak my mind — alternative print, computer networks, television. 📺 Where TV land is concerned, I have realized that there are a myriad of openings through which one can sneak ones activism into “the box”. You can go out and buy a Fisher Price PixelVision camera and document your dissent — but it is unlikely that many people will see what you have done. You can go to journalism or film school, move to New York or Hollywood, and try to “change the system from within” — but this is a dangerous and personally painful journey. You can spend six months writing an arts council grant and make a relatively high quality magnum opus of electronic resistance — but it may only show to nine other activists at a far off film festival. 📺 Or, you can start making activist television right now, for free, and broadcast it to thousands of eager viewers by using your local community access TV facility. For the past five years, I have been using community television as my activist intervention into the television realm.

In theory, the community channel is the utopia of social change media freaks. It’s free. You get trained on how to use the equipment (so



📺 Over the years, I have called myself a peace activist, an environmental activist, an anti-car activist, and a media activist. I have done media projects related to all of these activisms.

📺 All of these are actually useful approaches. I have exaggerated their very real problems for literary effect.



✍️ ...we'll talk about access TV in America a little later.

📺 Nadia Sistonon's *The Crux of The Gist of The Biscuit*, which showed a vagina smoking a cigarette, is among a handful of programs pulled from Toronto community channels over the past few years for being "offensive".



👋 ...unless you've got a FreeNet in your town or city. More on this latter.

you don't have to spend all that time and money going to TV school). There's no censorship of your ideas. Everybody from the community has an equal opportunity to use the channel. Your programs inhabit a spot on the TV sets of thousands upon thousands of channel surfers. Sounds like the perfect place for an anti-big-business-anarchist-cooking-show, doesn't it? Unfortunately, it's not. Because that's just the theory — and we all know about the tenuous connection between theory and what actually happens. In reality, the Canadian community channel ✍️ is only a good place for activism as long as you don't offend anybody too important. I have helped air programs showing political protest, civil disobedience, the propaganda value of the Gulf War media coverage, and the beauty of human powered art vehicles. But try doing a show about representations of sexuality. 📺 Or, even better, try making a media activist show that criticizes the cable company that runs your local community channel. No way.

This gap between the way the community channel is supposed to work and the way it does work hasn't stamped out my interest in access TV, it's just made me shuffle sideways a little. I have shuffled to places that take the good parts of community television and combine them with new ideas, and new ways of organizing. And I have looked at the ways that creative activist TV producers all over North America have made the best of access channels where they live.

I have also started to experiment with a model of an open, uncensored, grassroots, people-controlled media system that exists outside the realm of television — the Internet. Although it doesn't allow me to send videos out to the world, the Internet does fulfill many of my activist communication desires. It lets me share my ideas with people all over the world. It lets me find information that is so unique, so activist, so challenging to "the way things are" that it would probably never make it into a bookstore. In these ways, the Internet is a bit like an internationally linked, text-based community access channel without the censorship problem. But the Internet certainly has its problems too. It's hard to get around, it's not free 🖐️, it's generally male dominated, and you've got to own a computer. In my activist communication dreams, I'd like to bring the best parts of the Internet and the best parts of the community channel together.

Which brings us to the "crux of the gist" of this paper — how to create a perfect world for activist videomakers and anyone else who wants to express themselves electronically. Well, maybe not a *perfect* world, but a better one at least. I would like to suggest that it really is

possible to merge the best parts of the Internet and the community channel to create a more democratic and sustainable system of public, grassroots communication. To figure out how, we will have to look back at the original dream of community television and listen to the people who dreamed it. We should also explore the problems that this dream had when it came of age, and what activist video producers in the 1990's have done to deal with weak points of community TV. And of course we should think about the Internet, about all of the people who swear by it and at all of the activist projects that have used it. With all these perspectives, we just might be able to figure out a strategy to get ourselves a hip new, totally open, people-centred, accessible, egalitarian, grassroots, electronic communications system. Or, something like that.

But first we should take a quick look at where all of this electronic democracy stuff came from. In the late 1960's, there were a bunch of people who saw social change flowing from the mouth of a twenty year old electronic pipe — cable television. The cable industry, government bureaucrats, academics, liberals and progressives in both Canada and the US all gathered around the cable hearth to argue that the proliferation of this “new” technology could “...rehumanize a dehumanized society, ... eliminate the existing bureaucratic restrictions of government regulation common to the industrial world and ... empower the currently powerless public.” ¶ The revolutionary potential of cable technology was attributed to its ability to open up more bandwidth — to offer more channels — than off-air TV. ✎ Another new technology — the 1/2" portable videotape recorder (VTR) — was making similar if smaller utopian waves at the same time. New technology made video recorders cheap enough and light enough that average middle class people could buy their own camera and VTR to make home TV. Hand-in-hand with the increased bandwidth of cable, it was often argued that VTR could lead to a new age of people-centred communication. Of course these predictions were nothing new: “...every step in modern media history — telephone, photograph, motion picture, radio, television, satellite — stirred similar euphoric predictions. All were expected to usher in an age of enlightenment. All were seen as filling the promise of democracy.” ¶

But some of the ends to which all of this rhetoric was taken were new. While the general utopian buzz implied that more bandwidth and cheap VTR's in and of themselves could create a brave new world, there were people who argued that specific political and economic models were needed to make this techno-democracy dream come true. Com-



¶ Streeter, p. 181. For more on “the utopian vision of the ‘wired nation’”, see all of Streeter's *Cable Fable* article.

✎ Streeter, pg. 179.

¶ Eric Barnouw in Blau, p. 22.



☞ Antonio Gramsci was an Italian communist who talked about hegemony and counter-hegemony, or how domination and resistance work in capitalist democracies. I am using the phrase “activist project” in place of the more academic phrase “counter-hegemonic project”. Later in the paper I will also substitute the phrase “counter-cultural” for “counter hegemonic”. The point of all this is to avoid alienating academic language. For a more detailed explanation of hegemony and counter-hegemony, see Appendix One, *What is a Hegemony Anyways?*

🏠 The Internet and the superhighway are not the same thing. Once built, the new broadband superhighways may or may not resemble the current Internet in terms of form, access and freedom.

munity access TV advocates argued that the prophesied social changes would only occur if there were specific structures aimed at promoting information democracy. The structures in question were community access channels and the TV production equipment needed to fill these channels with grassroots programming.

There were two general approaches to the access channel. One saw community television as the electronic equivalent of Jeffersonian democracy, as an electronic commons where equality, free speech and democratic dialogue would abound. The other saw the community channel as a Gramscian “activist project”, a place that would specifically help those who had been left without a voice by the corporate media world of network television. ☞ Although both visions of community TV floated around North America in the late sixties and early seventies, Canadian and American community channels eventually took diverse paths, tending towards one or the other of these visions. American access channels moved towards the Jeffersonian electronic commons — open to everyone without discrimination. A warped version of the “activist project” — open only to “disadvantaged communities” — has dug itself in at Canadian community channels.

Today — more than twenty years after people started building community channels — a new generation of technological utopians, Jeffersonian democrats and Gramscian activists seem to be coming out of the woodwork. They’re talking in much the same language about much the same thing, but this time in relation to the Internet and the new broadband multi-media networks that have been dubbed “superhighways”. 🏠 The new techno-utopians — like their predecessors — are predicting that more bandwidth will change the world, although this time around they think we need 500 channels instead of 20 to do the job. The Jeffersonians see the Internet as the perfect model of an electronic commons and want to ensure that model makes it to the “superhighway”. The Gramscian activists are trying to ensure that both the Internet and the new broadband networks contain spaces that promote voice and access for marginalized communities.

The important question that faces both the community channel advocates of twenty years ago and the access advocates of today is: how do you bring the best of both these visions together? At a time when new networks could change the nature of both community television and the Internet, how can we develop grassroots media ideals and visions for the future, while at the same time maintaining the good principles and prac-

tices of the past? To start answering these questions, we should go back and talk to Thomas Jefferson.

## 2.

# thomas jefferson gets wired

Thomas Jefferson sits at the centre of the American democratic myth. He is an icon of individualism, free speech for the common people, education and democratic rights. He is the “...most conspicuous of American apostles of democracy.”  His name conjures up a time in American history when the townsfolk gathered in town halls and in the commons to debate issues,  and when the media was a “public sphere” filled with small, partisan newspapers.  In short, he represents all of the myths of America that started to sputter and zig-zag during the late 1960’s.

Offering itself up as an electronic commons in an age of weakening democratic myths, community access television was perfectly timed. Hippies and liberals alike argued that community access television could rekindle Jeffersonian democracy by providing a central soapbox (the commons) and media opportunities devoid of corporate control (the public sphere). Books, speeches and big-time magazine articles all trumpeted the coming of this democratic new age. In the introduction to his book, *Video Power*, Chuck Anderson describes this vision in all of its passion: “In a democratic society, active dialogue is held to be the ideal approach to problem solving. There was once a time when a broad representation of the community was able to get together in a town hall and hold this kind of dialogue.”  Anderson argued that such dialogue had been eliminated by the growth of cities, the power of experts and corporate media. He also argued that community TV could bring us back to that Jeffersonian Shangri-La: “By using the television set that is in everyone’s living room as a forum for community self expression, we may be able to realize the democratic dialogue.” 

From this Jeffersonian vision the community access channel as electronic commons was born. Channels were opened up across North America to be used by everyone, free of charge on a first-come, first served basis. In many cases, access facilities included production equipment as well as a channel on which to air finished programs. Community members were free to say anything they wanted as long as it was not commercial, libelous or obscene.

This Jeffersonian television was especially suited to America, as it

 Encyclopedia Britannica 1962, volume 12, p. 986.

 Usually it was only the land owning townsmen who were welcome at these chats, but I don’t want to quibble on details.

 This idea comes from communications theorist Jurgen Habermas who argued that a “democratic public sphere” existed in the 18th and 19th centuries when small partisan presses and other minor institutions created the possibility of debate. Habermas claimed that the state and corporate media had destroyed the democratic public sphere by the beginning of the 20th century. (Kellner 1990, pp. 13 -14.)

