

# ACCESS THROUGH ACTIVISM: EXTENDING THE IDEAS OF NEGT AND KLUGE TO AMERICAN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA PRACTICES

DAVID  
SHOLLE

American media theory, particularly within cultural studies, has been preoccupied with the textual analysis of dominant media and more recently with the study of audience consumption. This work has emphasised the activity of “consumptive resistance” and all but ignored the activity of production, where issues of access, public media and the public sphere are central. Just as academics have been blind to alternative media practices, media activists, themselves, have shunned theory, seeing media scholarship as removed from the everyday reality of their practice (Anderson and Goldson 1993).

However, the recent turn of attention by media scholars to the concept of the public sphere provides the possibility for developing a dialogue between scholars and activists, for concern with the public sphere turns attention back to the suppressed area of production. The recent translation into English of Negt and Kluge’s *Public Sphere and Experience* (1993) promises to reinvigorate this rethinking of the concepts of public sphere, access, and media activism in the United States.

It is my contention that alternative media stands to gain much from the theoretical intervention of public sphere scholars (particularly, Negt and Kluge), and that at the same time, scholars of the public sphere have much to learn from the concrete practices of alternative media. Accordingly, this essay will examine alternative media in light of the concepts of access and public sphere activity. First, a description of alternative media in the United States will be presented and the central theoretical issues involving this practice will be delineated. Then, Negt and Kluge’s work on the public sphere will be presented in an attempt to assess and rethink alternative media practices.

David Sholle is  
Visiting  
Associate  
Professor,  
Department of  
Communication  
Studies,  
University of  
Michigan,  
Ann Arbor,  
MI 48109-1285.

## Alternative Media in the United States

What is “alternative” about alternative media? This question can be answered only by describing the structure and operation of the mainstream media. At this point, we need only offer a brief account (to be tested later) in order to come to a tentative definition of alternative media practice. The dominant media in the United States are privately owned, profit-driven, corporately structured and operate within the parameters of dominant political and economic arrangements that support a truncated representative democracy and a quasi-regulated free-market. Most significantly, these mainstream media regard their various publics as predominantly consumerist in orientation. Thus, these media are structured on a one-way model of communication, where feedback is registered as consumer need, and access to the media is conceptualised as “access” to information. In other words, access is something that is provided to the consumer. Given this broad definition of mainstream media, we must immediately recognise that such a system is fraught with contradictions and gaps in its actual operation. In practice, mainstream media generate variations in content, structure and orientation to the audience that provide the space for some alternative practices to arise.

Given such a broad vision of mainstream or dominant media, many current practices could be described as alternative—from neo-nazi videotape distribution, to fundamentalist religious networks, to left-wing independent productions. We will delimit what we mean by “alternative media” to those practices that stand in opposition to the mainstream media in terms of its structuring of access to the public sphere. Further, while recognising that alternative media include radio, newspaper, magazine and music recording, in order to maintain focus, we will limit our examination to alternative television and media activism. For our purpose, the rubric variously called “independent production,” “alternative media,” or “media activism” will refer to media work that operates outside of the political and economic mainstream, challenges mainstream television’s hierarchical structures, and supports access to the means of communication. What is crucial is that these media groups challenge mainstream media’s structure and orientation to the public sphere.

We can further subdivide alternative media practice in terms of their basic orientation to the public and in terms of their sphere of activity. First, several types of alternative media can be distinguished according to their self-defined practice in relation to the dominant media and to their audience. We can distinguish three types of alternative media practice in this regard— guerrilla television, community television and independent media (Boddy 1990). As David Trend (1993, 22) notes, both guerrilla television and community television emphasise decentralised production. Guerrilla television arose in the 1960’s and included groups such as Ant Farm, the Videofreex, Top Value Television and Global Village. These media activists stressed iconoclasm, and although sporadically providing video cameras to various disadvantaged groups, tended to stress the artistic dimension of video use in line with the conceptual art groups of the time. As Boddy (1990, 93) notes these groups were motivated by a technological utopianism and were apolitical and even anti-political in their approach. This tradition continues today in artist-based media centres. The second type of alternative media, community television, also developed in the 1960s. The Canadian National Film Board’s Challenge for Change program serves as a model for this type of activism. As Trend (1993, 23) notes, “producers used film and video to enable local groups to communicate to government leaders with minimal third-part mediation.” In the United States, the public access cable movement takes up this type of activity in stressing grassroots organisation, community outreach and providing voice to diverse groups within the community. Groups such as Paper

Tiger Television, Deep Dish, and Labor Beat are representative of this type of space for alternative voices within dominant structures. Such groups as Appalshop, Women Make Movies, and The Southern California Asian American Studies Central are examples of this (Trend 1993, 27). These organisations began as media arts centres designed to pool equipment resources for independent artists. Although many of these organisations have evolved into community-oriented centres that provide access to various social movements and community groups, there is a decided tendency to focus on the needs of the professional artist.

