



# The feminist cable collective as public sphere activity

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## ABSTRACT

This article highlights the efforts of a group that produces, under the aegis of the National Organization for Women, a feminist public affairs series cablecast on cable television public access channels. The question addressed here is whether this work, called 'New Directions for Women', can be seen as representing agency in the public sphere, assuming that something like the public sphere is indispensable to democratic political practice. The research finds that public access cable television does provide viable opportunities for feminist 'content', for activist-minded news, discussion, and criticism of the economy sphere, the state, and family. Yet, publicness is at odds with certain feminist principles, at least as these have been practiced in feminist journalism (i.e. directed at the enclave), in large part because the technology constrains enactment of feminist modes of news production.

KEY WORDS ■ agency ■ alternative media ■ cable television ■ feminism  
■ public access ■ public sphere

## Introduction

Like other social change groups, feminists have long understood that reportage on feminism and feminist perspectives brings both advantages and risks. Already 150 years ago, even without the benefit of social science research, feminists knew that mass media coverage, especially favorable news, symbolized status and might even win support. But 19th-century dress reformers, health advocates, and suffragists also recognized that the practices, routines, and assumptions of journalism would work against them; if not altogether ignored, their causes would be mocked or marginalized by the mainstream press. However, in representing themselves in their own newspapers and magazines, they would be representing themselves to themselves, the already converted.

This internal focus can be intentional, both for separatist groups uninterested in reaching 'outsiders' and for emerging groups more interested in experimenting with various ways to argue their cause and bolster adherents' commitment to distinctive values. Often feminists assume that only sympathizers will rank content and methodological consistency with political principles as more important than aesthetics and slick production values. McLaughlin (1993) criticizes feminists for focusing on internal communications, without directing their oppositional claims outward. And it's true that feminists infrequently work with mainstream media. In contrast, especially recently, some movements – anti-globalization, to take one example – have worked almost entirely through mainstream media; they manipulate (in the best sense of the word) mainstream news to reframe their message. But either because they believed in the transformative power of working as a sisterhood or they feared corruption of their news, feminists long preferred 'controlled' media directed to their own membership lists over 'massified' media.

Emerging technologies, however, raise anew the question of whether social movements can reach larger news audiences without sacrificing control over their message. Notably, while long-ignored radical media are now attracting considerable scholarly interest, most studies of radical and 'alternative' media, whether limited to members or 'broadcast', regard sheer survival as the mark of success; conversely, failures (for example, of website cessations) are attributed to financial problems or organizational/personal failures. This study attempts to assess the potential of a news forum, in part, by considering the advantages and disadvantages of the medium per se. Trying to avoid the extremes of both technophobia and technophilia, the question here is whether feminists can use cable television to enter the public sphere, to challenge dominant ideological assumptions, and invite a larger audience to consider political issues, while remaining consistent with feminist ethics and organizing principles.

At least hypothetically, public access channels offered on cable systems would seem to lend themselves to counter-hegemonic efforts. Public access has been called the 'last best hope for a public sphere and for an active enlightened polity' (Devine, 1992: 9), in part because of this access. Cable operators provide channel space free to virtually anyone, regardless of whether they have professional expertise, and public access 'producers' usually do not. Cable subscriptions themselves are not free, of course; but public access channels come bundled into the basic cable package. Linder (1999) claims that public access creates community; enables people to express and disseminate their views; empowers people by demystifying television; encourages public discourse; and promotes social change. Linder herself does not test these multiple achievements, however. So questions remain whether, when, and for whom

public access does enable these projects and to what extent these social goods promote deliberation.

This article tests these issues through the particular case of a collective that, under the aegis of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in the USA, produces what it calls feminist television. From its birth in 1966, NOW has been reasonably media savvy, although not particularly innovative, primarily using print media to communicate with members at the national and local levels. In 1996 three women (including two women from the local NOW 'chapter' described here) brought to NOW's national convention a resolution calling for feminist media to counter the images of women as sex objects and/or victims and supply otherwise-absent feminist perspectives. This task force claimed NOW needs 'a public voice, public awareness of feminist positions, a forum for feminist thought and analysis of national policy issues, and a vehicle for recording women's herstory' as well as 'a more powerful tool for recruitment, organizing, and fund raising'. Documents presented at the convention floor said feminist news on television might sensitize the public to feminist issues. Feminist television might convert "'mainstream" women into declared feminists'. After considerable politicking by the task force, NOW resolved to establish both a feminist television project and cable network. Nationally, the proposal remains stalled; it received no resources or staff. The single exception is the focus of this study, the *New Directions for Women* cable access show, shown in New Jersey and on systems in three other northeastern states. Since 1994, over two dozen people, NOW members in western New Jersey, have worked on this cable television show.