 Anderson, p. 11.

 Anderson, p. 13.

was rooted in American myths. In 1972, the FCC mandated that cable operators in the 100 largest markets provide channels for “public access”. 🏠 In addition, the legal thinking of the time was that the First Amendment guaranteed a “...general public right of access to the media.” 🏠 But it was not just the legal and policy mood of America in the early seventies that kept the Jeffersonian vision of community television running — this idea had resonated on a much deeper level. As one activist TV producer from New York has said, “...the gospel of access had spread quickly throughout the country.” 📁 Despite the elimination of the FCC’s access mandate in 1979, the number of open access channels grew in the US throughout the 1980’s and the gospel continued to spread. 🌀 Most American community channels continue to be run on an open access, first-come, first-served basis.

Although it never became the rule in Canada, the vision of a Jeffersonian electronic commons made many border crossings during the 1970’s. In its 1977 community channel handbook, *The New Communicators*, the Canadian Cable Television Association (CCTA) said that “...cable technology makes it possible for people to have access to television as a citizen right.” 📖 And this was not just talk. Many early Canadian community channels experimented with the open access, electronic commons model. In a 1973 article from the Challenge for Change Newsletter, Calgary community programming manager Wendy O’Flaherty explained that her policy “...was to permit and encourage unrestricted access to the channel by the public. No screening of users was practised, with the exception of screening out people with commercial purposes, groups with other resources available to them (schools), and avoiding duplication and overuse by evangelical religious groups.” 🖐️ This sort of experiment with the electronic commons only made brief stays on Canadian soil.

The problem that emerged with both American and Canadian experiments in totally open access channels was that they often did not create the great gardens of democracy that had been prophesied. It became obvious that simply opening up channels and providing equipment was almost as ineffective at creating social change as the laissez faire approach of the technological utopians. 🏠 The people who showed up to use the community channels were often not the people the original access advocates had expected. As one example, O’Flaherty’s open access channel in Calgary was used by groups like the Ku Klux Klan, local ego-trippers, the Aquarium Club and right wing evangelists. O’Flaherty also points out that “...virtually no use was made of the cable

🏠 Kellner 1992, p. 101.

🏠 Blau, p. 24.



📁 Davitian in PTTV, p. 29.

🌀 This growth can be partially attributed to cable operators who were so desperate for licenses that they would promise anything to the municipal governments who negotiated franchise agreements — money for access channels was one of the regular benefits promised. (Kellner 1992, p. 101.)

📖 Forbes & Layng, p. 24.

🖐️ O’Flaherty, p.3.

🏠 The technological utopian approach was laissez faire only in terms of social and political matters. They were very directed in terms of how the technology had to be implemented.

facilities by social action groups, social agencies, Challenge for Change, or other people interested in social change.”<sup>10</sup> Many American access channels still tend to be dominated by conservative groups and ego-trippers, with little representation from the real margins of society. These circumstances point to a key flaw in the electronic commons approach to community television — it does not address media literacy, burnout in volunteer organizations, or the psychological relationship between social institutions (of which the access channel is one) and marginalized communities.

American community channels faced an additional challenge — cable operators were often reluctant to provide the funding needed to keep the electronic commons well maintained. There are dozens of stories about American cable companies renegeing on access contracts, moving away from the open access model or shutting down access channels altogether.<sup>11</sup> In Buffalo, New York — where there is a thriving group of activist video makers using community TV — there has been a broad range of difficulties associated with getting and maintaining the access channel. Until 1984, the access channel was controlled by a cable company that favoured censorship and made no connection between “access” and “free speech”. Buffalo city council put control of the channel in the hands of the community in 1984, but it was a number of years before an organization with proper access guidelines and policies was given control of the channel and production facilities. Even though Buffalonians are now guaranteed access to their community channel, there continues to be conflict over First Amendment rights between the access channel board and a pro-censorship city council. Although other problems exist, Canadian community channels do not have problems with funding or local politicians, as the CRTC both universally mandates the terms of community channel operation and requires all cable companies with over 3000 subscribers to contribute at least five percent of their revenue to the community channel.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the problem of underuse by social change groups and the difficulty of maintaining funding in the US, the community channel as electronic commons is not a vision that should be discarded. American channels that run on this model still offer something unique — a total guarantee of access to video distribution. Although this is not enough in itself, it does provide a good foundation from which to build new approaches to activist television. Before we look at these approaches, we should see how the Gramscian activist project style of community TV

<sup>10</sup> O’Flaherty, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Kellner 1992, p. 105.



Buffalo public access activists produced *Studio of the Streets* (above) outside city hall until they were given proper access facilities.

<sup>12</sup> City council ultimately controls the terms of the access agreement.

<sup>13</sup> CRTC 1991, pg. 5.

developed in Canada as an alternative to the problems of the open access model.

# 3.                   uncle gramsci and the activist video makers

📄 O’Flaherty, p. 5. Some Americans, like Chuck Anderson, echoed these concerns: “A policy of restricted public access to the community TV channel ... is preferable to unrestricted access, with airtime availability being given only to the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised and alternate-lifestyle groups — in short, those who have limited access to establishment media.” This approach did not take hold in American community channels. (Anderson, p160)

🌀 This is Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. For more on this, see Appendix One: What Is A Hegemony Anyways?

🗨 ...or counter hegemonic.

📖 Gramsci argued that “everyone is a philosopher” (Forgacs, p. 325) and that: “For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real and present world, is a ‘philosophical’ event far more important and ‘original’ than the discovery by some philosophical ‘genius’ of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals” (Forgacs, p. 327).

📖 Forgacs, p.397.

After a year with the Klan and right-wing preachers knocking at her door, Wendy O’Flaherty decided to institute a limited access policy at her Calgary community channel. She stated that “...a policy of restricted public access to the community channel is preferred to unrestricted access, with access being given to disadvantaged and emerging groups and to individuals and peoples with alternate material.” 📄 This January 1973 statement marked the end of the open electronic commons in Calgary, and reflects the approach to community access television that has been taken throughout Canada. It is an approach that is in theory committed to alternative programming but which does not guarantee free access to the community channel.

This idea of creating media spaces that are open only to those who are shut out by other media can be linked to the thinking of Italian communist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci argued that the power of dominant forces in a capitalist democracy is maintained by cultural means — by elaborate and unconscious transfers of common sense that lead most people to accept our economic and political systems as “the way things are”, as the natural order of things. 🌀 The only way to create a social transformation in a society where culture is power, is to fight back with culture. Thus, Gramsci envisioned counter-cultural 🗨 projects created by people who had come together in coalitions opposed to “the way things are”. Such projects would emphasize the ideas and perceptions of average people, and would be specifically open to those who wanted to take an oppositional stance. 📖 Gramsci, in his belief that social transformation must happen at the grassroots, stressed the importance of popular media in the struggle for cultural change. From his prison cell in the 1930’s, he argued that a “new literature” could not ignore popular forms like the serial novel or the detective novel. 📖

Although very few of the early access advocates would have gone so far as to associate themselves with an Italian communist, those who argued for “limited access” were talking about very Gramscian ideas. As opposed to the Jeffersonian electronic commons approach — which implied that open access would automatically equalize society on its own — the limited access approach saw the community channel as something

that would specifically serve counter-cultural movements. It also stressed that media should be produced *by* the grassroots rather than *about* the grassroots — that the marginalized should make their own images. 📍 This approach to community television saw itself in direct opposition to the way the major TV networks were constructing our imaginary worlds.

The link between these Gramsci-style ideas and the development of community television is the National Film Board of Canada’s Challenge for Change program. Between 1966 and 1975, Challenge for Change attempted to use film and video to “... help eradicate the causes of poverty by provoking basic social change.” 📍 To do this, the NFB put film and video cameras in the hands of social activists and marginalized communities, made films showing people how video could be used for social intervention, sponsored access television pilot projects and published a newsletter that served as a philosophical focal point for people interested in media as activist project. Challenge for Change emphasized two points throughout its existence — that people who wanted social change needed a media culture that was just for them and that these people should be making their own media. This social change media philosophy was a major contributing factor to the development of grassroots-oriented, limited access policies at Canadian community channels. Following the lead of Challenge for Change and grassroots-minded community channel staff like O’Flaherty, both the cable industry and government regulators embedded social change catch phrases like “citizen participation” and “community self expression” into documents relating to community television. ✂

With these impressive philosophical and regulatory underpinnings, it is hard to imagine how the Canadian community channel could have gone wrong as an outlet for social change media. But, in many ways, it has gone very wrong. With the limited access approach, the power to decide what is alternative, what is community and what gets on the channel all lie in the hands of the cable company staff. 🏠

From the perspective of some social change access advocates, putting decisions about “what gets on” into the hands of community TV staff was the original strength of limited access. Most of the people who ran Canadian community channels in the early seventies came either from social activism or from Challenge for Change, or at least were people who had been caught up in the grassroots rhetoric of the time. These people were able to use limited access to keep conservative or well established groups out and bring marginalized groups in. But many early staffers eventually left community television, or they started to become

📍 ...this did seep into American public access practice, but comes from the “activist project” way of thinking that flows from Challenge for Change. See below.

📍 McPherson, p.1.



✂ See CRTC, 1975 and Forbes & Layng, 1977.