A second way of conceptualising alternative media practices is in terms of the actual activities carried out by various groups: production, distribution, media literacy, policy making. Although many media activist groups are involved in all of these types of activity, specific organisations tend to focus on one area or another. Groups such as Austin Community Television's "Alternative Views," Labor Beat and Paper Tiger Television focus predominantly on the production of alternative forms of media. Deep Dish, a satellite mini-network, provides for the distribution of local community access programming to a wider national audience. Organisations such as the National Alliance for Media Education and Strategies for Media Literacy focus on projects of media literacy, both in terms of critical viewing skills and utilising the tools of the media. Finally, organisations such as the Telecommunications Policy Roundtable and the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture, monitor policy making within the media industries and government and attempt to intervene through educational and lobbying efforts. In this analysis we will focus on alternative media as forms of production and distribution, and later raise questions surrounding the other types of activist activities.

All of these alternative media practices are directed at developing what Negt (1980, 67) calls emancipatory communication, i.e., "the objective conditions under which the human being can become more of a subject and can build more autonomous and more comprehensive relationships to reality." This position owes much to Enzensberger and Brecht, who both critique the one-way functioning of dominant media, while maintaining that the form of media technology does not determine the form of its use. Thus, Brecht sees the potential of radio to be transformed from a mechanism of distribution into one of communication (Negt 1980). Alternative media have shared in this kind of utopianism, but as we shall see, this discourse is not without its problems.

The activities of alternative media groups suggest the production of a counter public sphere whose discourse is primarily oppositional to what is conceived as the public sphere proper. This is the central question for this essay: does such a formulation of public sphere activity adequately characterise the present structure of representational and oppositional practices; if not, what are the consequences for the goals of alternative media practices.

Negt and Kluge's work suggests that, if alternative media practitioners are to have a significant role in transforming public sphere activity, they will have to think through a number of theoretical and practical issues:

- What are the strategies by which meaning is created by dominant media, and how may alternatives work to disrupt this process? Further, how are these strategies structured by the contradictory conceptions of the public sphere?
- Should media activists attempt to infiltrate dominant exhibition systems, or attempt to build their own distribution networks? Who is included or excluded from participation in the design and programming of such networks?
- How should audiences for alternative media be conceived? Is the audience universalisable, enclaved, diverse, etc.?
- How should access be conceptualised— as access to technology, audiences, political impact, etc.? (Anderson and Goldson 1993, 59).

As we shall see, centring these issues within the overarching question of the nature of the public sphere raises important and disturbing questions for alternative media practices. Before directly confronting these issues, I will examine Negt and Kluge's *The Public Sphere and Experience*, showing how its retheorisation of the public sphere provides fruitful insights for rethinking alternative media practices in the United States.

## Negt and Kluge on the Public Sphere

The function of the public sphere in democratic life has taken up a position of central importance within contemporary social-political theory and media study. The notion of the public sphere foregrounds questions of the place of citizens' activity in communication processes that potentially affect decision-making over economic and political policies. Situating this activity within the conditions of modern mass mediated society further leads us to the question of how the media can function to provide the space for such democratic discursive activity and how citizens can gain access to a public sphere within the terms of contemporary late capitalist development. These questions are crucial to the project of alternative media.

Negt and Kluge's project is focused on the contemporary situation and is an attempt to reformulate what the public sphere means in light of the current media. This involves a critique of the extant definitions of the public sphere and a conceptualisation of new forms of public sphere activity. Negt and Kluge's project is to show how the public sphere cannot be described as a singular homogeneous substance, rather it must be seen as an aggregation of phenomena. "One can no longer think of the public sphere as an integral whole, because increasingly it is becoming only a regulative idea. In reality the public sphere has already disintegrated into partial public spheres" (Kluge 1988, 98). Thus, they distinguish at least three types of public sphere that overlap: the classical bourgeois public sphere, the public spheres of production, and the proletarian public sphere (prefigured in alternative and counter publics).

The classical bourgeois public sphere is commonly taken as the model of the public sphere. This model is described by Habermas, which Curran succinctly summarises as:

*a neutral zone where access to relevant information affecting the public good is widely available, where discussion is free of domination by the state and where all those participating in public debate do so on an equal basis. Within this public sphere, people collectively determine through the processes of rational argument the way in which they want to see society develop.... The media facilitates this process by providing an arena of public debate. For Habermas, the present new media block this process by creating a culture of spectacle and consumption (Curran 1991, 83).*

Negt and Kluge take issue with this characterisation, arguing that "the bourgeois public sphere is founded on an abstract principle of generality, deployed in the fight against any and all particularity." Thus, the problem with the public sphere inheres in its very nature — the public sphere claims to represent a general will, which was and is a mechanism of exclusion — the exclusion of certain social groups, women, servants, as well as vital social issues such as the conditions of production, reproduction (child-rearing) and the exclusion of all difference (Hansen 1993, XXVIII). Second, Habermas' classical bourgeois public sphere operates through an exclusionary discourse of rationality grounded in formal communicative rules. Negt and Kluge show how the dictates of polite argument do not secure a rational critical politics, but are in themselves mechanisms of exclusion and silencing. Communicative rationality tends to ignore questions of constituency, concrete needs, interests, conflicts, protest and power. This ties in with the

classical model's tendency to reduce politics to the steering of state policy. For Negt and Kluge, this ignores the extent to which politics is structured by the interests of property, high culture, or the material conditions of everyday life. This leads them to reformulate the notion of politics, extending it to all social sites of production and reproduction.

