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Radical Media Projects and the Crisis of Public Media

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INTRODUCTION

My initial purpose in this contribution is to propose that the endless e-mails circulated in recent years in the United States exhorting recipients to save the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and the National Public Radio (NPR) from their demolition by Congress are akin – along with the sacralisation of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) – to playing a string quartet as the Titanic is sinking,[12] with the exception that, if the 1997 movie version is to be believed, those musicians were attempting to assert the dignity of cultural achievement in the teeth of the haphazardness of human life, whereas these desperate laments are simply in denial of the effective evaporation of what they are seeking to defend. To mix my metaphors furiously, we are invited to surround and defend an empty Trojan horse.

There are numerous voices that have evidenced my case in relation to public radio and television in the United States, most notably McCourt's (1999) richly detailed study of National Public Radio and Public Radio International, and Starr's (2000) case studies of struggles to push public television to fulfil its national mandate. McCourt (1999: 104) sums up the situation with an admirably pungent comparison.

Like the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, the CPB [Corporation for Public Broadcasting] remains an overarching, if often ineffectual, authority. Rather than on holy writ, its mandate is based on the heated subjectivity of politics and the cold objectivity of dollars and demographics.

Thus, there is every reason to look elsewhere for creative contrahegemonic media, particularly to the radical video movements of various countries and to what is sometimes called community radio, but also, most recently, to the Independent Media Centres (IMCs) that first sprang up during the anti-World Trade Organization (WTO) movement in Seattle in November 1999 and have since become an international phenomenon. There is, moreover, a fundamental argument from a human rights principle for ensuring that digital information opportunities do not become the virtually exclusive property of the already privileged (Mansell 2001).

The term 'contrahegemonic' is drawn from a broadly Gramscian and Benjaminian conceptual framework. Beyond this, there are different versions and indeed visions of how such contrahegemonic media do and should operate in practice. Three of these are: the counter-information model (Baldelli 1977; Hammond and Herman 2000); the Bakhtinian model (1968/1984) of earthy and ribald popular cultural expression; and the public deliberation model developed by Habermas (1996).

Such media cannot be what public broadcasting has been at certain points in the past in Britain or in the United States, as though we were merely called upon to replace a new toner cartridge in the same printer. But these movements and their media exist, there is every reason for them to grow, and effective strategies to foster and multiply them need to be developed as a pressing priority.

A Personal Historical Note

Along with others, whether in, or like myself, out of the Leicester University Centre for Mass Communication Research and the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, I cut my critical media researcher's teeth in the early 1970s on attacking the BBC. My focus was the almost comprehensive failure of BBC television to represent, with either respect or accuracy, British wage-workers' strikes for improved pay and conditions and, even more so, the situation or aspirations of people of colour in Britain (Downing 1980). The BBC did not perform noticeably any better than its regional commercial competitor television channels. And while it did not convey quite the racist and anti-labour viciousness of the majority of the press, its constructive achievements were few and far between.

People of colour rarely surfaced on BBC television, and when they did, it was normally in stereotypical roles and without voice, at least in any meaningful sense of the term. This was as true of Black South Africans and Zimbabweans desperately fighting their despicable regimes as it was of young Black people trying to survive in Britain's discriminatory labour market and against a militantly hostile police force. Racist politicians who took it as their mission to amplify popular racism, such as the late and much unlamented Enoch Powell, were given by contrast a huge amount of voice (Downing 1975). I compared BBC and other journalists of those days to the legendary weasel frozen motionless with fear when face-to-face with a fox, so emasculated were their responses to the racist demagogue.

Strikers were regularly depicted as a purely sectional interest, their battles with their employers having no possible beneficial outcome for wage-workers and their

families in the rest of the economy. The role of government as of the BBC news professionals was supposedly to hold the ring as disinterested arbiters. Now this was the BBC, long before it turned itself into its current manifestation as a wham-bang global marketing operation.

If we turn our attention to PBS in the United States, albeit always a poor stepchild in comparison, then some may defensively hark back to its significant role in developing the Watergate affair to the point where it became understood as the crisis it was, and so cobble together an argument that it is a cultural beacon in peril.

Yet as a convenient index of why that argument will not work, we can take KLRU, the PBS station in Austin, Texas. As of 2002 KLRU had an enlightened and energetic Executive Director, and a number of pleasant and dedicated staff. But what did it do? It saturated us with increasingly lame 'British Comedies', ever limper Masterpiece Theatre productions bought from the BBC and continuing versions of *Austin City Limits*, now in its third decade and a money-spinning show whose logistics must have long ago stopped offering any challenges. This was no surprise. Market-force fundamentalism is not only an economic policy, but before that it is a way of life, a hegemonic regime of truth that necessarily excludes as it frames.

So what is it that we are trying to defend when we rush to circle the wagons around PBS? Or the BBC? Whatever the achievements of public broadcasting in the past and even the present, we are now in a different place and time. And the question inevitably is, where can we and should we go from here in order to produce and diffuse *high quality* media as *effectively* as possible?

What is 'High Quality'?

