

MIND POWER:  
Collective Action  
for  
Media Reform

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by  
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Historically, the independent media producer's political involvement has consisted of documenting the struggles and confrontations of other groups. Coal miners» auto workers, anti-war demonstrators, plutonium victims have all had their stories told by committed and supportive video and film makers. There has been relatively little attempt by independents to direct their energies to changing their own material position within the dominant media structures. If these structures were considered at all, it was to make use of them - garnering the airtime on the news with some Yippie-type action, or occasionally being allowed "access", either a one-time "airing" on PBS or perhaps served up smorgasbord-style with other independents and given a catchy, albeit patronizing title such as "Flick-Out" or "Up and Coming." Until recently there had been no attempt to analyze media policies, let alone counter them.

The activity of independents in the past two years has marked somewhat of a departure. Frustrated with the increasingly competitive and unresponsive structures of both PBS and the networks, independents have banded together to press their demands. These demands, however, are not just for access or more grant money. They are now addressing the issue of control of the system as a whole. This is a new fight and one that runs counter to a tradition of political impotence in the media field. This impotence has been maintained by a pervasive aura of technological determinism. American media theory has been dominated by a Janus-headed romanticism: two aspects of the same basic credo: the omnipotence of technology. On one hand we have a McLuhanesque romanticism that continues to permeate our culture: the belief that information, per se, is good, and that an increasingly complex technology always triumphs. While technological mystification has been dealt a severe blow with the Three Mile Island incident, it continues to run rampant in the communications field. This technological Darwinism is most recently evinced in Gene Youngblood's Utopian prognostications of a transponder future. [1] On the other side, just as romantic, but in a more pessimistic vein, are Jerry Mander [2] and the electronic Luddites. Back to nature: reality is pure: it is not transcribed, transmitted or televised. Electrons are to be exorcised in primal earthy rites. The saint of this sect is the San Diego woman who took out her gun one afternoon and shot her TV set. Their apostle and Sunday School teacher is Marie Winn, [3] who bewails what TV does to children, and is followed by troops of converted parents, whose families have been saved by pulling the plug on their sets.

While the woman with the gun probably had a better idea than McLuhan, both of these ideologies have the common aspect of seeing MEDIA as all, powerful and something beyond our control or responsibility. In spite of these fatalists, there is a budding hope that media change is possible. The involvement of the PTA with Peggy Charon's Action for Children's Television is a grass-roots movement with wide support and growing clout in Congress. Alliances of Blacks and Hispanics have challenged license renewals and have forced many stations into affirmative action programs. The Consumers Union and the United Church of Christ, through their huge constituencies have applied pressure on Congress and the FCC for major reforms. The AFL-CIO and other labor groups have recently issued telecommunications policy statements, and have begun to testify on media issues in Congress. The legislative work of the

1. Gene Youngblood, "The Mass Media and the Future of Desire," Coevolution Quarterly, Winter, 1977. P. 6-17. Also "Interview with Gene Youngblood," Videography, April, 1979
2. Jerry Mander, Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television William Morrow, N.Y. 1978.
3. Marie Winn, The Plug-In Drug, Viking, N.Y. 1977.

National Task Force on Public Television and the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers is certainly a part of this over-all pattern of increased awareness of media issues, and the growing hope that well-directed pressure can accomplish change.

What has been the response of the media policy makers in the face of widespread and increasing public demands for media accountability? DEREGULATION. Congress is presently considering HR 3333, sponsored by Communications Sub-Committee Chairman Lionel Van Deerlin. This bill calls for the eventual deregulation of radio, television, cable and common carrier systems. That this move should come at this time is no coincidence. While it may not be a well-orchestrated-full-fledged conspiracy, it is part of an over-all pattern of government deregulation, justified in rhetorical calls for "freedom of market." This deregulation is coming at a time when the public demand for government responsibility, as witnessed in the consumer and anti-nuclear movements, are forcing the federal regulatory commissions to become legitimate. It is no longer possible for these commissions to maintain their positions as hand-maidens to the industries they were created to regulate. A post-Water gate vigilance has made that kind of collusion difficult, if not impossible.

The challenge is getting the deregulation passed before this vigilant public understands its implications: thus the desperation of Van Deerlin to get his bill through this year. The longer that it stalls, the greater will be the public opposition. If there were field hearings this year, there would be no chance that it could pass. If the public is asked about regulation versus the free market, what will be their response? What kind of faith does a Pinto driver have in the free market? Or someone who bought Firestone radials? Or the community surrounding Three Mile Island? Or anyone waiting in line to pay a dollar a gallon for gas? Annenburg School of Communications in Los Angeles recently conducted a poll: they asked people if they wanted retention of license evaluation and the public interest standard, two aspects of regulation that are eliminated in Van Deerlin's bill. The overwhelming majority {92%} opted for the public interest as the standard for broadcasting and 93% were in favor of regular license evaluation and regulation. [1]