Thus, in Negt and Kluge's analysis, the Classical bourgeois public sphere presents only the illusion that it can construct a consensus around all socially relevant issues, and it constructs the further illusion that all members of society participate in it. Historically, this public sphere has never actually functioned in this way and in the present, even the illusion that it does so is breaking down. Negt and Kluge contend that today the classical bourgeois sphere cannot function as the public sphere, but only as a counter public sphere (Liebman 1988, 43). Yet, in times of crisis, the operation of the public sphere as the builder of an illusory consensus comes forward, as for example, in the Gulf war. As one piece of the totality of public sphere activity, the classical bourgeois model still functions to preserve the basic forms of bourgeois experience through the exclusion of the majority of citizens, the construction of a republic of scholars (thus, excluding most on the basis of their level of competence in rational deliberation), the prevention of the emergence of any actual political public sphere, the constant shifting of the grounds of consensus, and the rigid separation of the private and the public.

For Negt and Kluge, the most significant historical phenomenon for discussing the public sphere today is the advent of the new public spheres of production. The public spheres of production are non-public, directly rooted in capital and state interests and operate directly on the private lives of individuals — "they seek direct access to the private sphere of the individual" (Negt and Kluge 1993, xlvi). These spheres no longer pretend to come from a place separate from the marketplace, they are directly tied to commercial production. Included among the public spheres of production are the consciousness industry, including advertising and the commercial media of consumption; the public relations industries of corporations, associations, states and parties; and the sensual-demonstrative spheres of factories, banks, and urban centres (Knodler-Bunte 1975, 60). As Negt states:

*These public spheres of production are rooted in the production process itself. Since they are intertwined with or even consist of the technologically highly developed mass media, they mobilize the traditional bourgeois public sphere in order to guarantee particular economic interests and to create mass loyalty for the preservation of the entire capitalist system (Negt 1980, 73).*

Thus, the contemporary social situation is one in which the public sphere has fragmented and split. The polarisation of the public sphere has led to a reworking of the exclusionary nature of the bourgeois public sphere, reducing it to the mere distribution of opinions (Negt 1980, 73), while the public spheres of production commodify and make public the intimate private sphere. If the ideal function of the public sphere is to provide a space in which citizens can — free from coercion — exchange ideas and information in such a way that their deliberations impact and, in part, direct all spheres of social production and reproduction (including, the state), then the present situation, in which democratic activity is reduced to a hollow electoral politics and in which the media systems are nearly wholly shaped by economic and state interests is a grave one, indeed. Given this situation, Negt and Kluge's effort is to determine what would make a counter public alternative to the public life that we know possible.

They believe that a counter public sphere (or proletarian public sphere) is imaginable only if public sphere activity is conceived as a category relating to the totality of society:

*The public sphere denotes specific institutions, agencies, practices (e.g., those connected with law enforcement, the press, public opinion, the public, public sphere work, streets, and public squares); however, it is also a general social horizon of experience in which everything that is actually or ostensibly relevant for all members of society is integrated (Negt and Kluge 1993, 1-2).*

This connection to “experience” is crucial for Negt and Kluge’s notion of the public sphere. In contemporary society the establishment of an effective public sphere depends on two crucial factors: the reconstruction of collective experience, retrieving it from its rationalistic roots, and the confrontation of the “industrialisation of consciousness” endemic to media systems (Liebman 1988a, 7).

Negt and Kluge imagine the possibility of a proletarian public sphere that is grounded in the context of living, in the collective social practice of everyday life. The public sphere is then that collection of sites that allows for the expression and contestation of this “experience.” The formation of a public that sees their experiences as part of a collective social experience depends on institutions that allow them to develop the capacities to integrate their experiences into their consciousness. Here it can be seen how the public sphere is connected to the concept of **Glasnost** — that is, “a public sphere filled with experience, a substantive public sphere that is moral, that has a conscience” (Liebman 1988, 41). It is Negt and Kluge’s conclusion that the bourgeois public sphere and the public sphere of present media systems do not sustain this kind of experience. In order to develop strategies that would foster such experience, we must examine the structures of present-day media that preclude such a public sphere, and the counter practices that do exist which point to the potential for the full development of a proletarian public sphere.

## **Alternative Media/Dominant Media**

I now turn to the issues for alternative media raised by Negt and Kluge’s work. First, alternative media in the United States need to address their relationship to the dominant media and the extent to which their strategies are limited and/or enabled by this relationship.

**The strategies by which meaning is created by dominant media.** In contrast to Habermas, Negt and Kluge do not see the new public spheres of production as a totally negative phenomenon, despite their harsh critiques of contemporary media. Habermas’ distrust of the image led him to emphasise the rational and formal nature of communicative exchange and to reject the sensuous dimension of mass media. As a result, he models the public sphere on face-to-face communication and sees modern mass media as leading to the total disintegration of critical communicative rationality (Peters 1993). Such a wholesale rejection of the mass media is evident in some media activist projects, particularly, those that align themselves with the public television system.