The hitherto unbridgeable chasm between aesthetically pleasing and culturally significant video is closing up and classic formulations such as García Espinosa's 1969 essay 'For An Imperfect Cinema', are no longer as urgently needed as they were when first made. In that essay, he vigorously challenged the ideology of technical 'perfection' as arbiter of cinematic quality, especially to the point where the budgets of dispossessed groups meant they could never imaginably make films supposedly worth watching. Brazilian *cinema novo* director Glauber Rocha (1995/1970: 89) equally attacked the pretensions of the left: 'The Tricontinental filmmaker should burn the theories that the neo-colonialist left tries to impose on us'.

Most recently Hamilton (2000) has reinvigorated this argument, urging that absolute priority should be given to alternative media that require no professional expertise to create, and warning against the snares of professionalisation. I do not follow Hamilton's exclusive emphasis on the simplest, preferring rather to envisage a spectrum running from the non-professional to the professional, but his emphasis, like Mansell's (2001), on the urgency of *widespread* public media empowerment is nonetheless tremendously important.

In an era of digital cameras and editing stations, however, with prices reducing constantly, the production of technically fluent video – lighting, sound, framing, montage, and so on – presents many fewer challenges of a purely financial nature. This is not to say that jump-cuts and other ruptures of canonical procedure should be ironed out, nor is it to say that producing a tough film on a difficult subject means the film-makers can live or do it without money. And beyond finance, political repression may also levy an extremely severe toll.

Nonetheless, accidental visual distractions and dislocations due purely to lack of finance are now more avoidable. For a public culturally inured to a certain level of glitch-free visual expression, this often matters, because it interferes with their appropriation of the textual content. While video- or film-makers may both chafe under this and also challenge it in creative and provocative ways, we cannot pretend our learned visual culture is otherwise. Art videos that seek specifically to re-orient our culture of visuality as though that by itself were a contrahegemonic moment, are perfectly valid and simultaneously, self-indulgent within and for a select community. Seepage outside that community is almost certainly the thinnest of trickles.

Content quality and watchability no longer have to be horses straining in different directions. The proliferation of film and video production courses in colleges, universities, cable access centres, community groups and schools means that at least elementary media-making skills are becoming far more widely diffused than ever in the United States, and similar trends are evident in a growing number of countries. Admittedly there are many shortfalls, not least the tendency towards a gender-divide in public video-making in favour of young males, who in turn have often glued themselves to hegemonic formats such as shoot-em-ups and worse still, violence against women. But their capacity to develop beyond that point is not necessarily packed in permafrost.

What is 'Diffusing Effectively'?
And so to distribution. For all the endless hours spent in low-to-no-budget production/editing/mixing, the final ratio of those hours to the number of times

when (and people by whom) the video is subsequently watched, is a ratio mostly at the misery end of asymmetrical. The obverse of the dominance of the distributors in Hollywood, the networks and the multiservice operators, is the abysmal lack of distribution for the films and videos made from within the general public. Not all of them, by any means, deserve extensive distribution. But the following account from Juhasz's (1995: 216-7) notable study of AIDS-theme videos made in the United States gives some sense of the headache.

When factoring an AIDS video into the already small network of alternative distribution companies willing to distribute low-budget, progressive, educational video, things become even more difficult ... Most alternative AIDS tapes require some complex interweaving of these particularized distribution networks ... . Furthermore, the people who most need to see AIDS tapes ... are the disenfranchised members of our society who are not going to be reached by even the methods of progressive distribution ... which means nothing less than labour-intensive, pro-active strategies that take the tape to the people that need it ... . This means phone calls, follow-up, letter campaigns, follow-up, then long train rides to hard-to-find agencies, a small audience, and then, finally, few of the institutionally accepted markers of success ... . A *successful* screening finds a tape playing to fifteen members of an HIV support group or women's club, the tape introduced by the makers and then discussed afterward.

There are alternative approaches. Video documentaries can be taken out on the road. This can be a particularly powerful combination of distribution, exhibition and, most importantly, of debate and possibly ensuing activism following screening, but the process is tremendously time-consuming and – the more the locations – physically exhausting.

A different approach to the problem is taken by Rodríguez (2001) in her *Fissures In The Mediascape*. There she argues from a case study of women making videos in a poor *barrio* in Bogotá, that it is very mistaken to assume that only a nationally distributed video or film has validity – that only very large numbers of viewers are an acceptable index of meaningfulness. She instances from her own study in Bogotá how younger members of the *barrio* community, often somewhat scornful of their elders as still bound to rural ways, switched to a very new and from-the-gut respect for them once they became involved in filming the parents' stories of their harsh transition to urban life.

This is an important corrective to the 'huge audience' fallacy, which tends to lead to defeatist and fatalistic attitudes that go well beyond the 'pessimism of the intelligence' of which Gramsci once wrote. At the same time, there is no reason to lurch to the opposite pole and deny absolutely the value of international, national and regional distribution agencies and networks.