*New Directions for Women* (NDW) highlights the question of whether or how such activist work constitutes operating in the public sphere, i.e. deliberation on issues of public concern in a discursive space separate from the state, economy, and family. The public sphere is highly useful as a normative concept referring to productive processes through which citizens can debate and act on important issues, including divisive ones. The research examines whether cable access presents viable opportunities for public participation and deliberation on feminist perspectives and for feminist modes of production. Members of this particular collective are a counter-public in that they reject dominant perspectives and share the sense that they are distinctly separate from the mainstream. Operating in parallel arenas to circulate counter-discourses permits these activists, as Fraser (1997: 81) puts it, 'to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, their stated purpose is to enter ever-widening arenas to contest marginalization; their publicity is deployed against invisibility and on behalf of broad transformation.

The women described here aim their work not at the enclave but at some larger, albeit unknown, audience. The research is grounded in the ways the collective's participants explain their involvement, how they conceptualize their audience, and how they make decisions about the show; many of the participants have been involved since the start, in 1994. Nonetheless, while at least hypothetically this counter-public addresses a generalized public sphere, people are not necessarily effective agents in the public sphere merely because they act as if they were or they claim to be so. Before taking up the NOW collective itself, I clarify how I use public sphere theory. I also outline structural differences among the media most relevant to the question of what technological features hinder or enable oppositional groups from producing counter-knowledge and I summarize the history of public access cable programming.

### **The place of publics and the media in the public sphere**

Many scholars accuse Habermas of empirical, historical, and conceptual errors in his (1989) history of the emergence and disintegration of the liberal bourgeois public sphere (among the most well-known critics are Eley, 1992; Fraser, 1997; Landes, 1995; Young, 1990). Among the problems is that the public sphere Habermas valorized never offered universal or equal access or equally distributed power. His conception privileged certain peoples, contents, and kinds of discourses (namely white bourgeois men, formal political issues, rational debate) while excluding others. Launching a more radical attack, DeLuca and Peeples (2002) argue that those who try to reform the Habermasian public sphere problematically retain ideals of rationality, embodied conversation and dialogue, and consensus. They offer the notion of the public screen; picking up on Peters' (1999) notion of open scattering of emissions, the public screen plays on hypermediacy, publicity, distraction, noise, and dissent.

I also discount consensus and face-to-face interaction as significant ideals. Nonetheless, I hold to the aspirational notion of the public sphere, with its preference for rationality, deliberation, and civility. This is most likely to emerge in discursive spaces separate from the individual and family, on the one hand, and the state and official economy, on the other. This version does not assume that individuals must bracket or abandon, even temporarily, their differences or life experiences. Differences are inevitable and desirable. Indeed, the boundaries of the Habermasian liberal public were never fixed or impermeable. It does not refer to a literal place or, despite the singular grammar, a single site. A single, comprehensive public sphere is impossible in complex multi-

cultural modern societies (Fraser, 1997). As Carey (1995: 373) suggests, references to 'recovering' the public sphere or public life are 'not an attempt to recapture a period, historical moment, or condition but, instead, to invigorate a conception, illusion, or idea that once had the capacity to engage the imagination, motivate action, and serve an ideological purpose'.

How various counter-publics have exploited various media/news forums was long ignored in public sphere theory and media studies; the terms 'media' and 'news' are still nearly automatically taken to refer to large-scale commercial mass media products and institutions. Attention to radical media is dramatically increasing.<sup>2</sup> But historians, sociologists, and political scientists who study particular social movements typically treat in-house media solely as data sources, rather than as agents. Habermas' own pessimism about the re-emergence of public spaces for citizen debate depends on a historical account that defined mass media monolithically and in mass-market terms. Habermas long ignored alternative, plebian, and oppositional public spheres (Dahlgren, 1991: 6). Habermas might have doubted the emancipatory potential of news media even if he had included politically alternative media of the period, which, again, were largely directed at the already converted.<sup>3</sup> Notably, for groups such as NOW, public activities occur in a realm located between the micropolitics of the everyday and family and abstract macro-level institutions. Furthermore, 'publicity' (referring here to visibility and access to visibility, not public relations) is crucial, not merely accidental, to this process. Indeed, it is precisely because the intimate sphere of the family is powerfully affected by questions of the workings of the state and capital (and, likewise, gender inequalities of the family and domestic sphere underpin and bolster inequalities of the workplace, notably including journalism) that 'publicness' is necessary. The USA presents a felicitous rhetorical coincidence: the press is conventionally regarded as the 'fourth estate' and the public sphere allows citizens to critique not only, as Habermas said, the state/government but also the market and family.