🏠 With the exception of some community channels Quebec. See Goldberg pp. 52 - 54.



more conscious of what would offend their employers. George Stoney, one of the heads of the Challenge for Change program, saw a direct link between this “employee consciousness” and the move towards more conservative programming. “I went up there in 1982 for a panel at a Canadian cable television conference, and when I screened all of the programs entered for awards I was appalled at how uncontroversial and essentially dull most of it was. It could have been made in the Queen’s parlor. I divined that this was because it was all made or facilitated by cable company employees. Although most of the coordinators came out of a good Canadian tradition of social animation they couldn’t help but look over their shoulders to see how the company that was providing their salaries was responding.” 🏠

In addition to the drift away from Challenge for Change idealism and towards “employee consciousness”, the type of people who cable companies hire has also changed over the years. Early community channel staff tended to be people with activist or social science backgrounds, whose training was primarily in people and ideas skills. Television technical skills were often picked up along the way. This bias was stated in the CCTA’s *New Communicators*: “When cable managers advertise a program staff position they would be wise to stress people skills. They would of course say ‘a knowledge of television would be an asset’. That is not intended to play down television skills. It is to stress that television skills are more readily accessible than the community skills or human qualities the job demands.” ✌️ The importance of people skills over technical skills for programming staff was also mentioned in the CRTC’s 1975 brief outlining its new community channel regulations. 🏠 But this bias didn’t last long. The Canadian community channel today is looked upon as an easy first job for people just out of broadcasting college. These people have brought with them the aesthetics, values and working styles of broadcast television. They have also brought ideas about “professionalism” and “technical quality” which are not very compatible with putting TV into the hands of “the people”.

These “professional” broadcast values have had a profound effect on the day to day operation of community channels, and on the nature of access itself. Some of the traditional myths surrounding TV are: (1) television production equipment is hard to use and breaks easily; and (2) only professionals should be making TV. These are exactly the myths that community television tried to undermine from the beginning. But any undermining that had occurred was quickly undone by the new cadre of “community TV broadcasting professionals”. Many community channels have rebuilt myth number one — “this stuff is tricky” — by instituting

🏠 Sturken, p.11.

✌️ Forbes & Layng, p.19.

🏠 CRTC 1975, p.4.

long, drawn out, hierarchical training programs that frame the technical end of TV production as a secret art. As these courses are often mandatory, a group wanting access may have to spend a year and a half learning how to use studio equipment before they are able to touch the portable camera and editing system that they wanted access to in the first place. Also, these mandatory courses mean that activist media makers with years of previous training or experience have to spend valuable time jumping through training hoops.

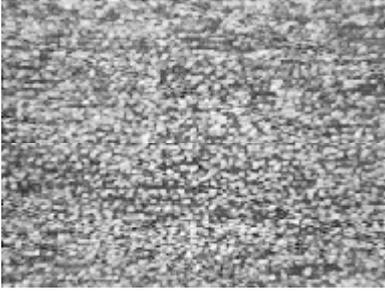
Myth number two — “professionals only” — has been brought back to life by cable companies who have introduced “paid volunteers”. Community channels who use this system put new volunteers on boring, low profile productions until they are “good enough” to work on higher profile shows, for which they are paid. Such professional hierarchies totally destroy any fiction of grassroots TV production that may have been left over from old community channel rhetoric.

This move towards the “professionalized” community channel — especially the introduction of paid volunteers — was helped along by the introduction of sponsorship by the CRTC. ¶ Since 1986, community channels have been able to sell PBS style advertising billboards at the beginning and end of each program. On an obvious level, this development has flushed the non-commercial nature of community access down the drain. On a subtler level, it has led to the professionalization of production mentioned above, as well as aesthetic uniformity and censorship. Rogers Community 10 in Toronto is rumored to bring in more than \$100,000 a year in sponsorship revenues. With that kind of money flowing in, it is essential that they provide “high quality” programming for the sponsors. In community TV land, “high quality” is usually a euphemism for traditional broadcast aesthetics, boring topics and a ban on controversy. As sponsorship revenue must stay within the community channel, Rogers pumps the money right back into professionalization projects like the purchase of high tech, hard to use equipment and the payment of “volunteers”. Such “professionalism” is a guarantee of “high quality”.

Another factor which has contributed to the Canadian community channel’s shift away from its social change roots is an overemphasis on the mandate for local programming. When the CRTC defined the role of community television, it put local community programming on par with the ideas of access and citizen participation. This made sense at the time, as most media images reflected the metropolitan location of the people who made them. Except for local news, most of the programming that Canadians saw in the early 1970’s came from Toronto, Montreal, New



¶ Goldberg, p.24.



York or Los Angeles. The local aspect of the community channel was intended to counter-balance these dominant metropolitan images. But, as Raymond Williams argues, there are dangers to this local focus of community television. “The community emphasis is so right, in its own terms, and could so notably contribute to solving the problems of urban information flow, democratic discussion and decision-making and community identity, that it is easy to overlook the dimension that is inevitably there, beyond the community — the nation and the world with which it is inevitably involved.”<sup>1</sup> This overlooking of that which is beyond the community is exactly what has happened in Canadian community television. The local aspect of the CRTC mandate is stressed by some community channel staff to the point that geographically-generic, yet underrepresented ideas — like feminism, peace, environmentalism — are often denied access because they don’t specifically identify themselves as “local”.

Although the shift in staff, the opening up of sponsorship and the overemphasis on the local aspects of programming are key factors in the erosion of the social change focus at community channels in Canada, the central problem is still who ultimately controls “what gets on” — privately owned cable companies. “A fundamental problem has always dogged community access television (in Canada): It is a democratic concept with a democratic structure. The community channel is and always has been under the direct control of the licensee.”<sup>2</sup> This is unlikely to change soon, as cable regulations put the responsibility for community channel content in the hands of the cable operators. It is the cable company that will be sued or lose their license if libelous, obscene or copyrighted material makes it to air, not the community member who produced the show. This means two things. Cable companies are very conservative about programs that push any of these boundaries, shutting out people who want to criticize the corporate media by “sampling” copyrighted images and people who want to explore sexuality through their programming. The cable companies are also unlikely to give up control over the content as long as they are held responsible — meaning that a totally open access channel is almost an impossibility without regulatory changes.

Strict cable company control of community TV in Canada has been linked both to the blandness of the channel and the disappearance of “citizen access”. In Dot Tuer’s recent article on the Canadian community TV landscape, she describes a boring and uncontroversial evening of programming from the highly professionalized Rogers Community 10 Toronto. It included: “...the Canadian Club Speakers Series, the Cancer

<sup>1</sup> Williams 1974, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Goldberg, p.21.

Society Fashion Show, Festival of Festivals Trade forums ... and the *Lemon-Aid* phone-in show on cars.”<sup>⊕</sup> Hardly the radical programming advocated by early access prophets! Frank Spiller, one of the architects of the CRTC’s 1975 community channel policy, talks about the disappearance of access in a 1982 report entitled *Community Programming in Canada*. “One has the sense, after looking at what has actually happened, that while a genuine effort was actually made to provide citizen “hands-on” access in the early years, this has progressively declined so that today such a form of access is the exception rather than the rule.”<sup>✂</sup>

Spiller’s comments describe the central problem of community television in Canada — it was set up as a Gramscian activist project to promote social change, but it has become as timid, and often as inaccessible, as other privately controlled media. Of course the Canadian community channel is not a complete wasteland. There are people in the cable industry who live out the original ideals of Challenge for Change and access, but they are far from the dominant voice in how community TV is run. One must remember that the limited access approach of Canadian community television originally offered itself up as a solution to the problems of the American electronic commons. As such a solution, it has not fared well. It has not been able to sustain itself as a “social change media space”, as a place totally dedicated to the media empowerment of marginalized communities. The reason for this may have something to do with the total abandonment of the electronic commons and guaranteed open access. A mix of free speech and social change ideals may have proven a better approach. To see how such a mix is possible, we should take quick and creative walk with Gramsci on the electronic commons.



⊕ Tuer, p.27.

✂ Spiller pg. 38.

# 4. activist outposts on the electronic commons



As it became apparent that both the American electronic commons and the Canadian approach of grassroots-focused limited access had their problems, many creative and flexible media activists started to come up with hybrid solutions that mixed the best of both worlds. These solutions have incorporated the idea that an open electronic commons is needed if activists are to be guaranteed access to a channel and the idea that infrastructures specifically committed to social change are needed if marginalized communities are to develop a stronger voice. This approach acknowledges that *even if you don't believe in the Jeffersonian myth, it is an essential foundation to the successful development of a Gramscian activist project*. Gramsci certainly recognized this. His ideas about the “activist project” assume that the counter-cultural coalition is working within a capitalist democracy, where at least the myth of free speech and open political opposition exist. 🗨

🗨 Of course even capitalist democracies will use force against internal enemies if they have to — but they have to justify it culturally first. See Appendix One, What is a Hegemony Anyway? for more on this.

In practice, the activist project on the electronic commons takes the form of autonomous social change media “institutions”. Such organizations can take almost any shape — a group of friends, an issue-centred collective, a media access group, a non-profit production company — as long as they stick to the goal of making a space that is nurturing for the communities that they work with. These activist institutions gain strength, flexibility and practicality by using the access channel for what it does best — guarantee a place to show and produce programs 🗨 — and taking care of the social change media organizing themselves. They gain a certain level of credibility and legitimacy just by giving themselves a name. Such legitimacy is useful not only as a public relations ploy — making it seem like a massive activist cultural force is looming just over the horizon — but also as a means to attract new members and sustain the momentum of the group. These groups also contribute to the creation of a social infrastructure of alternative media, building up media literacy, production skills, ways of organizing and networks of people. Best of all, activist media institutions are no single entity, no single voice. There are groups that deal with feminism, race issues, workers’ rights, the environment and any other issue that you can imagine. New groups pop up all over the place, all the time, contributing to the development of a broad

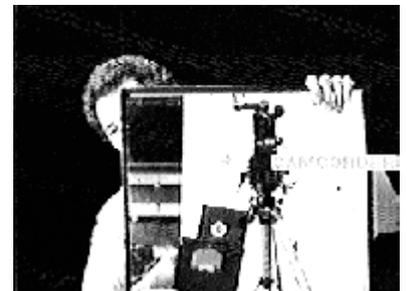
🗨 ...at least in the US.

and diverse counter-culture of activist media.