Negt and Kluge, on the other hand, focus on how the commercial media’s production and distribution apparatus function to create a community of consumers. As Hansen (1993, XXX) notes, these public spheres of production use areas of everyday life as their “raw materials, areas of human life previously bracketed from representation- if only to appropriate, commodify, and desubstantiate that material.” However, this industrial-commercial publicity does point out a different potential for the public sphere: “that of a horizon of experience, a discourse grounded in the context of everyday life, in material, psychic, and social (re-) production” (Hansen 1993, XXX).

Clearly, the mass media do not work to release this potential. Instead, they absorb this “context of living” and make it into a private experience. Negt and Kluge refer to this

as the work of the “consciousness industry:”

*Public sphere activity, ideology production, and the “management” of everyday life — the latter in particular, in the form of pluralistically balanced leisure and consciousness programs — appropriate as raw material human beings’ desire for a meaningful life, as well as parts of their consciousness, in order to erect an industrialized facade of programming and legitimation (Negt and Kluge 1993, 18).*

Fundamentally, the consciousness industry works through the blocking of experience, the refusal of communication. Thus, for Negt and Kluge, television is a programming industry, not a communication industry. Criticisms of television that focus on individual programs miss the point, instead one must focus on the “general programming will” that is embodied in the structure of the new public spheres of production. Negt and Kluge point out a number of practices that result from this structure. First, television transmits “the appearance of both immediacy and completeness” and in doing so it conceals the practices of the production process (Negt & Kluge 1993, 103). Out of these immediate finished products, television attempts to represent or reflect the entire world, i.e., like the bourgeois public sphere it constructs the illusion of completeness by excluding anything that impinges on its facade of wholeness. Second, following from this exclusionary function, television attempts to present “balance” in its programming, treating all subjects “in a middle-of-the-road perspective that cannot be radicalized” (Negt and Kluge 1993, 109).

Third, television works by diverting the viewer’s attention onto a sphere that is removed from society. This results from the hodgepodge of programming that allows for no interconnection of domains. Since real social life is left untouched, entertainment becomes the dominant mode of the viewer. Finally, the trajectory of the new public spheres of production is consummated in what Negt and Kluge call the “media cartel,” i.e., large scale media conglomerates that interconnect a diverse group of media into a collective publicity block. What is for sale in the media cartel is “actually the life context and learning context that are preorganized within the media cartel. The media cartel is a macrocommodity, which fuses the individual commodities of education, entertainment, and information into one overall complex” (Negt & Kluge 1993, 131). The media cartel actually uses the needs and consciousness of people to create its products, that is, it is founded upon their production, their acts of intelligence. However, these viewers are given no actual say in how the activities of these industries are carried out.

**How may alternatives work to disrupt this process?** Given that the dominant media institutions in the United States do not function to develop a public sphere based in the social experience of the public, alternative media have attempted to counter and disrupt this process. The new public spheres of production distort experience by excluding issues of cultural and social reproduction to the private realm, and by turning the private social experiences of individuals into a publicity rooted in consumerism. This points to the need for alternative media projects to deconstruct the blocks to developed experience, thus, fostering capacities for reflecting upon experience, remembering the past, and imagining a different future (Hansen 1993, XVI). Alternative media projects have not generally reflected upon their relationships to the production and reproduction of experience. Instead, rooted in art movements, counter cultural groups and localised community structures, they have conceptualised their mission as the production of a different type of content.

This focus on an abstract notion of content is particularly evident in “arts” based media and in those groups most closely involved in “making” Public TV alternative. As David Trend (1993, 21) notes, many activists have maintained an exclusionary and

apolitical view of culture, refusing to engage with it. In fact, alternative media such as Guerilla TV and many of the media arts centres repeat the errors of the radical movements of the 1960s: they attempt to set up a craft-based production of media. However, these activist movements, composed primarily of intellectuals, could not impose such an experience upon the public without at the same time replicating the exclusionary mechanisms of the classic bourgeois public sphere. Further, as Kluge states,

*Against such a power to convince millions through television, all conventional means are powerless. That means that I also have to produce for this window. I can only influence a mass medium through a counter mass medium. An entire public sphere through a counter public sphere (Leibman 1988, 40).*

Alternative media must work to transform the means of production of the mass media, and in some ways the notion of craft does point toward a revitalisation of participation; however, this will not take place by putting home video cameras in the hands of everyone. Likewise, those who have lobbied for the radicalisation of PBS have failed to recognise the contradictory nature of public service media. Negt and Kluge (1993, 100) point out that public service television addresses its programs “to whom it may concern,” i.e., it transmits generalised program material and thus, replicates the norms of balance, order and pluralism of the bourgeois public sphere. Fighting for space for alternative independent works within this programming doctrine results in these works being lost in the pluralistic whole.

Other alternative media projects — Paper Tiger, for example — have attempted to incorporate a critique of the dominant media’s construction of meaning into their own projects. Although Paper Tiger sometimes falls into external critique of the content of the media, it generally follows Negt and Kluge’s (1993, 103) recommendation that “television can be transformed not on the level of the individual program, but of its entire history, which determines that program.”