### **Structures of technologies**

One need not resort to oversimplified technological determinism to acknowledge how each medium's technological structures may either constrain or promote social groups' attempts to effect social change. For media ecologists such as Postman (1979), each medium is structured in a way that prompts certain ways of thinking and learning. Print – with its neat, sequential march of words – encourages analytical and rational thinking in terms of cause-effect. In contrast, visual and aural information tends to be 'consumed'

holistically and simultaneously. Given the emphasis on production here, costs, degree of technical skill required, the complexity of production processes, and even the number of people necessary are also relevant.

Kellner (1985) chides his leftist colleagues for their 'technophobia' and reliance on print, although he and others also criticize political activists for fetishizing technology. But, in fact, print was long the preferred oppositional medium for good reasons. Newspapers and magazines are relatively inexpensive to produce, requiring little capital investment or access to complex, expensive technologies. Since politically alternative news organs typically eschew a glossy, sophisticated look on both philosophical and practical grounds, a few people, or even one person, without journalistic or technical credentials, can produce them. However, even when the cost itself is not prohibitive, subscribing to an 'alternative' periodical requires effort, commitment. Meanwhile, non-subscribers are unlikely to flip through the periodical, even if it is available on the news-stand. So, non-subscribers will not 'happen' to see a magazine's contents in the way that people surfing through their television menu might happen upon a cable access show.

The US Supreme Court rejects the argument that the First Amendment implies right of access to the mass media (Pember, 1987). Although ostensibly the airwaves are to be used in the public interest, there is no concomitant notion that every citizen deserves access to airwaves. The notion that the airwaves are a public good notwithstanding, free market rhetoric, licensing policies, and commercial power have cut off most possibilities for broadcasting politically (or culturally) minority voices. To be sure, besides sanctioned low power stations, various types of illegal micropower radio stations enable non-licensed alternative voices, including ones that aggressively repudiate government authority and/or interrupt broadcasts of licensed stations (Soley 1999). Soley (1999) lists multiple advantages for 'free' radio as a democratic free speech medium: microradio transmitters can be built and maintained for very little money; receivers are cheap; reception does not require literacy; and it is safe. Nonetheless, in the USA, experiments in feminist radio are very rare, perhaps because the content is fleeting and perhaps because of low-power radio's 'pirate' reputation. <sup>4</sup>

The importance and cross-generational attractions of television are clear: television symbolizes and allocates status. It creates cultural capital. Producing feminist broadcast television, however, is even more difficult, more complex, and more expensive than radio. A low-power television station can be set up for about \$80,000 and thousands of LPTV licenses remain available. Yet low-power broadcasting is a lot of work – just to broadcast a radius of 20–30 miles. Given the role of advertising, producing explicitly feminist broadcast news for a single city on a mainstream broadcast channel, much less for a national

audience, is nearly as daunting and thus unlikely. Apparently even as broad-minded a system as the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) scrapped a series on women's issues because it failed to get corporate matching funds and an offer of support from makers of birth control pills was rejected by PBS as too controversial (Halleck, 2002: 191). Second, television's complex technical demands essentially require that some, if not all, of the producers of television programming have some training. Even producing a fairly primitive public access show necessitates a core mass of skilled people; this job cannot be done on the spur of the moment, at home, or alone. However, this communal feature is perhaps an advantage of public access as a specifically feminist news source. Reception of media content is still likely to be private and individual. But producing public access television requires participation by and interaction among a group. Activists engaged in alternative media tend to agree that 'doing' production and using technology to collective ends are themselves counter-hegemonic; dissecting and demystifying media industries is the aim of much of the content. For example, a study of a Cape Cod public access facility (King and Mele, 1999) found that active members described themselves as enriched in several ways: they mastered a technology, learned to appreciate differing points of views, formed a collaborative community, and felt more 'hooked into' the local community.

Again, technical innovations in television affect the potential for democratic (public sphere) work. Video 'camcorders' – relatively cheap, portable, easy to learn and use – let 'grass roots' non-professionals do video work. As with still and home-movie cameras, camcorders were marketed in terms of their place in family rituals, not for their public or political potential (Ouellette, 1995). Still, marketing strategies notwithstanding, many recent innovations are affordable and user-friendly. (Photocopiers, fax machines, digital cameras, and computers with internet access, and website management software can even be used at home.) These technologies can be used in unintended ways or even against the intended ways. They enable people to manipulate and recirculate information. From public access producers to web bloggers, these technologies give rise to new kinds of journalists who do journalism in very different ways.

