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Where in the World is US PEG?
By DeeDee Halleck

As September 11 so forcefully pointed out, we in the US have to realize that there is a wider context to all our actions, our geography and our very lives. I recall years ago Elliot Margolies, then director of Cupertino Cable, in a PSA for Deep Dish recounted a conversation he had with his son. "Dad, why do we have wars?" was the question. "Son, because we don't have enough public access." was his answer. Now more than ever, community communication is necessary -- crucial. But the wider context is essential.

There are several ways in which the PEG community in the US has been part of a global context. First, of course, is as a model for community dialogue. The creation of the infrastructure for democratic communication has been something many groups all over the world are seeing as an important example of using technology to enhance civic participation. Movements have sprung up in Germany, Korea, Brazil and many other countries which have been initiated and encouraged by the work of access in this country.

Second, the US access movement has successfully "taxed" multinational corporations in a way that provides for public "pay back". This has been seen and is being studied globally as a unique and useful application of contractual law. This has implications not only for television and internet, but for other aspects of business: by requiring responsibility for local benefit from large multi-national corporations.

Third, the PEG movement has provided the world with ambassadors of communication - those leaders, such as Dirk Koenig, Jessika Ross, George Stoney and others who have traveled the world to assist local efforts by sharing their vast experience and concrete knowledge.

Fourth, and this is where I think the PEG community must take more leadership, has been the use of local community media for discussion of global issues.

Encouraging Global Understanding

How can local channels help to sustain global understanding? Obviously one way is for community media centers to provide space and infrastructure for immigrant populations to express their concerns and culture. I recall during the Gulf War visiting the Minneapolis center and seeing two editors working on a program which was basically Saddam Hussein's speeches. It was a local Iraqi group making their weekly show. I recall thinking that what they really needed was to translate the program so that other people in the Twin Cities could at least hear what "the enemy" was saying. Could the process of doing that translation have been initiated by the access center? Could the Iraqi producers have been encouraged to participate in a round table discussion? Could there be community forums (face to face, not necessarily only on the tube)? Of course PEG administrators are overworked and under-budgeted and not looking for extra work. However, if PEG is to thrive in this difficult climate, we must encourage programming that takes ourselves and the world seriously. Certainly the local network news is not going to provide this sort of forum. Unless community media becomes more pro-active, we will soon be as irrelevant as the mass media portrays us.

Another possibility is program exchange with media makers from other countries, by helping local organizations connect with international sources of media. One example is Korean Labor News. As many factories move out of the country, it is becoming more and more important for workers around the world to share their concerns. Myung June Kim has been a frequent visitor to this country and works with video makers who document labor struggles in his country. Many of these programs are translated and could be quite useful for local rank and file workers to see and discuss. Other areas for exchange are the environmental and animal rights movements. There are many local groups who would probably value having international programming on these issues. By providing the resources to facilitate this sort of program exchange, PEG can improve the channel's quality and increase local support.

Indy Media Center Movement

An example of community media that has been able to successfully operate on a global scale in a uniquely horizontal and democratic way is the Independent Media Center movement (www.indymedia.org). Begun in Seattle during the demonstrations around the World Trade Organization, this movement has sparked media activity in over eighty sites around the world, by providing a forum for reporting and posting of video, audio and photos. IMC's could never have developed without global collaboration -- the initial software (which provides for instant posting of many file formats) was developed in Australia and the elaborate foundation of servers and mirror server back-ups depends on infrastructure from many countries. An interesting resource for understanding just how the IMCs work is their open discussion archive at <http://process.indymedia.org>. If there is an IMC in your community, find out how to connect with this dynamic group of media activists.

Upcoming Actions

As militarism flourishes around the world and the threat of nuclear war again rears its head, PEG centers must be places where we can resurrect peace and global understanding. This can only happen if we see ourselves as part of a larger community of people around the world who are dedicated to dialogue and democratic exchange. In 2003 there will be a World Summit on the Information Society at the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in Geneva. For the first time groups from civil society will take part. In the past it has only been business and governments. There is a growing movement to have democratic communication finally on the agenda of this international organization which, among other activities, assigns the global orbital slots for satellites. I hope that ACM members will find out about this meeting (www.comunica.org) and become involved in this effort. At a recent meeting to prepare for this summit at UNESCO in Paris, I proposed that the ITU consider requiring all military satellites to have a proportion of their transponders dedicated to peace. It's about time. Of course that will take a long struggle. In the meanwhile we can begin at home, on our own channels.

Author note

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Manuscript Note

This article will be presented in a White Paper session at the 2002 national conference of the Alliance for Community Media in Houston.

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