A number of media hip activists in Buffalo, New York have set up counter-cultural institutions like this to reflect a variety of issues that concern them. As one example, Barbara Lattanzi, Armin Heurich, Chris Hill, Brian Springer and other Buffalonians formed the Media Coalition for Reproductive Rights (MCRR) in 1989 to insert a radical pro-choice voice into the upstate New York abortion debate. They used a number of strategies to make themselves a “community institution” — they took on a name and an acronym, they went on the access channel asking others to join their group, and they produced a regular public access series. In addition to taking on this grassroots institutional function, the MCRR has set itself up as a safe-soapbox for pro-choice activists who don’t want to show their faces on TV or open themselves up to public attack by violent anti-choice groups. They have done this by using rubber finger puppets representing anti-choice characters as the focal point of their show, allowing activists to speak their mind without being seen. ☞

A more widely talked about example of a successful activist access “institution” is Paper Tiger Television (PTTV) in New York City. Since 1981, PTTV has produced over 200 low-tech public access programs criticizing and deconstructing the corporate media culture. They have produced episodes like: *Unpacking Ted Koppel’s Revolution in a Box*; *Staking a Claim in Cyberspace*; and *Herb Schiller Reads the New York Times*. Living on next to no resources — a small office on Lafayette Street in NYC and only a few paid staff — Paper Tiger has become one of America’s premiere activist video institutions. Its tapes are used in media literacy classes, it has a California branch called Paper Tiger Southwest, it has been an “artist in residence” at the Wexner Centre for the Arts at Ohio State University and it has been the subject of a number of magazine and journal articles. As videomaker Helen De Michiel points out, Paper Tiger’s “institutional status” is an essential element in inspiring others to do activist access work. “Simply and effectively over the last decade (Paper Tiger has) created a “wilderness preserve” for dissident viewpoints to be visualized, constructed and aired. As a consistent yet fluid group they are continually extending to give “camcorder guerrillas” across the country the courage and the resources (both psychic and material) to create work that looks for the truth, finds it in unlikely places and reframes it for reflection.” ✓

Although collectives like Paper Tiger and the Media Coalition for Reproductive Rights are the most essential building blocks in making the electronic commons model of access TV into a haven for activist media



☞ Rubber puppets and an invitation to submit programming from the MCRR access show in Buffalo, New York.

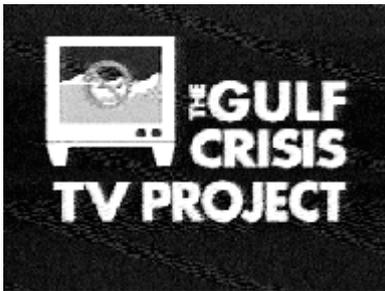


✓ De Michiel, p.15.



Although it is still very small scale compared to corporate media.

Braderman, p.22.



→ Graw, p.35.

making, their effect tends to be very localized. This is a limitation both of the access channel itself — it is local entity often covering only part of a city — and of the limited energy and resources of small activist organizations. In 1985, members of Paper Tiger and other video activists banded together to overcome this limitation by creating Deep Dish TV, a national satellite network for activist video. Deep Dish collects activist tapes from producers all over America, puts them together into themed packages and sends these up into space so that they can be downlinked by access channels all over the US. This is the kind of infrastructure — outside the realm of any particular access channel but using access channels as a foundation — that makes activist TV on a much larger scale possible. “Without infrastructures like the multi-generational, multi-practice, extended “collectives” of Paper Tiger and Deep Dish and the other visionaries who spend their time doing profound political work which is media driven and about building our own systems of public intervention and address ... without these, our silence will echo through the next century if there is anyone left to hear the echo.” Such infrastructures provide the organizing experience, the people networks and the technical skills needed to develop a broader social change media culture.

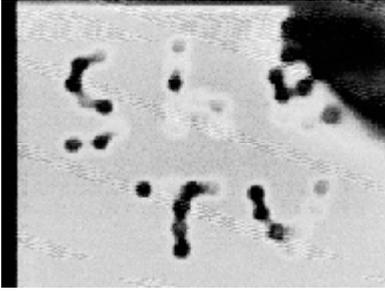
The advantage of infrastructural foundations like those of Deep Dish was clearly demonstrated during the Gulf War. When the possibility of a war against Iraq became apparent, members of Paper Tiger, Deep Dish and other activist groups joined together to produce a series of anti-war access shows under the name Gulf Crisis TV Project (GCTV). “Working with Deep Dish TV and its nationwide network of public access stations and producers, GCTV brought the alternative media movement together with anti-war activists to provide a response to the massive media management accompanying America’s military build-up in the Gulf.” The Gulf Crisis TV Project produced four half hour programs that were ready for satellite distribution by the week that the war began. The programs were not only picked up by hundreds of access stations across the US, but also by dozens of PBS stations, by Vision TV in Canada and by Channel 4 in the UK. The sale to Channel Four funded an additional six episodes, including programs on anti-Arab racism in US war propaganda, and the impact of the war on American blacks and Hispanics. The speed of production and the number of stations that picked up the Gulf Crisis show demonstrate the value of activist run counter-cultural institutions that are built on the foundations of the open access channel.

These examples of alternative media institutions and infrastructures have developed in the US, where open access to the community channel is fairly common. It is much harder to build autonomous activist institutions on the electronic commons in Canada, as the electronic commons doesn't really exist. I have been trying to get around this problem for a few years now, and would like to offer my experiences and the experiences of people who I have worked with to suggest one possible route.

In the spring of 1992 — a year after the Gulf War had ended — I went to New York City, camcorder in hand. Although the purpose of the trip was to attend the First International Conference for Auto Free Cities, I spent some of my time interviewing members of Paper Tiger and the Gulf Crisis TV Project about how they made activist media. A conversation about the nature of access television that I had with Paper Tiger member Cathy Scott is of particular interest in terms of my approach to activist TV in Canada. During our chat, I told Cathy that Canadians had no right of access to the community channel, that “what gets on” is at the whim of the cable company. This astonished her, and she started saying things like “that’s ridiculous” and “you have to organize people to change that” and “march on the government and make them give you access”. Although these concerns were not new to me — Kim Goldberg had talked about the need for such changes two years earlier in her book *The Barefoot Channel* — Cathy’s passion acted as very helpful kick in the butt. We needed to make some changes in Canadian community TV. The problem was, there didn’t seem to be the makings of a mass movement to revitalize and redemocratize the community channel. So, I started very close to home, by trying to increase the access focus in the small community station where I work in Parkdale, part of Toronto’s working class southwest end.

The changes that I pushed for were small, and given the commitment to good community TV of the people who worked with and above me, the resistance to ideas about access and social change was far from overwhelming. The first thing that I did was try to re-emphasize the importance of access for underrepresented groups in station policy — both in the written rules and in practice. The second thing was to try to change the equipment policies so activist producers who wanted to get in and out quickly didn’t need to spend a year and half taking technical workshops. The third was to encourage groups who wanted to form collectives, to create their own external institutions, to do so. Although these efforts have not changed the Canadian community channel as a





☞ Tuer, p.27.



☞ From the original SHE/tv promotional pamphlet.



Cyclists take over Toronto city hall in Sue Ziellinski's Bug Dreams.

☞ ...which included the anti-war program Gulf War Fantasies.

whole, they have contributed to Cable 10 Parkdale/Trinity being called “...the radical fringe of (Canadian) access television.” ☞ They have also led to the production of hours upon hours of vital activist television.

As we have seen with the American examples, the best way to make activist community TV is to have good access policies in place and then to create an external collective. A number of such collectives have developed in the Parkdale area. Most of these groups started out by putting in a proposal for a full year series and then farming out episodes to their members. One such collective is SHE/tv. SHE/tv is “...an alternative forum to represent society from the perspectives of women.” ☞ With over 20 members, SHE/tv has developed into a strong activist institution which has gained recognition in print and at video festivals. The collective shares technical and producing duties within its membership, producing a half hour per month to air on the community channel. The work that they have produced includes programs on gay and lesbian parenting, feminist transformational moments, black women’s health issues and gender roles within grassroots organizations.

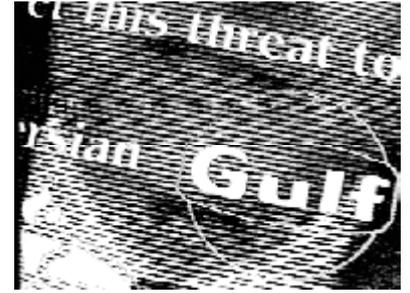
Another collective that has developed over the past two years in the Parkdale area is Undercurrents, which produces a monthly access forum open to people who want to deal with issues shut out by the mainstream media. Much more loosely knit and decentralized than SHE/tv, Undercurrents still functions well as an activist TV institution insofar as it is a voice for the idea of access and it opens itself up to pretty much anyone with an idea. The Undercurrents series has included programs on alternative theories about the cause of AIDS, anti-logging protests against MacMillan Bloedel, various kinds of “guerrilla television”, sustainable transportation, and animal rights. The access emphasis of the community channel in Parkdale has also opened up space for the environmental series *This Island Earth*, ☞ an artists’ television series curated by the YYY Artists’ Outlet and a number of single issue programs giving voice to commonly censored perspectives.

Of course there are examples of activist community TV in Toronto that have not come out of the Parkdale studios. A coalition of artists and activists in Toronto got together in the early 1990’s to independently produce the Cable AIDS Project, series of educational programs on AIDS produced for a variety of audiences and communities. The series aired on both Rogers Community 10 Toronto and Maclean Hunter Cable 10 Parkdale/Trinity. Unfortunately, the series was pulled by Rogers after the screening of Gita Saxena and Ian Rashid’s *Bolo Bolo*, which depicted two men kissing. ☹ There are also many examples from outside of

Toronto, including a peace show in Winnipeg, an environmental program in Kamloops, women's program in Campbell River, BC. and a cycling show in Ottawa. ◀◀ Despite these examples, the dominant look and feel of community television in Canada is dull and conservative, and there is still no guarantee of access.