Likewise, alternative media does little to create a transformed public sphere when it simply documents alternative viewpoints or exposes unjust conditions. Most critiques of social conditions fail to mobilise the viewer and result in producing the feeling that he or she can do nothing to change the situation. Failure to account for this limitation of the use of the medium has led to the impotence of much alternative media production. Thus, alternative media such as Paper Tiger must look for means to overcome this through establishing communication between the producing body and the viewer. This draws attention to the fact that the public sphere itself must be organised differently, i.e., in the interests of producing/experiencing subjects (Hansen 1993, XXXIV).

**How are these strategies structured by the contradictory conceptions of the public sphere (or the illusion of one)?** Alternative media are continually plagued by their participation in the organisational and normative patterns of the bourgeois public sphere and the new public spheres of production. This raises a crucial issue for these counter movements: what are the dangers of reproducing practices that emerge from specific political conditions and to what extent do alternative media operate inside or outside the models of public sphere activity in which the dominant media operate?

On the one hand, as we have seen, some alternative projects have tended to align themselves with the exclusionary high culture of the bourgeois public sphere. This sphere “operates according to [a] rule of private use, not according to the rules whereby the experiences and class interests of workers are organized” (Negt & Kluge 1993, 7). In attempting to make a classic public sphere out of a post-bourgeois situation, these projects (such as ITVS and most Media Arts Centers) replicate the exclusionary practices of the classic model. Public television in the United States has taken this route, resulting in a



liberal pluralistic, patrician, non-controversial network that is unable to compete with the commercial media, despite its contradictory attempts to become like them.

On the other hand, some alternative media tend to take up the practices of the new public spheres of production. As we have seen, this is particularly problematic in that these dominant media are incapable of representing the public's social experience as a whole. Alternative media is consistently in danger of reproducing commercial practices: mimicking dominant media forms, programming schedules, production hierarchies and professional ethics. One of alternative media's most important functions is to produce real alternatives to the rigid forms of commercial media, which has reduced the wealth of expression possible in communication to the triad of information, entertainment and education.

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that alternative media should align itself not just against the old bourgeois sphere, but also and primarily against the new public spheres of production. Such a global project is not likely to emerge overnight and certainly not simply through alternative media production that narrowly defines its context as the local **community**. As Hansen (1993, xxxvi) notes, "the ideal of community refers to a model of association patterned on family and kinship relations, on an affective language of love and loyalty, on assumptions of authenticity, homogeneity, and continuity, of inclusion and exclusion, identity and otherness." The notion of community can lead to a transformative politics, but only if it open to the possibilities of difference within it, which points to the need to form alliances and counter projects with other groups.

If alternative media subdivide into more and more localised groups—ethnic media, subcultural media, arts media, gay/lesbian media — they tend to act as partial publics whose practices are hidden from public view, "that is, from anyone who is not directly paying for and participating in them" (Hansen, 1993, xxxviii). It is crucial then that the various counter publics cohering around alternative media seek out potential connections with each other in order to develop a more comprehensive public sphere that can establish lines of communication blocked by dominant publicity. This leads us to examine the distributional structures of alternative media that either support or inhibit the project of a counter public sphere.

## Distribution and Media Workers

Should media activists attempt to infiltrate dominant exhibition systems, or attempt to build their own distribution networks? Alternative media in the United States have developed two strategies for disseminating work to the public: 1) they have built up their own mechanisms for distribution and exhibition, including videotape lending, film and video showings at community centres, the utilisation of public access channels, and networking of public access programs; 2) they have attempted to enter into mainstream distribution systems by securing funding and program time through the public television system, placement of programs on local and cable channels through independent distributors, and production for educational markets.

Some alternative media groups disdain any connection with the mainstream and others criticise the isolation and impotence of alternative distribution. Such a dichotomy is not fruitful for advancing the effectiveness of alternative media. What both groups are currently facing is the catapulting decentralisation of media systems (in terms of outlets for product) and the resulting fragmentation of the market. Over twenty years ago, Enzensberger advocated decentralisation as the strategy that would foster the emancipation of the media. In a prescient prediction, Negt and Kluge (1993, 126) countered that,

*the decentralization advocated by Enzensberger would, under the prevailing social conditions, express itself as the further penetration of the consciousness industry. In other words, social forces would try to use this theory of delegation and decentralization in serving their own interests.*

Certainly, the current proliferation of channels and utopian plans for the infobahn have not led to the democratisation of the media that Enzensberger hoped for. Instead, access to the media, freedom of speech and even "multicultural diversity" have been grafted into and redefined by the corporate interests that see only more profits flowing from each new demographic niche. What is clear here is that democratisation of media is impossible without democratisation of society (Jakubowicz 1993). Whatever tactics it takes up, alternative media will be constrained by these conditions.

