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A Guide to Philosophical Discussions of Community Media
by John W. Higgins

In the early 1990s I was a graduate student with an extensive background in commercial and community-based media, working on a dissertation about public access. Fred Johnson of Media Working Group put together a conference in Cincinnati, Ohio, that brought together two groups with interests in community media: scholars and practitioners. Between breaks, Dirk Koning from Grand Rapids pulled out an elaborately folded, origami-like piece of paper and asked me to choose "Pee Wee's Magic Word of the Day." ("Pee Wee's Magic Word" was a feature of a popular children's television program; when the secret word was mentioned throughout the show, all people and objects went wild.)

I chose a section of the folded paper; it lifted to reveal the word "hegemony." When I chose another, the word "pedagogy" was revealed; another showed "counter-hegemonic video." We laughed uproariously -- the scholarly presentations *had* been rather stuffy and pretentious and, in some instances, unnecessarily obscure and jargon-laden. Nonetheless, the conference was successful in bringing together scholars and practitioners interested in promoting the ideals of grassroots, community-based, democratic media, and rooting the emergent theoretical perspectives on lived practice. The meeting was one event that helped cultivate "public intellectuals," or "organic intellectuals," or "philosopher practitioners" -- people who engage the world through practice, reflect on the broader impact of such actions, with a theoretically and politically based consciousness about the implications of action and thought.

I think about that experience in Cincinnati at times. Access participation tends to cultivate public intellectuals from many different walks of life, involved in many different capacities within access: producers, staff, viewers, board members, administrators. We need a space to gather and theoretically frame our access experiences, to place them in larger contexts -- political, social, or philosophical, to name but a few. It doesn't take an advanced degree to participate in these discussions. But it can help to have a guide to the conversation.

Philosophical discussions related to access at times draw on shorthand terms in order to

convey complex ideas in a short period of time. Some of the more philosophically-based critiques of access and community media may seem a bit alien to the uninitiated; they are based on political and philosophical thought emerging primarily from the experiences of World Wars I and II. These schools of thought challenged many of the philosophical assumptions of the European and American democracies in order to more fully realize goals of equality and participatory democracy. They provide a more robust understanding of the nature of politics and power within society than the one-dimensional views portrayed on our nightly network newscasts.

The American mass media train us not to think too deeply about our lives, our beliefs, our relationship with the world. The corporate media promote anti-intellectualism and do little to encourage independent analytical or critical thought. Access participation shatters this model -- encouraging a process of exploration of and engagement with ourselves, our communities, our world. We see that starting with the discovery of our own voice -- or helping someone discover theirs -- we can shape our world, we can make a difference.

Here is a brief guide to some of the concepts behind the discussions:

The Enlightenment

The 18th century European philosophical movement upon which the founding philosophies of the U.S. constitutional system were based. The Enlightenment -- the "Age of Reason" -- applied "scientific," rational thought to all areas of life: morality, politics, social, religion, philosophy, and science. The Enlightenment venerated the role of the independent, aloof, "objective" philosopher.

Liberal democratic, republican; pluralist thought

Generic terms referring to the Enlightenment-based principles underlying the U.S. constitutional system. Whether discussing "right" or "left" or "centrist" political stances, the big picture of U.S. political philosophy is a republican (representative) based system, encouraging grassroots participation with an equality of rights (democratic), inclusive of diverse groups and thought (pluralist) and liberal (progressive, reform-oriented -- from the perspective of the era of

the Enlightenment) in approach.

Ideas related to the “marketplace of ideas,” “one person, one vote” -- or “first come, first served” -- stem from these roots.

Critical

Not the same as “analytical.” In this context, “critical” refers to an analysis that includes power (political) relationships, may be self-reflexive in approach, and seeks social change. The term also identifies a particular approach to scholarly study that includes and transcends subject areas such as communication, sociology, anthropology, politics, economics, etc. Critical theory disputes much of what it sees as naïve (unproblematic, under-theorized) assumptions of the Enlightenment, while supporting the goals of personal and societal transcendence.

For example, a critical approach might argue that the best way to achieve a “diversity of ideas” might not be from the Enlightenment-based “clash of ideas in the marketplace,” but from a more cooperatively-based model.

Critical thought emphasizes the role of the “organic intellectual” -- the practitioner/philosopher who, guided by a political and philosophical awareness, is able to act within the world, reflect alone and with others on the effect of those actions, and re-direct action accordingly -- to change the world.

Power

Notions of power are at the heart of critical thought and critiques of the Enlightenment. “Power” means issues of dominance and acquiescence, of which traditional politics (“liberal democratic”/“pluralist” discussions) are only a small part. An analysis of power within personal relationships, the media, or society, includes an exploration of which groups rule, which groups are subjugated, how the situation got to be this way, what ideals and practices hold the unequal power relationships in place, how the situation might be envisioned differently, and what actions might be taken to change the situation. These steps are applied from the micro to the macro levels, from personal to societal situations.

A critical analysis of “first come, first served,” for example, would argue that the policy

perpetuates unequal power relationships in the society -- since the people or groups most likely to first come through the door are those who already exercise some influence (power) in the community.

The policy of “first come, first served” would be seen as politically naive in that it attempts to restructure societal power relationships (giving unheard voices an opportunity to be heard), but actually ends up reinforcing the status quo.

Hegemony

A key concept in the notion of power. Formulated by Italian activist and philosopher Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s, the concept attempts to explain how power actually operates within society. Hegemony is the ability of the dominant group(s) to exercise social and cultural leadership over subordinated group(s) -- AND to maintain power over the economic, political, and cultural direction of the larger society. This dominance is achieved through social and cultural means, not by direct coercion of subordinated groups. An active, shifting set of group alliances, hegemony is said to work best when hidden. We consent to work with the dominant group, often against our own self and/or group interests. Hegemony identifies culture as a site of struggle between groups; in particular, the media reinforce ideologies that help the dominant group stay in power, since the media serve to maintain the status quo.

Of particular significance to access practitioner/philosophers is the notion of *resistance* to the hegemonic process: that there will always be resistance to the hegemonic process; opposition and alternatives can always be counted to spring up. These alternatives will usually be “trashed” (“*marginalized*”) by mainstream thought, which is dominated by the hegemonic group.

Pedagogy

An expanded conceptualization of “teaching” and “learning” that recognizes both processes take place at the same time. Rather than being limited to just institutional schooling, pedagogy refers to the way we learn about the world, and how we teach others to perceive the world. Within the critical perspective, these processes are considered sites of intense power and

ideological conflicts.

Quotation marks

Quotation marks around an everyday word often means that the term is contested. The quote marks note that there is controversy surrounding the "real" definition of the term or how the concept is applied in real life. For example, "free speech" -- is there really such a clean, unproblematic animal, given practical and critical considerations?

Resources

I was led to graduate studies by a fascinating comic book that raised intellectual questions within a fun format. So, I place a lot of stock in illustrated books -- sort of like hefty comic books with thought-provoking content. For a fun exploration of some of the ideas presented above, try the illustrated/comic book series "*Introducing . . .*" or "*. . . For Beginners.*" Some of these include:

Introducing the Enlightenment, by Lloyd Spencer and Andrzej Krauze. Cambridge: Icon. 2000.

Introducing Media Studies, by Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon. New York: Totem. 2000.

Introducing Cultural Studies, by Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon. New York: Totem. 1998.

Postmodernism for Beginners, by Jim Powell. New York: Writers and Readers. 1998.

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