It is important to note that there is a great deal of activist film and video work made outside the realm of community television in both Canada and the US — work that is committed to the development of Gramscian counter-cultures. The social change spirit of the 1970's left us with a legacy of media arts and artist access centres which provide equipment and a supportive atmosphere for the production of experimental and marginal work. Thousands of tapes come out of these centres each year. Unfortunately, there is no effective distribution system for most of this work outside of galleries. This is especially the case in Canada where there is a wide rift between community TV and artists — the bone of contention mainly being copyright and payment for work. There is also a good deal of social change work produced by small activist groups who use home videotape as their distribution method. Canada's NFB produces a large number of social change films and videos which — in contrast to media arts and activist productions — are well circulated on film, tape and over television. And NFB units like the Native-run Studio One, women's unit Studio D and the experimental interactive projects of Studio G still stress grassroots production on various levels. Unfortunately, the NFB is underfunded to the point that the grassroots end of its production can only touch a small number of people.

The breadth and volume of work that comes from media arts centres, small activist organizations and the NFB, combined with all of the social change programming that is produced for access channels throughout North America, indicates that there is a definite ferment and passion for activist TV. The question is, where do we take all these budding mini-institutions of the counter-culture? How do we find ways to connect them, and in Canada to open a bigger space for them? First, remember that the Gramscian counter-cultural institutions we are building depend on an open space, a protected electronic commons, as their foundation. And then, with a grain of salt, pick up a copy of *Wired* magazine, or sign on to your local Usenet news supplier, and see what people are saying. Much of the same rhetoric that was thrown out twenty years ago about the community channel is circulating in them thar'



☹ In Parkdale, the program manager Manny Floriano stood behind Bolo Bolo. In a letter to a viewer who complained about the two men kissing, Manny stated: "In Parkdale we are lucky to have an incredible mix of people in terms of work force, ethnicity, religion, age, colour and sexual orientation. All of these people make up our community and have right to access our facilities to produce programming of interest to their communities."

◀◀ Most of these examples come from Kim Goldberg's Barefoot Channel. See Goldberg, pp. 151-161 for more details.

wired hills. If there is a Jeffersonian video bus headed for cyberspace, maybe activist television can hitch a ride.

# 5. cyberspace and the future of activist tv

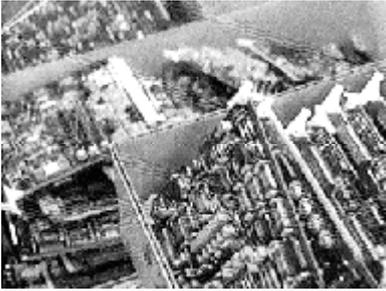
There is a new age of corporate technological utopianism upon us. It is emerging from all quarters in discussions about “the Net”, “the Superhighway” and cyberspace in general. Along with this new utopianism has come a fresh crop of people who skip the big-money tech-talk and head straight for crucial questions of principle and the models with which we should envision new systems of grassroots communication. These people are akin to the early community access advocates, complete with an energy and fervor for putting technology “into the hands of the people”. To listen to their ramblings — their words jumping from the Internet onto computer screens across the planet — one can only conclude that there is a movement afoot. And there will most likely be space for activist television and Gramscian ideals within such a movement.

All of this new-found excitement has been spurred on by so-called “convergence technologies”. The term convergence can be used to describe something as simple as a CD-ROM, which combines traditional print, video and sound styles into a single electronic document. But most of the hype around convergence has come from the idea of broadband, two-way networks — or “information superhighways” — that could allow people both to send and to receive video, print, voice and data using a single, internationally connected system. It is likely that the first “highways” will be built by cable and telephone companies that add fibre optic cables to their existing copper wire systems. ☺

A growing movement of people who envision an electronic commons on this “highway” is emerging mostly from the “virtual communities” that exist on the Internet and on local bulletin board systems (BBS’s) and FreeNets. The people who make up this movement have experienced the kind of community feeling that can develop on a multi-directional, uncensored communication system, and they want to ensure that the new, broader-band networks include public spaces that will allow this kind of community to continue. In talking about virtual communities, culture-jamming historian Mark Dery writes: “These burgeoning subcultures are driven not by the desire for commodities but by the dream of community — precisely the sort of community that is lacking in the nationally-shared



☺ ...as mentioned earlier, the Internet and the “superhighway” are not the same thing. The Internet is an existing network, whereas the highway is a proposed broadband network or set of networks.



🏠 Dery, p. 16.

🏠 Martin, no page.

🌀 Kapor, no page.

📁 Graham 1994(1), p. 6

experience of watching game shows, sitcoms, sportscasts, talk shows, and, less and less, the evening news.”🏠

This passion for self-generated culture and community, and the rejection of brainless corporate mass media, link the virtual access advocates of the 1990’s with the VTR toting community channel activists of the early 1970’s. Similarities between these two movements for grassroots banter — which are separated by a whole generation — are astonishing. In a 1973 Challenge for Change newsletter article entitled “Cable Can — And Will — Deliver More Than Just Programs”, Gail Martin paints a vision of a “two-way, international, on-demand information system” where citizens create the content and are guaranteed a “right of access”.🏠 Twenty years later — in a 1993 *Wired* article subtitled “The Case for a Jeffersonian Information Policy” — Electronic Frontier Foundation co-founder Mitch Kapor provides a similar vision of international, “open systems” networks that would stress: “Access ... everyone should be able to connect; Content ... users should be able to determine the content of the system; Uses ... people should be able to choose the roles they wish to play, whether as consumers, providers, or both.”🌀 Here in Canada, people like FreeNet advocate Garth Graham are writing articles that in many ways could have fit into the Challenge for Change newsletter. In his 1994 *Traveler’s Manifesto For The Electronic Mindway*, Graham argues that we should: “...ensure that the development of a Canadian communications and information infrastructure sustains grassroots community networking as the key to equity in the information age” and “...encourage universal access to a new global conversation and universal participation in shaping its content.”📁 The bias of most of these new access advocates is more towards the Jeffersonian electronic commons than the Gramscian counter-culture. But there are some who envision activist projects on the new networks, and there is the possibility for the flowering of these visions if a electronic commons is created on the “highway”.

The access advocates of the 70’s and the 90’s are also similar in that they both stress systems model over technology and hardware. Where the business-minded technological utopians of today often imply that the right configuration of fibre optic cables and digital switches is all that is needed to spark a positive social transformation, access advocates argue that the way new systems are designed and the way new institutions are created is of far more importance. Graham writes: “We need design metaphors of wetware for the national dream, not hardware.☺ ... Instead of a public policy debate on the defining institutions of an infor-

mation society, what we've got is a technical discussion of the vehicle that will convey us into it, and a market survey of our willingness to silently pay for the trip."📖 The "grassroots wetware" we need for the electronic commons will have to include visions of video and data that flows not just *to the home* but also *from the home*, increased levels of basic and computer literacy, and universal access to the new networks.

☹ ..."wetware" -- as opposed to hardware or software -- is that which is human or living. Our brains, and by extensions our thoughts, are wetware.

Of course "grassroots wetware" can have many meanings and interpretations that do not work in favor of the electronic commons. In fact, much of the grassroots social change rhetoric that is floating around our mediascape is coming from the mouths of information technology companies and others in the corporate world. For example, the Information Technology Association of Canada (ITAC) has used grassroots-sounding techno-utopianism to gloss over the role of information networks in fragmenting the North American work force and driving down wages.✂ In ITAC's January 26, 1994 paid supplement to the *Globe & Mail* — *Futurescape: Canada's Information Highway* — Canadians were provided with a glimpse of the future. In the photo-caption for an article called "Technology's Labour Day", ITAC promised that "...the superhighway will empower workers."📖 Towards the middle of the same article, it is explained how the superhighway will "empower" secretaries in particular: "Mississauga based Women of the Workplace (WOW) divides secretaries into two groups: 'thinkers and non-thinkers'. Although information technology will allow the few "thinkers" to become "producers...and more creative," non-thinkers will be "...eliminated from the office and channeled into retail and restaurant jobs." Such forms of "empowerment" certainly fit in with the goals of certain strains of "corporate broadband wetware".

📖 Graham 1994(1), p. 2.

✂ ITAC's members include Microsoft, IBM, Hewlett Packard, Stentor, Rogers Communications and pretty much every other company that has a controlling stake in Canada's infotech market.

More commonly, the corporate world uses grassroots and new age sounding phrases to describe its dreams of the "consumer information highway" model. A prime example is Montreal-based Videotron Ltee's "Universal, Bi-directional, Interactive" (UBI or you-bee) system. This "two-way" cable pilot project — which will be up and running in Quebec by 1995 — has been touted as Canada's first electronic highway. According to the Videotron press kit, UBI will allow users to download pay per view movies, download pay-per-byte information from databases, download advertising flyers and multi-media catalogues and download pretty much anything else. But the users ability to upload — to provide content to the system — is almost nil. The two-way interactive abilities of UBI will only allow users to upload their lottery

📖 Stienberg, pg. C9.



Stills from the UBI promotional video tape (above).

picks, their credit card numbers (for home shopping), the motions of their joysticks during interactive video games and their choice of camera angles during sporting events. Videotron has stated that they do not plan to add interactive capabilities to their community channel at this point.

With the people who are building these networks talking about systems that focus mainly on consumerism and control systems, many access advocates like Victoria FreeNet board member Clyde Bion Forrest are concerned that the new networks “...could become just like television.” It is from this fear, and from their positive experiences with the Internet, that access advocates describe the kind of model we need to pursue if we want to build a new electronic commons. “There are two extreme choices. Users (of new networks) may have indirect, or limited control over when, what, why, and from whom they get information and to whom they send it. That’s the broadcast model today, and it seems to breed consumerism, passivity, crassness, and mediocrity. Or, users may have decentralized, distributed, direct control over when, what, why, and with whom they exchange information. That’s the Internet model today, and it seems to breed critical thinking, activism, democracy, and quality. We have an opportunity to choose now.” 🗣️ Of course the choice really lies in the hands of corporations and governments, but access advocates are lobbying hard to make sure that the choice they make is the Internet model.

