

TOWARD EMANCIPATORY CULTURE AND MEDIA POLITICS

Given the cultural-political importance of television, the American Left's lack of a theory and practice of media politics is distressing. We must recognize that television is increasingly important as a vehicle of socialization and as a site of political communication and struggle, and devise a strategy to come to terms with this face. In order to do this, the Left must change its attitude toward the electronic media, especially television, and recognize its potential for communications that might promote social change. Although many radicals have realized the importance of cultural practices, there has been little discussion of cultural politics for the broadcasting media. But let's face it. If we want to communicate with and politically educate/entertain large numbers of people, we must use the broadcasting media, above all television.

Despite the current use of television as a vehicle of hegemonic ideology and political manipulation, it is defeatist and self-defeating to argue that television is in itself evil or regressive. Television is an instrument of unrealized possibilities. It could mobilize people, and entertain and educate on an unprecedented scale. It could democratize culture so that everyone could share in the cultural heritage, undermining the prerogatives of cultural elitism. It could allow people to understand the working of their society and government. It could help eliminate prejudices and biases of all sorts through communicating a better understanding of minorities and engaging in radical enlightenment. It could be used to reconstruct society and consciousness, and to change the world in ways as yet unforeseen.

There are, of course, risks here. It is sometimes argued that the very form of the electronic media imposes passivity on its audience, and more and better television might simply mean increased passivity and political apathy. Innovations such as electronic voting might create a specious sense of democracy and a facade of participation in societal processes. Further, media technology is now controlled by corporations who will fight uses of the media that contradict its interests. Developing an emancipatory culture and media politics should be connected with an anti-capitalist political movement, and should not suffer any illusions that change in media technology and production will suffice to bring about radical social change.

Nonetheless, these risks must be taken. Many are predicting that cable-satellite TV will break network hegemony and will open new channels of communication that could be used to transmit a more emancipatory culture. More television channels, home video-recorders, video-discs, and the like, give people more choice and control over their cultural environment. Further, citizen-band radio and some new cable TV systems provide for two-way communication, allowing the individual to overcome the passivity imposed by the present media system. We need to be aware that with the proliferating electronic technology and expanding communications markets, more and more electronic media productions will be demanded which will open new channels for emancipatory cultural production. Unfortunately, many people are yet fully aware of the tremendous potential of cable and satellite television. There are already operative forty channel

cable systems with two-way communication. Cable-satellite TV makes it technically possible for a group producing video programs in, say, San Francisco to show their works in Austin, Columbia, New York or Boston. Already, Home Box Office is showing recent, uncut movies to hundreds of thousands of homes across the country, the Christian Broadcasting Network and the PTL (Praise the Lord) Club programs are shown on many cable systems, porn movies are being regularly shown on many cable systems and local video groups and special interest groups are showing their productions on local cable stations. Important changes are thus taking place in the communications media. Radicals, too, must get into the act, and take advantage of existing media potentials and plan for the future.

Although we should reject the disdain for television that has marked so many radical theories, we must also beware against the sort of technological optimism found in Benjamin, Brecht and to some extent Enzensberger. Hence we need both a critical theory of the culture industry and television ideology, and a coherent radical media strategy based on the technical potentials of the electronic media, and the contradictions in the media industries that might allow emancipatory cultural production to take place.

Some groups have begun taking initial steps in this direction, but their efforts must be supported and stepped up if we are to effectively develop a socialist media politics. For example, socialist media groups have been meeting in Los Angeles and San Francisco to discuss possibilities of emancipatory communication within the existing media. Socialist feminists have been writing for Norman Lear; *Cine Manifest* has had dramas produced on PBS; a NAM sponsored production *Union Maids* was shown on PBS; Barbara Kopple's academy award winning *Harlan County, USA* was shown on the Home Box Office Network and PBS; different cultural and political groups have been using local public access cable channels and videotape for political education; and groups in Boston and around the country at various Pacifica radio stations have been trying to develop a socialist radio politics. We now have two major independent national radical print journals, and other print media. We must also begin getting into the electronic media, and using them to communicate our critique of capitalist society and vision of an alternative society.

There have been over 500 public access movement groups all over the country, struggling for more public access to the media. It is argued that the first amendment right to free speech contains a right to communicate, and a right to be heard. The "fairness doctrine" stipulates that all sides of an issue should be heard, that the broadcast industries must "devote a reasonable amount of broadcast time to the discussion of controversial issues; and to do so fairly, in order to afford reasonable opportunity for opposing viewpoints." The "first amendment" and "fairness doctrine" thus provide constitutional and legal grounds for radical access to the media. Why not radicals' participation in the public access movement, pushing ideas and cultural productions, testing the political waters and electronic wires, seeing what can be done and what cannot, discovering what works and what doesn't work?

Areas which have existing public access channels provide the opportunity for radical groups to make videotapes which can be shown on local TV. For instance, in Austin, when there is an important conference or cultural event it is videotaped and shown on the local public access channel. Eventually, an impressive tape library will be collected and could be exchanged with other groups.

The Austin Television Group has been meeting regularly in Austin, Texas for three years, studying the American communication system, and attempting to develop a theory of media politics. We urge an immediate, short-term strategy for existing radical groups to explore the possibilities of using local media more effectively as instruments of political communication and education. We also support radical cultural production of film, video, and documentaries, and would like to see a national left distribution network emerge so that the producers of emancipatory culture could have a distribution system and large audiences at their disposal. Finally, we want to begin devising a long term strategy to effectively utilize existing and emerging technology, and to map models of future media systems, in which electronic media are used as instruments of education and emancipation rather than of social control. We are currently working on these problems and hope that individuals who share our goals and are interested in this project will communicate with us and share their ideas and struggles. We hope in the future to produce a more detailed program of media politics, as the conclusion to our collective book on American television, based on the existing activities of radical groups and future possibilities for more emancipatory media-political action.*

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*Those participating in radical media politics should write us and send us material on their efforts and strategy, so we can assemble information on media politics for our forthcoming book. Write c/o Douglas Kellner, Department of Philosophy, University of Texas, Austin, Texas 78712
