

From the Editor

Promoting a Progressive Mass Media

by Hans Klein

I will always remember the day I discovered alternative mass media. I was sixteen years old, and one day I scanned my radio dial across the spectrum. At the low end of the dial I came across a station that was—well, different. The station played great music, like I had never heard before, and the announcers had a very direct manner. That station broadcast from the **University of Lowell** in Massachusetts and was one of many nonprofit community radio stations throughout the U.S.

Years later, after having become a regular listener to community radio (and, for a time, a disk jockey at **WPRB** in New Jersey), I had another remarkable experience. While tuning my car radio I came across an evening news show on Cambridge's **WMBR** radio station. In a story about U.S. policy in Haiti, the newscaster interviewed a Haitian intellectual who discussed the U.S. political interests motivating a possible invasion. His statements contradicted everything I had ever heard or seen in all other media coverage of Haiti. This was a very different kind of news program. I had discovered the **Pacifica News Network**, a nationally-syndicated news program whose editorial perspective goes beyond official government declarations.

A final surprise occurred when I discovered public access television. While doing university research on technological innovation and institutional change, I began thinking about the desirability of an institution to provide alternative television in a manner comparable to community radio and the Pacifica News Network. Such an institution could revolutionize peoples' understanding of themselves and their world by providing alternative, progressive news and programming. When I discovered that an institution similar to this vision existed—indeed, had existed for nearly twenty years—I was astounded.



Photo by Jim Peters
Hans Klein

As a longtime listener of community radio and a reader of print media like **The Nation**, how could it be that I was unaware of public access television? I became a regular viewer of access TV.

Since then I have participated in public access TV in a variety of ways, including as trainee, producer, and member of the Board of a local station. However, my perspective on access TV has remained primarily that of the viewer. I have looked to public access TV to serve as a source of new ideas and alternative perspectives. For me, public access TV is

an alternative mass medium that can present progressive programming which is absent on for-profit mass media.

This edition of **CMR** examines access television as an institution for a progressive mass media. The articles that follow address how access TV today provides an alternative to the mainstream mass media and how it might do so even more in the future. It examines such issues as: Why do we need an alternative to the mainstream mass media? What progressive

Perspectives

programming is available? How is programming distributed? And, how

well-suited is public access TV to the task of promoting a progressive mass media?

The issue begins with two articles examining the mainstream media and the history of public access television. **Danny Schechter**, producer of the television series **Rights and Wrongs**, talks about the problems of the for-profit mass media and proposes five steps toward media reform.

See **Promoting**, page 15...

Promoting...

Continued from page 6

Bob Devine provides an historical perspective with a review of **Ralph Engelman's** new book, *Public Radio and Television in America: A Political History*.

The three following articles examine some of the progressive programming available today on access TV. **Elizabeth Meister** describes the goals and activities of *DykeTV* in providing programming with a lesbian perspective. **Mark Sugg** of the **Center for Defense Information** talks about the *American Defense Monitor* video series, which offers hundreds of episodes examining the influence of the defense sector in all aspects of U.S. society. And **Adrienne Jenik** describes *Paper Tiger TV*.

In order to realize a progressive mass media through access television, distribution is very important. By distributing programming to cities and towns throughout the U.S., local-oriented public access stations can reach a nationwide audience. Three distributors serving the access community are **Free Speech TV**, **Deep Dish TV**, and **Flying Focus Video Collective**. Articles by **Dani Newsum**, **Martha Wallner**, and **Moss Drake** describe each of these organizations.

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My own contribution to this issue is an opinion piece. There I ask a question which has nagged me ever since I discovered public access TV: Why hasn't public access TV revolutionized the mass media? Access TV seems to have all the elements needed to provide an alternative to for-profit television. Yet the influence of access TV has been far less than for-profit television. Why is this? And how could the impact of access TV increase? I argue that the limited impact of access TV on the broader society results from the design of public access television as an institution. The institutional design of the local public access corporation defines a pattern of incentives and dependencies that leads to an emphasis on production and training over cablecasting and programming. With station staff required to focus more on producers than viewers, the progressive programming on access TV has remained somewhat inaccessible. I offer some suggestions on how this situation might be changed. The creation of a viewers' association could empower people in local communities to work with their access stations to better serve the needs of the viewing public.

In addition to these articles on the theme of a progressive mass media, this issue contains contributions by **Alliance** members **Alan Bushong** and **Carl Kucharski**. They examine policy issues facing the Alliance and suggest a plan for the reorganization.

Public access television as it exists today is a powerful, dynamic source of progressive programming. This issue of *CMR* both surveys today's activities and offers suggestions for making it even better.

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