As the plans for an information infrastructure based in digital networks moves forward, alternative media more and more have attempted to situate themselves within the coming system. The problem here is that the media cartel as an international structure of production and distribution tends to equalise all options. As Born (1993, 242) notes, "processes of conglomeration and concentration bring inevitable pressures for low-cost, high-audience programmes" making the survival of independents dependent on "their ability to mimic the output of the majors."

Likewise, the new distributional technologies that are being driven by a rhetoric of "access" do not necessarily promise a goldmine for alternative media. In fact, decisions now being formulated may actually reduce access. This situation, where large corporate interests are pushing for a system of market-driven access, points to the need for alternative media groups to intervene on the level of policy, for once the new infobahn is established its structure will dictate the possibilities of access (Wallner 1994, 5-7).

The task for alternative media groups is to move beyond a focus on production values and alternative views to a formulation of strategies for intervening in the decision-making process that structures the media landscape. Further, alternative media must work with broader movements that would work toward the development of relationships between producers, distributors and audiences. No broad alternative media project can succeed without the development of audiences that re-conceive their relationship to the media. This leads us to the next area of questioning.

## **Audiences for Alternative Media**

Is the audience universalisable, enclaved, diverse and conflicted, etc.? In order to come to terms with the audience, alternative media must first come to terms with the conditions of audience reception within the dominant media. Here, we return to the opening remarks about the new cultural studies approach to the audience. These populist audience studies suggest that viewers actively construct meaning and take up stances of resistance and opposition to dominant media content. Within this cultural studies viewpoint, the focus shifts to consumption as the area where the actual construction of public life takes place. Negt and Kluge recognise the capacity of audiences to reconstruct programs in accordance with their needs, yet what is crucial is the prior question of "who controls the means of production or who benefits from the current organisation of the pleasures and pressures of consumption" (Hansen 1993, xxxiv).

What is crucial in this matter of resistance is that the subversive interaction of "television shows and viewer needs remains without any public and conscious expression" (Negt and Kluge 1993, 123). The emancipatory potential of fantasy and escape remain abstract and private and do not emerge into the public realm. Further, the media learn from and incorporate the resistance of audiences, i.e., the media respond by producing

programming that presents the “semblance of wilful activity” (Negt and Kluge 1993, 142). The answer to this dilemma lies neither in rejecting the work of audiences nor in avoiding the difficult process of constructing alternative modes of production. Instead, alternative media must aim at developing audiences from within this context of the production of fantasy value. The dominant media respond to the desires and fantasies of the public by producing abstract answers to them in the realm of consumer objects. An emancipatory media would not reject out of hand the public’s production of fantasy, but would instead allow it to be directly expressed.

Alternative media have not generally considered these issues and have engaged in relationships with their audiences that often work against the goals of democratic media. Many of the alternative media have rejected the aesthetics of the mainstream and thus have ended in rejecting the public. But, if alternative media were to merely imagine its audience as universalisable, it could fall prey to the same temptation that has plagued PBS- the tendency to the middle-of-the-road approach based in abstract notions of balance and pluralism. Recognising that audiences have diverse needs and that certain communities may need to “talk among themselves” need not lead to the total abandonment of a more generalised public sphere. What is crucial is that diverse viewpoints not be left out on the grounds that they are pre-defined as without interest to the general public.

## Alternative Media and Access

**How should access be conceptualised — as access to technology, audiences, political impact, etc.?** Perhaps the most crucial issue for alternative media is that of access. The notion of “access,” if it is to have any specific meaning, must be grounded in historical context and in a choice of values. Splichal (1993) grounds the concept of access in the values associated with democratisation — equality, rights, freedom of expression, etc. He goes on to postulate a “generic right to communicate,” which includes “the right to publish opinions in the mass media, the right to participate in the management of the mass media, the right of free association and mutual interlinkage, and the equality of citizens in rights and duties” irrespective of status or the ownership of property (Splichal 1993, 11). In agreement with Negt and Kluge, Splichal contends that this democratisation of media activity can exist only where **society as a whole** organises and controls the media, rather than either the state or private interests (Splichal 1993, 11-12).

In this context, access can be defined as a set of activities and organisational arrangements whereby the public (irrespective of professional status) can make use of media channels and participate in their planning, management and administration. Thus, access can be broken down into a number of different types of participation: **programming, selection, policy, production and response** (Berrigan 1977).

In the United States, the debate over access tends to be discussed as if the media existed in a vacuum, i.e., as if democratisation of the media would lead to the democratisation of social relations, rather than the other way around. But as Negt and Kluge have shown, what is blocked in contemporary capitalist society is access to social relations and to the communicative means to negotiate and contest actual life experience. Thus, as Jakubowicz (1993) clearly shows, access to the media is a misleading notion, that remains tied to classic liberal political rhetoric. Instead, we should be talking about communicative access to society, i.e., a revitalised public sphere (grounded in the working/experiencing activities of the public) is what is at issue.