Critics may point to the limited nature of this form of distribution, and query whether classroom or other screenings outside a formal educational setting represent anything very significant. Yet to define the impact of working in higher education or in community or religious social action groups as a form of self-indulgent solipsism seems to me an unwarrantedly masochistic, almost suicidal judgement, that sociologically goes well beyond the evidence. There seems to be an audience assumption lurking unstated, safely disguised behind the shrubbery of academic analysis, namely that the capillary and molecular transformation of cultural life is equivalent to nothing happening at all. It represents a definition of media audiences curiously insulated from the analysis of social and political movements (Downing 2000).

A further network of distribution in the United States is constituted by cable community access centres. These centres cannot be trumpeted as automatic purveyors of compelling video visions. About a third of Austin's access programmes are from religious sources, mostly with no content beyond the politically quiescent, and the rules of the game have meant that syndicated racist neo-nazi programmes such as *Race and Reason* have also been part of the fare. But these centres do now exist, around 300 of them across the United States, and are part of the media landscape, even if potential could be much more interestingly realised than it has been. Whole series of Deep Dish TV programmes on the 1990-91 Gulf War, on the AIDS crisis, on the quincentennial of Columbus' invasion, on racism and imprisonment in the United States, and on many other topics, have found their way on to screens in localities nationally as a result – material that never could have found its path on to the mainstream broadcast networks.

In other countries some opportunities still exist, albeit flawed, such as Australia's Satellite Broadcasting Service, a multicultural channel operating since the late 1980s, and Canada's Aboriginal Peoples Television, seriously deprived of funds in the later 1990s, but still operating. And though public broadcasting internationally is experiencing problems, while it still lasts it would be foolish to ignore the sporadic spaces that it opens up.

Other Developments: Micro-Radio and IMCs

Micro-radio (Sakolsky and Dunifer 1998; Soley 1999) is the most recent expression in the United States and elsewhere of the much longer-running phenomenon usually referred to as 'community' radio (Girard 1992) and evinced in the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) conferences <www.amarc.org>. The term 'community' is extremely fuzzy, but, in this instance, covers radio stations not beholden to government, private capital or other authoritative bodies. Some of the first low-power radio experiments were those conducted in Tokyo in the early 1980s (Kogawa 1985) and there are reckoned to be micro-stations numbering in some hundreds in the United States.

There was a battle for years with the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), the American television networks' industry association, concerning their licensing. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), having for years acted as the NAB's police arm in threatening and closing down these micro-stations, has moved to permit their licensing as long as they have not already been broadcasting without FCC approval. The point of these stations in heavily populated areas is that they can reach, and serve as a forum for, a relatively large but still locally-bound public. This network of tiny open-microphone stations in urban areas contains the potential to engage a variety of voices either rejected or corralled by major radio operations, now typically in the hands of mega-corporations. However, a variety of forces are jumping aboard this bandwagon, in the United States particularly, the religious right.

A major development, however, in 2001 was the emergence of Independent Media Centres (IMCs), with the Seattle IMC dating its origin to the massive protests against the World Trade Organization at the end of November 1999 (Downing 2001). To illustrate the rapid proliferation of IMCs, as of the end of 2001, 70 were operating in countries around the world <www.indymedia.org>. This figure represented an approximate 40% rise over December 2000, even though a handful had ceased operating over that year. While clearly they are still an overwhelmingly North American phenomenon, nonetheless this was a phenomenal growth rate. The organisational dynamism and imaginative use of a whole raft of media technologies in the IMCs make them one of the most potentially promising radical media developments anywhere.

Conclusion

The flood of small-scale radical media, past and present, constitute a contrahegemonic public sphere. They have done so on many levels, from German anti-nuclear media in the 1980s to the diaper-headscarves of the Mothers of the

Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, from *dazibao* on Beijing's Democracy Wall in 1978 to Russian guitar-poets such as Vladimir Vyssotskii. They can be referred to collectively, but cannot be homogenised in either production, text or impact. Their consequences typically have been most visible at the height of social and political movements, but perhaps most pivotal when invisible, at the moments they have kept the tiny flames of contestation dancing when repression *and* cynicism *and* common sense alike dictated them to be a derisory, even suicidal, self-indulgence. Rather than lamenting what may be disappearing as public media, we need to investigate as thoroughly as possible the massive tapestry of contrahegemonic media, or citizens' media, and their relation to contested social movements.

Most illustrations of alternative media are in some sense hostile to capitalism, state repression, religious hierarchy, religious or economic fundamentalism, patriarchy, or sovietism. But we must also acknowledge the energy, insight and weight of radical rightist media in the public sphere. Three complications of this complex arena deserve to be flagged. First, these media and their backers are very far from being in synch with each other. Second, they are not all apocalyptic in tone, and this includes a number of the Christian fundamentalist operations. And, third, a pivotal question, yet to be properly researched, is the character and significance of the links between these extreme rightist forces and the more conventional right. A connecting thread among rightist media is that they represent the contrary to what C. B. MacPherson (1973) called 'developmental' power, which he contrasted with exploitative (or 'extractive') power. Developmental power signifies the public's ability to amass power to achieve secular, just, pro-human purposes. Extreme-right small and not so small-scale media have this in common; that they are not in the empowerment business but in the enslavement business. We wildly mischaracterize alternative media if we do not incorporate these too into our priorities for analysis. Small may not be beautiful, but it is surely able to subvert, for good or for ill.