Furthermore, satellites enable cable networks. In 1985, Paper Tiger TV, then a fledgling guerilla television collective (Halleck, 2002), began distributing programming to public access centers via satellite. The collective soon expanded into the first national public access satellite network: Deep Dish collated and uplinked work from 100 grass-roots video producers (Drew, 1995). Once renting transponders became cheaper, some 300 access centers could downlink Deep Dish programming (Lucas and Wallner, 1993). Free Speech TV distributes to some 60 access channels (Stein, 2001).

### The promise and potential of cable and public access

Public access programming has its roots in several technical and structural as well as political and philosophical developments. Inspired by Marshall McLuhan's messianic ideas about the unifying nature of electronic media (Boyle, 1997; Engelman, 1990) but also doubting that mass media would offer fair or complete accounts of the cultural revolution, video artists and counter-culture activists of the 1960s and 1970s experimented with video. The cofounder of one provocative media collective published *Guerilla Television* (Shamberg, 1972) to advocate video technology as participatory, decentralized communication. Yet, the 'radicalism' of video artists was less a matter of subversive political commitments and more an interest in rupturing aesthetic and mass media conventions. Few of these video artists were interested in cable; as had industry professionals, they dismissed amateurism.

Public access itself began with a 1966 experiment in Canada to involve poor people in film-making and, later, video production (see Linder, 1999). In 1971, largely importing the Canadian model, the Alternate Media Center at New York University began teaching people to establish and produce for local cable centers (King and Mele, 1999). Some video activists formed what Higgins (1999: 625) calls an 'unlikely' coalition with various business, academic, and government circles to promote community cable channels. Report after report in the 1960s and 1970s confidently predicted that cable could deliver information, civic education, and citizen participation. A blue-ribbon commission lauded the 'awesome' promise of the new 'television of abundance' to revolutionize cultural life and encourage 'direct engagement of people with people' (Sloan, 1971: 167).<sup>5</sup> The public access movement advocated it as 'the ideal vehicle of communication for a truly pluralistic, participatory society' (Doty, 1975).

Perhaps less inspired by such celebratory rhetoric and more by the Kerner Commission's criticism that African Americans lacked opportunities to present or see their views in the media (King and Mele, 1999), the Federal Communications Commission's 1972 *Cable Television Report and Order* required major cable franchises to establish a channel (each) for public access, education uses, and local government. By the time the Supreme Court vacated the Federal Communications Commission's mandate, the basic idea had taken root (Linder, 1999). The Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984 authorized franchisers to request these channels, if they wanted. Now, many local governments request cable companies, as a condition of obtaining or retaining franchises, to set aside public, educational, and governmental (PEG) channels and to provide training, equipment, and facilities for producing programs, usually for free. Indeed, once highly capitalized multi-system operators began to compete for

domination in the cable industry, public access became an important bargaining chip. In 1996, according to a widely cited source, 2000 centers were producing public access television and some 4800 PEG channels offered programming (Briller, 1996: 51). Some 18 percent of all cable systems supply equipment and facilities for public groups to use in producing local programming (Aufderheide, 2000: 128). By 1990, when more than 80 percent of US homes were passed by cable, nearly 60 percent received at least one PEG channel and 16 percent of the audience reported viewing a community channel within the last week (Atkin and LaRose, 1991: 357). Cable companies manage one-third of the centers; non-profits, government agencies and educational institutions manage the rest (Linder, 1999: 36).

Utopian discourse about cable peaked in the 1970s, when Marshall McLuhan's popularity also peaked. Perhaps the single cable arena where enthusiasm has not died is public access. Analysts personally involved in public access projects are particularly optimistic about this tool for democracy, if not revolutionary social change (Goldberg, 1990; Halleck, 2002; Kellner, 1990). A manifesto on 'Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs' issued by the World Summit on the Information Society in 2003 began with the importance of civil society participation and infrastructure promoting universal access to information; it acknowledged the particular role of community media (available at <http://www.wsis-cs.org>). Yet, even public access generates criticism. Aufderheide (1992: 55) says:

Cable's increased channel capacity does not miraculously create new opportunities for public participation in this technology, nor even for greater diversity of sources . . . Cable's current industry structure also powerfully discourages diversity of sources and perspectives, and leaves virtually no opening for use of the system as a public space.

Aufderheide argues that public access programming should help build social relationships, extend community self-structuring, and serve as a marketplace of ideas. Instead, it is self-indulgent, 'a pathetic, homemade version of entertainment' (p. 58). Ironically, the Do It Yourself movement further popularized the homemade aesthetic.<sup>6</sup> Public access adherents fear that emphasizing professionalism will backfire, undermining support for public access (Briller, 1996; Linder, 1999).