Free competition does not exist in an unbalanced situation. Dependence on paternalistic good-will will never change the situation. Independents know that the FACT (even before any outcome) that there is an ECLU suit against the networks, [2] has had a more profound effect on the air than any amount of network hype about the "new documentary" or Congressional musings about "free flow of ideas." Independents know that the specified proportion for them in the 1979 TV Funding Bill means dollars and cents and ultimately airtime, something no heticoric about "diversity and diverse sources" could ensure. The ranks of independents are growing. The membership of AIVF has doubled in the last year and a half to over 1,000. Similar organizations are forming in Madison, Atlanta, an Francisco", Boston, Philadelphia and Minneapolis. Their demands will grow and their needs will be made known. The 1979 Public Telecommunications Funding Bill is a recognition of that.

Within the 1979 Bill there is also a provision for open public television station board meetings. This one ruling will probably have an even more lasting effect on the PBS system than the stipulations for independent programming. It means that independents can go to their public stations and make

1. Broadcasting. April 30, P. 29. .
2. The Emergency Civil Liberties Union is currently representing some twenty independent producers, in a suit against CBS, NBC and ABC over their restrictive policies of only broadcasting in-house social documentaries.

themselves known and heard. The drawbridge is down. The fortress that PTV has maintained will never quite be the same. The stations, in particular the larger ones, were well aware of the implications of this mandate, as their bitter and well-financed opposition to that section of the bill indicated. Congress, aware of a growing public disenchantment with the BBC-dominated PBS system, could find no rhetoric that would justify excluding public participation in station affairs. Tax-payers and station members have an undeniable right to access to the decisions and the financial records of the stations that depend on their contributions. Letting the public in, however, also meant letting in the independent producers. The stations are more wary of independents than the general public. Independents at an open board meeting are more dangerous than any other consumer/viewer group. They know the business, and they can use that knowledge to form wedges for change.

This kind of intrusion into the machinations of the establishment by well-informed professionals is a phenomenon that Columbia economist, Eli Ginsberg, noted in an article in the March Scientific American. In his view, the growing cadres of college graduates in all professions and in managerial categories could eventually pose a threat to the entire system.

"Clearly their judgement and authority narrows the discretion of top management in the public agencies and business organizations in which they are employed."

He advocated the inclusion of these outsiders:

"No establishment can ensure its survival without the recruitment of talent from outside its ranks. If it does not succeed in the full co-optation of the new-comers, however, it may leave itself vulnerable to them as they proceed to advance their own interests and aims and succeed in usurping decision-making power. It remains to be seen whether the demands of the American mandarins can be met without subversion of the risk-taking, profit-seeking, efficiency criteria on which the country's business system has long rested."

The establishment can respond with either increased accommodation and co-optation, or with exclusionary and restrictive policies. Either way, the opposition is likely to grow. Either way the rhetoric contradicts the reality of the situation. For the ever increasing group of outsiders (the independents, the artists, the women, minorities, the public interest and consumer groups), a policy of OPEN MARKET is inevitably a restrictive and exclusionary structure - one which can only lessen diversity by allowing the already overwhelming and pervasive systems to increase their hegemony. This will make those structures more obvious and ultimately more vulnerable. A diverse and publicly responsive media environment can only exist in a protective context of REGULATION. Accommodation to the pressures of the public and the independents will raise expectations and increase the need for even greater participation. Piecemeal legislative reform will not solve the problems that are posed in the area of communications.

No matter what options are taken by the telecommunications industry and Congress, either toward regulatory/protection or toward unbridled profit-seeking by increasingly larger consortiums of corporate interests (or ultimately by the unilateral dominance by A.T. & T., as HR3333 seems to promulgate), the type of resistance that has developed in the past few years is not likely to lessen. This resistance is rooted in a fundamental economic shift. Mind power is replacing labor power. Information workers will continue to press for control as information systems replace mechanical and industrial production modes. Because it is their minds that are needed for this kind of work, they cannot be totally subjected and still remain useful and vital to the system. A kernel of resistance remains. No matter what use is made of them,

their ability to be useful is contingent upon keeping their minds alive. Therefore they are always a threat to the system.

The demands for increased media control and accountability in this country is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part of a global awakening that is evident in the UNESCO communications deliberations and in the preparations for the WARC meetings in the fall. The third world is demanding reassignment of spectrum allocations and an end to U.S. domination of news agencies and cultural affairs. Independent media producers are important participants in the discussions of telecommunications policies and responsibilities» Imaginative regulatory structures can be responsive to humanity's needs - both for justice and for unconstrained creative expression. These discussions are the cultural aspect of the demands for conservation and the just allocation and development of the world's resources. The crucial resource at issue here is not the spectrum - it is the human mind.

1. The U.S. and 153 other countries will meet in Geneva for the World Administrative Radio Conference for ten weeks starting September, 1979, to decide the future of spectrum allocations-.