Alternative media groups are divided over just how to conceptualise access and have

fallen into various errors that are the result of a failure to address the problems that Splichal, Jakubowicz and others point out. First of all, alternative media groups (particularly, independents and artists groups) have conceptualised access within the terms of the liberal pluralism of dominant state and private media institutions. The notion advanced here, borrowing from Enzensberger, is that democratisation of the media would lead to the situation where everyone could express their opinion in the mass media. This notion of universal individual access is rooted in the liberal marketplace concept. This "television pluralism" is tied to the American view of "the marketplace of ideas," in which supposedly everyone has access, i.e., opportunity of access to the market. Corcoran (1994) points out the peculiar American emphasis on the individual, who has something to say (and I would add the individual audience member who makes a choice). He adds that "what is ignored in this conceptualisation is the need which (self) organised groups, often with a language or cultural basis, have for media access." As a result the collective basis of access is lost.

A second problem in conceptualising access in the alternative media community relates to the development of technology. The first wave of media activists fell victim to the technological utopianism of the camcorder, seeing in it the answer to all media access problems — "give everyone a camcorder and everyone will be a media-maker." Very obviously, the camcorder did not bring about utopia. Media activists reconsidered their position and attempted to instead develop a diversity of production contexts. Currently a new technological utopianism is arising within alternative media, this time based in the promises of the Internet and the infobahn. Again, the blue sky appears. Alternative media groups are quickly jumping on the cyber-utopia bandwagon.

But the infobahn raises problems in regard to every aspect of access. Who will have access to it, everyone? Perhaps, but "everyone" will be defined by the limits of property, economic power, educational status, skill level, etc. The majority of the public will not have the competencies, economic means or the time to produce for this system. The discourse of the new technologies assumes that the expansion promised by the infobahn will automatically lead to more diversity and more choice (Jakubowicz 1993, 43). But "what this increasingly fashionable argument ignores is that prevailing market structures determine and impose limits on the "diversity" generated by expansion" (Curran 1991, 94). Within this market system, choice is always predetermined by the conditions of competition. Once again, this points to the fact that democratisation of the media depends on democratisation of society. Alternative media groups will need to reconceptualise access to the infobahn in a manner that reinvigorates the public sphere and this will require action at the level of policy making and planning.

**The problem of vanguardism.** One of the most significant problems for alternative media in developing practices of access involves the consequences of vanguardism in the operation of alternative media centres and channels. Despite a rhetoric of universal access, most alternative media sites are directed by and revolve around the artistic work of a privileged group of individuals. Local public access and community media arts centres have attempted to break down this practice. Unfortunately, the common carrier attitude of public access channels and the lack of any kind of programming plan has led to a situation where the loudest and artiest groups dominate access. Even if well-intentioned intellectuals and artists control these centres, the "white" and "professional" atmosphere tends to keep minority groups away.

This points out how access is conflicted over three overlapping goals: the expression of collective needs, the development of a "quality" aesthetic, and the attraction of a larger audience. As we have seen, these goals, taken together, are easily subsumed by the

dominant commercial ethos — “if the programs are quality, then the audience watches and therefore the needs are met.” The actual complexity of the situation belies this solution and alternative media will have to continuously grapple with questions raised by these goal conflicts: how can an audience be built up without simply mimicking commercial aesthetics, how can artistic quality be a criteria of access without marginalising community-based projects, how can specialised and diverse needs of various communities be expressed and still attract a wider public?

The resolution of these problems will involve overcoming the fragmentation of the public sphere into multiple, isolated partial publics and the retrieval of the material basis of experience. The experiences of the public are the raw materials out of which alternative media, through intellectual effort, can attempt to organise into a genuine democratic counter-public sphere. The continual reminder that the basis of media artists’ and journalists’ work is rooted in the experience of its publics, should serve to deconstruct the notion that independent media works are simply authentic individual creations provided to audiences defined as counter dominant only in their desire for alternatives. At its best, public access challenges the artist model of the maker and breaks down “the traditional maker/audience dichotomy” (Anderson and Goldson 1993, 59). It is crucial that both public access and media arts centres, despite the need for editorial and intellectual leadership (knowledge of media practices, technology, history, etc.), emphasise collective action that might lead to “collaborative and organized democratic participation” (Anderson and Goldson 1993, 60).

**Strategies for alternative media.** It should be evident that access is part of a larger question of the democratisation of communication and the wider social processes to which Negt and Kluge point. The development of a vital public sphere will not be motivated simply out of a concern with communication issues. Instead, the democratisation of social communication can arise only through the mobilisation of political counter strategies that aim at the democratisation of society as a whole.

There are signs that the alternative media movement is emphasising this broad project of developing strategies for restructuring the public sphere. A growing movement of media reform has turned from the “arts” orientation to a focus on the political and economic structures necessary for the public’s participation in media.

Two issues are crucial for this media reform movement: the issues of public access and public control. Public access cable channels and community media arts centres make it possible for citizens to participate in the creation of programming. But public access to small-scale production will not bring about a democratic public sphere within an overall system of media that negates public control. In the United States, a fully functioning counter public sphere will require both public access and a publicly controlled media system. As Aufderheide (1991) states, this will require a sweeping reform of the present system. Particularly, public television itself will have to move from a “focus on programming as a passive activity for viewers” to a mandate to reinvigorate the public sphere by involving the public in the organising, making and viewing of television (Aufderheide 1991, 172).