And there is certainly good reason to think that putting the Internet model onto at least part of the new broadband networks would make for an excellent electronic commons. Experience has shown that it is a model that works well in this role: “...life in cyberspace seems to be shaping up exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted: founded on the primacy of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity, and community.” ✨ The Internet cyberspace that Kapor is talking about is a global system of thousands of interconnected computer networks that offers a totally uncensored, two-way information environment. Mostly limited to text, the Internet offers discussion areas and databases covering every interest, idea and philosophy imaginable. Within the discussion areas, anyone can post an opinion or an article at any time, completely blurring the distinction between information producers and information consumers. The Internet has also been, at least until recently, a vehemently non-commercial community. As a working model of an electronic commons, the Internet is in many ways doing better job of fulfilling the original community channel dream than the community channel itself.

But the community channel-like role of the Internet is certainly

🗣️ Kapor, no page.

✨ Kapor, no page.

limited by the same factors that have limited American electronic commons model of access television, unable to produce social change, activism or even equal access all on its own. As Mark Dery points out, the virtual communities on the Internet often “...fall short of utopia — women and people of colour are grossly underrepresented, and those who cannot afford the price of admission or who are alienated from the technology by their cultural status are denied access.” ↵ As with the access channel, it is essential to inject activism into the Internet model, and to build Gramscian activist institutions on its soil.

Activists who are interested specifically in information rights have risen to this challenge by addressing the problem of “the price of admission” on the Internet. Their main strategy has been to develop FreeNets or Public Education Networks (PENs) in their communities. FreeNets and PENs are “community computing networks” that provide free dial-up access for people with home computers and free public terminals in libraries and community centres. As FreeNet pioneer Tom Grunder explains, community networks are about developing a locally oriented system to solve local problems. “I believe that, if we enter this (information) age with equity at all, it will be because of LOCAL people, building LOCAL systems, to meet LOCAL needs. That’s YOU, building FreeNets, in cities and towns all over the country.” 🏠 This emphasis on free and local communications is very similar to that of the community channel, but community computing offers a number of elements that the community channel (especially in Canada) does not offer: a censorship free space; a two-way, dialogue oriented system; and free international connectivity through the Internet to supplement local debate and share ideas on local solutions. But a FreeNet is only in a limited sense an “activist project”. It is not devoted specifically to social change or even to increasing access for the those who are denied access on the basis of literacy or cultural position. From and within the FreeNet need to come projects that deal with gender, race, environmental and class issues and systems that deal with literacy.

There are activists who are working to ensure groups which have traditionally been shut of the technology loop -- such as women and low-income communities -- are trained on and made to feel comfortable with computer networks. For example, the Canadian Womens Networking Support Program is setting up systems that will provide a foundation for electronic conferencing before and during the United Nations 4th World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing, China in 1995. The program's initiatives include: outreach and training that is specifically tailored



↵ Dery, p. 15.



🏠 Grunder in Graham 1994(2), p. 5.



The Playing to Win computer centre in Harlem (above).

to women's needs; an on-line conference system for Canadian womens groups who want to discuss issues before the conference; on-site technical support in Beijing; systems that will allow conference participants to easily and cheaply communicate with activists at home; and a full-text database of documents relating to the conference. The organizers of the program are not only working to set up these systems in Canada, but also they are trying to find funding to ensure that women in the South have access to the same systems. This part of the initiative is aimed at breaking down the dominance of the North in international information flows and at encouraging South-South communication.

Other groups have taken a "community centre" approach to dealing with cultural and literacy based access barriers. One such facility is New York City's Playing to Win computer centre — located in the predominantly Black and Latino neighbourhood of Harlem. Five hundred local residents use the centre on a weekly basis. The centre offers them the ability to access and learn to use a variety of computer systems that can be used for network access, desktop publishing and word-processing. Playing to Win's Ramon Morales says that his centre is "...giving people the opportunity to use technology, but use it in a collective way, to use it in a way that people are working together collaboratively, and using it as tools for self-empowerment." Unlike isolated home computing, the centre communal atmosphere often politicizes users about information access issues.

In addition to projects like Playing to Win and the FreeNets, which focus their activism on access issues, there are also a massive number of counter-cultural "activist projects" that have brought the Gramscian dimension of community media onto the Internet commons itself. There are dozens of mailing lists, newsgroups and gopher sites dealing with feminism, race issues, the environment, gay and lesbian issues, international development and activism in general. There was a great deal of activist activity on the Internet during the Gulf War. The war was a time when "everybody and their dog" wanted to get onto the Internet and associated networks, as they were the only place to find information that had not been "cleared by the US military". Once on-line, activists were able to find information about Patriot missiles causing damage to civilian areas, articles from journalists who had been muzzled by their editors, and descriptions of peace demonstrations that never made it to the 6 o'clock news.

Larger activist projects and social change institutions have also started to form on the Internet. One of the most notable is the Association for Progressive Communication (APC). The APC is a coalition of

PTTV Southwest, 1993.

Mailing lists and newsgroups are automatic information distribution systems with which you can both contribute and receive information about a specific topic or concern. A gopher site is a remote computer on the network which you can visit electronically to obtain information.

Internet connected social change computer networks in over 20 countries including Alternex in Brazil, Nicarao in Nicaragua, Peacenet and Labornet in the US and Web in Canada. The networks provide a space specifically oriented towards information provision and interpersonal networking for social change activists. They provide information and discussion areas on the environment, human rights, gender issues, peace and other topics of interest to people working for social change. More established APC members often help progressive groups in the South to develop their own autonomous communications systems. In a sense, the APC is like the Deep Dish TV of the Internet, providing a safe and comfortable space for activist communications.



With activist projects like this edging ever deeper into the Net, it becomes more and more clear that the Internet model is one of the best tools with which to rebuild the Jeffersonian foundations that will allow a new wave of Gramscian counter-cultural media. As we have seen with public access TV, an electronic commons model like the Internet is an essential foundation to the development of our own, autonomous activist media institutions. The technology needed to bring access TV and the Internet model together is becoming available. The fervor and passion for people-centred, grassroots-created content is also blooming at a mile a minute. Creating a new electronic commons that could serve projects like activist video making is now just a matter of pulling a few things together. Well, maybe not *just*.

## 6.

# strategies for a new electronic commons



☞ Private correspondence dated March 31, 1994.

It is very likely that the new broadband networks — like cable in the past — will develop to serve the goals of consumerism. But it is important to remember that a grassroots movement was able to carve out at least some form of electronic commons and some space for Gramscian activist projects within the earlier commercial cable jungle. According to Frank Spiller, the most important factor in getting the community channel embedded into Canada’s cable regulations was “...an intense public lobby, so large that the CRTC could not ignore it.” ☞ A lobby of equal size, loudness and intensity could certainly develop to ensure that an open public space is available North America’s “superhighways”. To make this happen, those who want a new electronic commons have three main tasks ahead of them: the construction of a mass movement built on alliances between diverse groups; the creation of the human centred institutions — both within and outside the new network — that will be necessary to sustain an egalitarian and truly accessible infosphere; and an intervention into the regulatory processes of the countries in which the new movement is organized.

The language, myths and visions of a Jeffersonian electronic commons — the most crucial part of any movement — have already started to spread widely. Where community video and the Challenge for Change newsletter spread grassroots media philosophy in the 1970’s, the Internet and *Wired Magazine* are doing the same today. As something that people are already using and enjoying, the Internet has incredible mythical power. People are telling their friends about the info-freedom that it brings. They are also making new friends and creating new virtual communities. It is unlikely that the people who are using the Internet would be willing to either give up this way of communicating or see it limited to text as broadband, multimedia networks develop. This kind of attachment to a way of communicating, to a way of being, could be a powerful force in bringing people together to ensure that the Internet model makes it to the broadband networks. Also, more commercial media outlets like *Wired* can play a significant role in developing the myths of a new democratic information landscape. Amidst all of its hardware reviews and techno-fetishism, *Wired* spouts the Jeffersonian ideals of an electronic

commons to over 100,000 readers. 📖

While most of the myths and ideas that flow from cyberspace and fill the pages of *Wired* take a Jeffersonian slant, there are also many 1990's access advocates that embrace the Gramscian spirit of Challenge for Change. Paper Tiger's *Staking A Claim In Cyberspace* program envisions an activist electronic democracy that opens up spaces for marginalized communities. And activists who set up the feminist, environmental and other social change listservs, newsgroups and gophers on the Internet are definitely contributing to an electronically networked community future. These visions of an activist, community-focused future must exist alongside — not instead of — myths of a Jeffersonian common.

Some of organizations that could form the nucleus of such a movement have already started to take shape. In the US, the Electronic Frontier Foundation and Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility are organizing conferences, writing articles, running listservs and lobbying government to ensure that cyberspace is public space. An organization called the Coalition for Public Information has formed to pursue similar goals in Canada. On a more grassroots level, people are forming small groups in towns and cities all over North America to build FreeNets. These groups are a movement in and of themselves.

One limitation of the organizations that have formed so far, is that they are almost solely made up of people who already understand or use The Net — grassroots computer activists, software designers and information professional like librarians. The “already Net literate” bias of these groups is at this point a major roadblock to the development of a movement for a new electronic commons — people with other backgrounds and experiences need to be involved. One important constituency that could be brought into such a movement is the large number of people who were initially involved in Challenge for Change and the early community channel. These are people who have both a passion for “people’s media” and a great deal of experience finding the human, financial and political resources necessary to build an electronic commons. People who are currently producing non-computer grassroots media also need to get connected into this movement. Activist video makers, community radio producers, community channel facilitators, artists, journalists and the independent print media all have a stake in what the electronic commons looks like. They also have experience in their own fields that can be added to the experiences of the computer people and information providers who currently make up the membership of the organizations listed above.

