

"The Satellite Bridge Across the Digital Divide"

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Last month I was in Barranquilla, Colombia, as part of a conference of community media, organized by a group of academics, media makers and teachers entitled, "Our Media" [www.ourmedianet.org]. One of the events we saw there was a street projection at the Plaza of Bolivar of a film about the neighborhood around the plaza which had been made by students at the near-by Universidad del Norte. A soft rain drenched the plastic seats and an umbrella shielded the projector, but the warmth of the images on the screen made the chilly night cozy. The audience, many of whom were in the film, watched with enthusiasm. This screening reminded me of street screenings I organized in 1961 in the Lower East Side in New York City of work by our Henry Street Settlement film club. It was also like the projections of experimental video I saw one evening on a building in downtown Havana of work produced by the Cuban Video Movement as part of the Latin American Film Festival in the 1988. It resonated most closely, I suppose, with a screening by TV Maxambomba I attended in a favela of Rio in the nineties with a screen attached to a VW microbus.

These screenings were all of OUR MEDIA. There may be different equipment, different themes, different imagery, different formats: It might be through the airwaves, community cable channels, the rumba drums, the xerox machine, the computer, or a dance stage. It may be in villages or barrios, in attics or basements, it may be on roof tops or bill boards, on a satellite or a mola. Our Media are united by being made and shared by people on a completely different basis from that of the mass media. This is media for cooperation and exchange, for peace and against exploitation and greed.

Much of the discussion at the Colombia conference focused on development media projects in Latin America and Asia. Within the “first world” we have our own “third world”: there are many communities totally excluded from mass media. With the growing militarism of George Bush’s presidency it is more important than ever that we have spaces for those who disagree with the war fever that has gripped the corporate channels. We who are in the “belly of the beast” have our own needs for information equity. The community of alternative media makers in the United States often have a hard time to raise sustaining funds from foundations who sometimes find it easier to fund projects in far off lands than projects too close to home.

Negotiating franchise agreements with cable corporations has been one way that many of us have been able to sustain community media in this country. I think the lessons of access in the US are extremely important to share with the world. In December there will be an important gathering in Geneva, Switzerland that is co-sponsored by the International Telecommunications Union and UNESCO. For the first time there will be representatives of the “civil society” there to debate issues concerning the “World Summit on the Information Society”. This is a good opportunity for those of us with experience in PEG access to share our insights and suggestions with delegates from all over the world. The ITU designates the satellite paths. Like the “rights of way” in our cities, these paths are a public resource. At the present time, they are used by commercial and military interests. Perhaps there could be a way that using the lessons of franchise negotiations, the ITU could set up a mechanism so that any commercial use of the satellite paths has to be augmented by a “set-aside” for public use: channels (transponders) and time for OUR MEDIA. As for the military use, there could be a stipulation that all military transponders be matched with ones dedicated to peace.

This is a utopian idea, but so is PEG access. Despite the constant threats and hassles from the cable corporations, despite the way the mass media ridicules and minimizes community media, despite the attempts to deregulate any public interest sector from our channels, at the present time, PEG access is working and thriving in many cities. This can be a model of democratic communication for the world.

There is much lip service given to “bridging the digital divide”. The way to do that is to strengthen community media on an international level. There are corporate entities that are trying to use the language of empowerment to ensnare communities in a web of consumerism and debt. On my way to Colombia I picked up a copy of the Financial Times and found an article which I think highlights the difference between our media and theirs... The article is about a project of Hewlett Packard and Unilever corporation and is being touted as bridging the digital divide. It proposes to give Indian women palm pilot mini computers, or as they call it “personal digital organizers” Why? Well first they say to access information about hospitals, schools and food prices in this test village of Chirummari which is two hours from Hyderabad. Then to quote: Later the pilot project will be “up graded” to allow the women to buy and sell shampoos, soaps and other Unilever products...Unilever is working with “self-help” groups to sell its products in rural India in places which are beyond the reach of formal distribution networks. Corps rural markets generate 50 % of Unilever’s Indian turnover. There are 600,000 rural villages in India. We reached a level (of only 100,000 of these villages)that could not be improved alone...that’s why we partner with self help groups....it is “low risk”...Some of the women were alarmed by concepts such as margins for goods that they were selling to their neighbors. The deep community spirit among women meant that they were not competitive in pricing goods sold to neighbors. We told them it was not wrong to charge a margin. Our aim is to turn illiterate women into entrepreneurs.”

This project is not Our Media. It is definitely Their Media.