Alternative media groups can remain important to the development of this public media service by turning their focus to the areas of policy and media literacy. Raboy (article elsewhere in this issue) and others have raised the question of access to policy to a place of central importance. Without a part in forming and planning the media system and the nature of its goals, the public will remain confined to the position of viewer/consumer. Access to information and production tools follow from economic, political and organisational policies and thus, cannot really be adequately fulfilled unless the public has a say in these determining practices.

Alternative media groups perform a crucial function here: organisations such as the National Alliance for Media Education provide resources on policy issues to the public, and coalitions such as the Telecommunication Policy Roundtable research policy issues and lobby the appropriate government agencies. These policy-directed activities should be expanded and further co-ordinated between various Alternative media groups.

Finally, Alternative media groups can serve the greater public by emphasising their activities in media literacy projects. The citizenry faces a complex avalanche of information on the technological, political and cultural aspects of the media. The present conditions of the media, particularly the disintegration of the public sphere are not adequately covered in the mainstream media. In other words, the general public lacks the competencies in the areas of media critical theory and media technology/production that would enable them to take full part in the debates around media policy. Already, alternative media groups in the US have turned some attention to media literacy: NAME, a coalition of media literacy projects, provides information to the broader public, many access centres feature media literacy in their training, and some organisations such as Strategies for Media Literacy work on getting media education into the public schools.


Clearly, no amount of alternative media action will quickly change the American media into a democratic public sphere. Media activism as practised in the United States is a partial and fragmented solution to a larger problem — the illusionary nature of the public sphere. Alternative forms of media can serve as models for more expanded strategies for developing democratic modes of communication, but they cannot in themselves bring about the media utopia they sometimes espouse.

## References:

- Anderson, Kelly and Goldson, Annie. 1993. *Alternative Currents: Alternative Television Inside and Outside the Academy*. *Social Text* 35, 56-71.
- Aufderheide, Pat. 1991. Public Television and the Public Sphere. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, 168-183.
- Berrigan, Francis (ed.). 1977. *Access: Some Western Models of Community Media*. Paris: Unesco.
- Boddy, William. (1990). Alternative Television in the United States. *Screen* 31, 1, 91-101.
- Born, Georgina. (1993). Against Negation, for a Politics of Cultural Production: Adorno, Aesthetics. the Social. *Screen* 34, 223-244.
- Corcoran, Farrel. 1994. Unpublished remarks. Euricom Colloquium Rethinking Access, first session, Conegliano, Italy, April 22.
- Curran, James. 1991. Mass Media and Democracy: A reappraisal. In J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds.), *Mass Media and Society*, 82-117. London: Edward Arnold.
- Hansen, Miriam. 1993. Foreword. In O. Negt and A. Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, IX-XLI. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Jakubowicz, Karol. 1993. Stuck in a Groove: Why the 1960s Approach to Communication Democratization Will No Longer Do? In S. Splichal and J. Wasko (eds.), *Communication and Democracy*, 33-54. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.
- Kluge, Alexander. 1988. Why Should Film and Television Cooperate? *October* 46, 96-102.
- Knodler-Bunte, Eberhard. 1975. The Proletarian Public Sphere and Political Organisation. *New German Critique* 4 (Winter), 51-75.
- Liebman, Stuart. 1988. On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere: An Interview with Alexander Kluge. *New German Critique* 4 (Winter), 23-59.
- Liebman, Stuart. 1988a. Why Kluge? *New German Critique* 4 (Winter), 5-22.
- Negt, Oscar. 1980. Mass Media: Tools of Domination or Instruments of Emancipation? Aspects of the Frankfurt School's Communication Analysis. In K. Woodward (ed.), *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*, 65-87. Madison, Wisconsin: Coda Press.

- Negt, Oscar and Alexander Kluge. 1993. *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Peters, John D. 1993. Distrust of Representation: Habermas on the Public Sphere. *Media, Culture and Society* 15, 4, 541-572.
- Splichal, Slavko. 1993. Searching for New Paradigms: An Introduction. In S. Splichal and J. Wasko (eds.), *Communication and Democracy*, 3-18. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.
- Trend, David. 1993. Rethinking Media Activism. *Socialist Review* 23, 2, 5-33.
- Wallner, Martha. 1994. Coalition Focuses on Public Interest in Information Age. *The Independent*, Jan/Feb, 5-7.

# Social Theory and Practice



**An International and Interdisciplinary Journal of Social Philosophy**

**Volume 21, Number 1**

**Spring 1995**

**Full-Information Theories of Individual Good**

*Don Loeb*

**The State's Dr. Death: What's Unethical About Physicians Helping at Executions?**

*Michael Davis*

**Selective Conscientious Objection and the Right Not to Kill**

*G. Albert Ruesga*

**Liberal Education Is Moral Education**

*David McCabe*

**Politics and Manipulation**

*Claudia Mills*

**The Disputation of Hate: Speech Codes, Pluralism, and Academic Freedoms**

*Phil Cox*

Subscriptions (3 issues): Individuals \$12; Institutions \$33; Foreign postage \$4  
Department of Philosophy, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1054