📖 It will be interesting to see if this idealism continues now that Vanity Fair has invested big bucks in *Wired*



In order to attract these people to a new movement, discussion of info-access issues should not be limited to high-tech forums like the Internet, or to computer hip magazines like *Wired*. The ideals of the electronic commons and of visions of the social change media institutions that we could build on such a commons need to be distributed by computer, poster, pamphlet, TV show, radio program, book and any other media that we can think of. To paraphrase interactive video artist Nancy Paterson: “Stay multi-format. Use video, use CD-ROM, use computer networks — use T-shirts.”☺

As a movement emerges, it is essential that it develop a multiplicity of visions that concretely describe what a new public access systems could look like — a wish list, so to speak. This is Garth Graham’s “wetware for a national dream”. In terms of the actual design of broadband public access system, I personally envision a multimedia FreeNet that would borrow from the experience of both community television and current community computer networks. Community television in Canada provides the perfect model for the funding of public communications projects. The government makes the people who profit from information distribution pay for a public system. FreeNets offer an excellent model for community-run, two-way communications systems where everyone is a sender and receiver of information. To combine these two elements on a broadband network that carries video, sound and all other media would make for an almost ideal electronic commons. As technology progressed, such multimedia FreeNets would allow community members to put their videotapes, CD ROMs, radio shows, etc. onto a community multi-media server. Any other community member would then be able download that information into their home.

Although such a vision may sound far fetched compared to the text-centric Internet, it is not an impossibility when you consider the UBI system that Videotron is building. As an example, UBI will have computer servers using CD ROM or some similar format allowing users to randomly access multi-media consumer catalogues. There is no reason that this technology which is being put in place to sell things could not also be used to serve the electronic commons. Such a system might not be able to handle complete community video on demand right from the outset, although this would be the ultimate goal. In the meantime, grass-roots multi-media and radio producers could use the community interactive server while video makers would be given additional channels with which to create a more open access space. There would even be the possibility for a near on-demand community video all request channel. 📺

☺ Statement by Nancy Paterson at the Images '94 "Cyberspace & Virtual Systems" workshop, April 26, 1994.

On cable systems which plan to use most of their 500 channels to run the same Hollywood movies starting at five minute intervals, freeing up the bandwidth for additional video access channels is not too much to ask for.

Of course it is also essential to build support institutions for the electronic commons outside of the network itself, especially if we are to lay the foundations of activist projects and avoid the failings of open access community television. Such institutions would provide basic and computer literacy training, and access to the technology needed to use the electronic commons. Centres like the Playing to Win computer access facility are a step in this direction. As a grander vision, I would like to borrow the concept of the Centre for Appropriate Transportation (CAT) from the alternative transportation movement. CATs are community centres for sustainable technology. In the transportation world, they include bike maintenance training spaces, design studios for people working on human powered transport projects and other facilities that contribute to the development of a non-car culture. For the new public access networks, we could create our own CATs — Centre's for Appropriate Telecommunication — that would provide free access to video production equipment, desktop publishing systems, network connected computers, multi-media authoring facilities, literacy classes, technical advice and the like. Such centres could be run in association with the local multi-media FreeNet, using some of the funding provided by the network owners.

☎ ...an idea that was tried out by Challenge for Change in the 1970's.

The fruition of all of these visions will definitely be driven by a great deal of human energy, co-operation and passion. But this human energy must go hand in hand with a regulatory environment that supports the existence of a public space on the new networks. Such regulations are necessary to ensure that network providers like the cable and telephone companies are legally responsible for funding a public space on their systems. In order to get regulations like this put into place, a movement for the creation of public networks will have to identify key moments for intervention into the regulatory process.

One such moment in Canada will be upon us in the next few years as the CRTC deals with requests by the telephone companies to carry video. Telephone delivered video is often referred to as “video-dialtone”. In the US, the FCC has already made major rulings on video-dialtone, the most significant of which ensures equal access to the system for third-party information suppliers (i.e. people who are not the phone company).<sup>①</sup> It is important that Canadian regulations guarantee the



© Kapor, no page.

same sort of access if independent film, video and multi-media makers are to develop a market on the “highway”. It is even more important that video-dialtone regulations in Canada follow in the footsteps of the cable regulations that require the system owners to spend 5% of revenue on some sort of public access system. This funding is essential both to build systems like the multi-media FreeNet and to ensure that the cable companies are still required to provide some sort of community channel. If the phone companies don’t have to fund a public space on the multi-media networks that they are developing, it is likely that the cable companies will be able to get out of their community channel obligations in the name of “fair competition”.

The frenzy with which big cable companies are swallowing up smaller ones in both Canada and the US provides another regulatory area to watch. In Canada, such transfers of ownership almost always come with a “benefits package”. These packages include goodies like updated equipment for community television and independent film funds, which are intended to prove that the cable company is doing something “in the interest of the Canadian people”. Although benefit packages are usually designed by the cable company in question, there is no reason that members of the public cannot present the CRTC with requests for additions or changes. Such requests could include extra access channels, fiber optic links between a media arts centre and the community channel master control or special community channel projects in support of marginalized communities.

On the sidelines of the regulatory process there are often advisory councils or other such government bodies. These are also excellent places to plant the regulatory seeds of the new public networks. In Canada, the federal government has created an Advisory Council on the Information Highway. Although the council’s twenty-nine person membership is dominated by the cable and telephone industries, it also includes the chair of the Coalition for Public Information, the president of the National Capital FreeNet and the president of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada. These are all people who understand the need for democratic communications and grassroots information systems. It is essential that they hear the opinions of and get support from diverse sectors that support the idea of an electronic commons. With alliances between a movement for democratic networks and the people who work within bodies like the advisory council, and with a clear understanding of when crucial decisions will be made, there is a real possibility of inserting grassroots communications values into the process of broadband net-

work regulation.

As we take the crucial steps of developing a new movement, new institutions, and new regulations that guarantee an electronic commons, we should not fall into the trap of thinking that public space on the new broadband networks is too much to ask for. As public access producer Fernando Moreena says in Paper Tiger's *Staking a Claim in Cyberspace*: "If telephone companies and others are going to be able to develop this electronic highway, then we want electronic parks to go with it, just like any other development. We also want money to grow the grass, to keep the trees and to be able to work with the community." ✓ Leaving a space for the public is a matter of course in the development of housing, as it should be in the development of new communications networks.

It is also important to remember that a group of grassroots media activists were faced with the same challenges — building a movement, visioning the future, creating regulations — twenty years ago. Against great odds, they were able to build community channels across North America. Despite the problems that community television faces, there is a great deal to be learned from these earlier victories.

It is also important for activists who are concerned about our mediascape to remember that the creation of an electronic commons or public space on the new networks is not enough in itself. We need to turn back to the Gramscian vision of community television, and look for the places where we can build counter-cultural institutions on the new systems. Looking for these spots is the only way to create a real cultural shift, to create real openings for *anyone* who wants to speak electronically, as opposed to creating a play-thing for the middle class and the already literate.

Finally, we must constantly remind ourselves what this whole grassroots media thing is about — human beings and community. If we all fall into our computers and stop talking to the people around us, we are wasting our time. If access to the new systems does not include literacy and the demystification of technology, we will have created a system that makes class barriers and cultural exclusions bigger rather than smaller. If we leave people in the South to sit on the periphery of the Net, getting sick as they build computers for the rich, the electronic commons is a failure. As we build a movement for a new electronic commons, we need to remember the primacy of all these things, to remember why we care about information democracy in the first place.

✓ PTTV Southwest, 1993.



**hegemony** **appendix:**  
**what is a**  
**anyways?**



Pooh Bear dreams of heffalumps while Christopher Robin maintains hegemony in the forest.

🔊 Cultural hegemony refers to those socially constructed ways of seeing and making sense of the world around us that predominate in a given time and place. In the latter 20th century US the supremacy of commodity relations has exercised a disproportionate influence over the way we see our lives. (Goldman, pg. 2)

A “hegemony” is really nothing like a heffalump. In fact, it isn’t any kind of animal at all. Rather, it is a state of being where everything is in harmony, at least for those with a lot of money and power. More specifically, hegemony is taking one way of seeing things, and convincing people that this way of seeing things is natural, that it is “just the way things are”. This “way of seeing things” in question is almost always in the interests of people who are rich and powerful. In other words, ideas that support the rich and powerful usually define the way a society sees the world.

In late 20th century North America, most of us see the world through the eyes of consumerism. The mass happiness of mass consumption pretty much dominates our shared conceptions of the way things are. 🔊 This idea of hegemony — a way of seeing power in which “the war for mens’ minds” is paramount — will help us understand how the corporate world has been able to disable environmentalism. But before we see how this happened, we should take a closer look at the inner workings of hegemony. One way to get at these inner workings is to explore a single element of the consumerist way of seeing the world. The private automobile — with all of the cultural and structural elements that support it — is as good an example as any.

Most North Americans believe that the private automobile is the *only* way to get around, and that it is definitely the best and coolest way to get around. In this way, it could be said that the belief system which supports the automobile is hegemonic, it is all encompassing. Given all of the other ways of moving about that are available — walking, biking, bussing, boating, training — this overwhelming support for cars as the *only* way is amazing. It is so amazing that it is hard to believe that it happened on its own, that people just naturally love the car. In reality, the move towards a near universal acceptance of the car as the North American way to get around required a great deal of work on the part of big corporations and the people who help them sell ideas. A number of structural, legal, and cultural shifts had to take place before North Americans would joyously shout in unison — “the car is the *only* way to get around, and we love it!”. The most significant elements involved in driving this almost univocal shout are: suburban road and shopping systems; the creation of a government funded car-only infrastructure; the destruction of the American public transit industry; the creation of

Hollywood myths around the car; the connection of our unfulfilled desires to automobile ownership; and the linking of the car to fundamental cultural values like freedom.

Let's start with suburban road and shopping systems. Since the 1940's, North Americans have constructed their new cities in such a way that people almost literally have no choice but to get around by car. We have built suburbs where stores and houses that are too far from each other to allow walking. We have built shopping places surrounded by seas of pavement, making it impossible to stroll along and window shop like we did in our old downtowns. We have built streets so big and wide that we fear for our children's lives if they aren't safely tucked inside our cars. The easiest way to convince people of something is to make sure they don't have any choices. This is exactly what the suburbs have done as a part of their contribution to the hegemony of car culture, and the dominance of consumerism in general. If it is very difficult to get around without a car, people will quickly come to the conclusion that the car is the *only* way to get around. 🏙️

The governments of North America gave the suburbs a good deal of help in convincing people to buy into this *only* way scenario. Although there are many other examples, the two biggest contributions that governments made to the development of a car centred culture were road subsidies and centralized planning. Federal, regional and municipal governments in North America massively subsidized — and continue to massively subsidize — the road system. If they didn't do this, most people just couldn't have afforded to drive their cars. And that wouldn't have been very good for business, would it? 🏞️ Once people could afford cars, planners were brought in to design spaces that people could only get around by car (the suburbs). This planning aspect of things represents a whole sub-belief system contained within a profession. By directly controlling the ways in which certain aspects of society are organized, these professional belief systems provide essential support for the development of broader public conceptions of the way things are.

Of course the car corporations themselves had a big hand in the development of the car centred belief system. They made and advertised the cars that would fill the roads. They also made sure that there was no competition from more economically viable and economically accessible forms of transportation. "In 1936 General Motors, Standard Oil of



🏙️ In relation to this, Goldman talks about the role that physical infrastructure has played in developing the hegemonic commodity culture as a whole ... The franchising of food establishments, the selling of vitality and beauty through fitness clubs, the creation of retirement havens, the construction of instant "communities" in apartment complexes and the manufacture of a new kind of public gathering place in sanitized shopping malls create the most appropriate spaces for privatized consumption. This level of commodification is inseparable from the world of magazine advertising that we have been discussing (Goldman, pp. 34 - 35).

🏞️ To find out more about the subsidizing of car infrastructure, you should look at the articles by Sue Zielinski, Gord Laird, Michael Replogle and Charles Komanoff in the book *Beyond the Car*, by Steel Rail Press



California, and Firestone Tire formed a company called National City Lines, whose purpose was to buy up alternative transport systems all across the US., and then close them down. By 1956, over one hundred electric surface rail systems in 45 cities, serving millions of people had bought up and dismantled entirely." 🏠 With no buses or trains available, it was much easier to convince potential suburban transit users that the car was the *only* way. National City Lines was a step in this direction.

🏠 Nelson, 1994



All of these structural motivations couldn't have convinced people to believe so deeply in the car unless people really *wanted* the car and the suburbs. North America's cultural industries quickly stepped in to help the *want* develop. From the 1940s to the 1960s, TV shows and movie screens were filled with glorious visions of suburban life. The suburban bliss of the Beaver Cleaver family and the futuristic excitement of the Jetsons made the old downtowns — where you walked to the market and socialized on the front porch — look drab and boring. These programs let people know that progress, that ever illusive commodity lusted after by every God-fearing American, was to be found in the car filled suburbs. And, if pulp TV and movie fiction wasn't enough, news producers helped push "White Flight" to the suburbs by constructing downtowns as hostile places filled with criminals and minorities. This muddling mixture of Hollywood fantasy and "real world" news melded together to make the suburbs into "the place to be".



This Oldsmobile ad promises "a new found freedom, a sense of authority and justifiable pride like nothing else you've ever known." If the ad copy isn't lying, this couple is "Living Oldsmobility -- and loving it!"

Media makers not only helped people with the psychological leap to the suburbs, they also helped to create some powerful, down home myths about what the car could do for your life. The American film industry re-created the car as a provider of social and sexual power. Hollywood-made home town America drag races from the 1950s — where the winner always gets the girl — are only the tip of the iceberg. Car advertising brought similar messages to television. Women draped on the front of slowly rotating automobiles drew the ever stronger connection between cars and the ability to get women. These images of the car as a great thing, as a way to get power and sex, filtered quickly into real and everyday life. The rites of passage that have developed around the car are evidence of this. Most North American teenagers just can't wait to get their driver's license, the official proof of adulthood.

This cultural link between the car and sexuality demonstrates how the car centred belief system was built from the rubble of our most valued

life experiences and the mortar of our perceived personal inadequacies.

 Sexuality is one of the most vital and exciting parts of our lives. Unfortunately, the dominant messages of our society and the day to day enforced morality of the 1950s made a good job of quashing the sharing and beauty of sex. If you didn't have a horrible sex life already, the myth-makers did as much as they could to convince you that you did. As sexuality has been broken down into something that we don't have, or can't have, it has been easily sold back to us in the form of cars and other consumer objects. In other words, advertising and other forms of popular culture have linked sexual fulfillment to the car as a way to help us buy the car and love the car. It is important to note that the accelerating car culture of the 1950s focused on the car only as the solution to male sexual needs. In this way, the sexualization of the car not only commercialized desire but also it contributed to the post-war rebuilding of male dominance in North American society. 

Finally, the car was also brought into the hegemonic consumerist belief system by the skillful application of words. Certain words hold immense power in a society, the power to sway people and justify actions. In North American society, one of these words is "freedom". Freedom has many meanings, and many connotations. The most overarching of these meanings play into the hands of consumerism and the powers-that-be.  In our culture, "freedom" can be used to conjure up ideas about the right to espouse any political beliefs you like, the ability control your own body, or the right to protection from oppressive economic and political forces. But more often than not, "freedom" is used to invoke ideas about economic liberty in the marketplace — the right to make a buck or the right to buy the product you like, the "free" market and the "free" press.  These more dominant uses of the word freedom act as fundamental supports to consumerism. In the case of the car, freedom has been strongly linked to freedom from parents, from the state, and the freedom to chose your favourite model of car. By making such strong links between the car and freedom, culture-makers have helped to secure the car's position as a "must have" product, and as a central element to our obsession with mass consumption.

All of these things — the suburbs, government road subsidies, the destruction of public transit in the US, the creation of Hollywood car myths, the appropriation of our desires, and the links between the car

 Advertising has become a form of internal cultural colonialism that mercilessly hunts out and appropriates those meaningful elements of our cultural lives that have value. (Goldman, p. 8)

 Many cultural theorists argue that the Second World War put cracks in the North American patriarchy by allowing women more independence and power. Movies, popular fiction, television and advertising all contributed to filling of these cracks and the pushing of women back into suburban kitchen after the war.

 The sets of connotative meanings that start to build up in a society (e.g. the car = freedom) are the means by which power and ideology are made to signify in particular discourses. They refer signs to the 'maps of meaning' into which any culture is classified; and those 'maps of social reality' have the whole range of social meanings, practices and usages, power and interest 'written in' to them. (pg. 134)

 The term "free" press in America almost always refers to a profitable capitalist enterprise



This fits in with Hall's ideas about hegemony as the foundation of political and economic domination ...because this domination has been secured by consent — on the basis of a wide consensus, as the saying goes — the domination not only seems universal (what everybody wants) and legitimate (not won by coercive force), but its basis in exploitation actually disappears from view. (pg. 216)



In his paper on encoding and decoding, Hall points out that messages from the media are interpreted differently depending on the “position” of the viewer. A person who interprets a message from the dominant-hegemonic position accepts the meaning intended by the producer. The person who interprets the message from a negotiated position doesn't question, but also doesn't think that the message applies to his or her situation. The person who interprets the message from an oppositional position sees the meaning of the message and rejects it as the voice of the oppressors. These viewing positions relate to a person's situation within the hegemonic culture. That is, you must be able to interpret messages from an oppositional position before you can develop a strategy for resistance. See pages 136 to 138 of the Encoding/Decoding article in Media, Culture, and Society.

and central values like freedom — have contributed to the creation of an almost all encompassing car loving belief system in North America. This belief system has been so successful, and is so pervasively connected to concepts of personal power and fun, that few North Americans would say that they don't like cars. In fact, they can't get enough of them. This belief system is so pervasive that the vision of the car as the *only* way to get around seems natural, “just the way things are”. Massive support for the car — and in similar ways for consumerist beliefs in general — amounts to a tacit public consent to the political and economic system that makes mass consumption work. This natural-seemingness of a belief system and this broad consent for a economic and political system are the elements that make up hegemony. They indicate a situation where the desires of the “general public” and the money making schemes of big corporations are “in harmony”. 

Of course there will always be people who either don't participate in the dominant way of doing things, or who downright oppose it.  In the case of the consumerist car culture, there are definitely people who choose to use the predominantly shut out modes of transportation such as walking, biking, busing and training. There are also people who come right out and say that cars should be gotten rid of altogether and that we should all turn to other options. Although these people may be acting and talking in ways that go counter to the dominant way of seeing things — counter to the hegemony — the big car corporations don't bother with them much. Corporations are much more interested in keeping consumerist myths rolling along than they are in talking to people who think that the consumerist lifestyle is bunk.

Big corporations only start to worry about people who oppose them when there is actually a threat to their ability to make a profit. People can rant and scream and do their own thing all they want as long as they don't interfere with profits. But once you start tampering with profits — by convincing enough people that consumerism is a bad thing or by directly standing in the way of money making operations — you have crossed an important threshold. This is the threshold that stands between the powers-that-be being nice to you, and being thrown in jail. It is at this point that the environmentalists re-enter the story. As we saw earlier, the spread of eco-ideas during the 1980s was seen as a threat by those at the top of the consumerist power ladder. Large numbers of people started to question widely held beliefs that stood at the foundation of consumerism. Many North Americans started to understand that using

paper doesn't have to mean clearcutting our forests and that getting around doesn't have to mean driving a car. This was a questioning of the dominant way of seeing the world.

When the dominant ways of seeing the world start to be questioned, the rich and powerful start to wonder how they can keep the harmony of hegemony. A situation like this is often called a "crisis of hegemony". Such a crisis usually results in two actions on the part of the powers-that-be. The first is to undermine your opponents by making sure that the "general public" gets real happy again, real fast. The second is to use force against the "agitators" who won't get back in line, while convincing everybody else in society that the "agitators" were just a bunch of criminals anyway. In the environmental "war for mens' minds", the rich and powerful generally choose to use the undermining tactic first.

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