Originally heralded for community-making possibilities, ironically, cable is criticized for reinforcing niche audiences and thus promoting segmentation. Certainly producers of niche programming for PEG channels would be hard put to claim a sense of community, much less communion, with audiences. Relationships between producers and audiences in the cases of both commercial broadcasting and cable television are at best diffuse. In some sense, with new broadcast networks and the proliferation of channels enabled by cable,

satellite, and digital transmission, with the exception of a few media ‘events,’<sup>7</sup> nearly all television programs are directed at a segmented market. Of course, the real thrust of the accusation that cable addresses niche audiences is to belittle niches as tiny. Unlike broadcast television stations, whose advertisers demand that they ascertain audiences’ size and kind, including for news, cable systems rarely bother to determine the size of the audiences for specific programming. Cable systems merely assume that few people watch PEG programming, lacking as it does the technical sophistication and production values of commercial television. In any case, measuring and understanding the audiences for PEG programming is difficult and the results unreliable. Studies from the 1970s and 1980s of PEG audiences in specific communities offer figures ranging from less than 1 percent to 38 percent to 75 percent (Atkin and LaRose, 1991: 355). Kellner (1990: 209, 224) concluded ‘there is definitely a receptive and growing audience for public access television, and the possibility of making alternative television programs by progressives should be a much higher priority for radical media politics’ (p. 224). He claimed that two surveys showed ‘a large and loyal audience’ for a public access show he co-hosted; a footnote specified this as 4.7 percent of the cable audience. Kellner’s Austin-based *Alternative Views*, an early access program that ran for nearly 20 years, was apparently sufficiently visible to be denounced by both establishment and liberal media. One of the few national studies (Atkin and LaRose, 1991: 358) found that overall, over one-quarter of the respondents described themselves as ‘very satisfied’ with community programming; interestingly, with respect to the case here, 32 percent of women but only 23 percent of men were ‘very satisfied’ and seniors/retirees as well as somewhat better educated subscribers were the most likely to watch community television. Granted, most cable subscribers never watch public access and may have only heard of it from *Wayne’s World*, the film about two friends producing a public access show. But community channels do as well or better than some satellite channels, including BET, C-SPAN, and the Financial News Network (Atkin and LaRose, 1991).

If access producers know little or nothing about their audience or its response to the programming or if they suspect the audience may be hostile, how do access producers judge their success? Why do volunteers devote time and energy to produce programming?

### **New directions for women**

Originally titled as the work of the Morris County (NJ) chapter of NOW, the show’s name was changed to New Directions for Women (NDW) after the series began to be cablecast more broadly. The name change coincided with

the death of a nationally distributed feminist newspaper *New Directions for Women*, established in 1972 and long published by Paula Kassell, a loyal member of the local chapter.<sup>8</sup> An advantage of this change, according to one member, is that 'without the name NOW attached to the show, people can't automatically discount it'. The new name, she explained, keeps it more accessible, more 'open'. The half-hour show is listed in local cable guides and individual topics are listed on the channel's 'bulletin board' listing and on the chapter's website. Programs are repeated several times over the course of a month.

I interviewed members individually, some by telephone, and in groups, at the cable company's studio, in November 1997, February 1998, March 1998 and April 1998, December 2000, and July 2004. I appeared as a guest on two shows. While observing taping sessions at the studio, I also occasionally filled in for someone who had not shown up. Background came from interviews with members, especially the show's executive producer, who also supplied some documents.<sup>9</sup>

The programs themselves are typically taped talks – interviews with one, two, or three guests. The collective insists that shows be 'informative'. Guests are both people whose personal experience gives them warrant, as well as researchers and scholars from nearby universities, political leaders, and professionals. Occasionally the group invites relatively well-known feminists. For example, Fran Hosken discussed genital mutilation, which she often wrote about in her *Women's International Network (WIN) News*. NDW's first program dealt with sexual harassment of female high school students. Since then, inter alia, NDW has featured the debate over equal rights; public school teaching of abstinence; pay equity; women in sports and in music; male feminists; 'non-traditional' jobs; feminist ethics; date rape and sex crimes. Shows often focus on specific women's organizations, especially political coalitions. Not surprisingly, given that women over 50 dominate the crew (college students sometimes drop in but more members are mothers or grandmothers), myths about older women have been discussed. But breast feeding, reproductive rights, and abortion are more prominent. Several shows have dealt with (homo)sexuality, including same-sex marriage. Spirituality and the invention of new rituals show the influence of the collective's leader: NDW taped a ceremony to celebrate her divorce.

For NDW, the key is serious programming that does not pander. They want to be 'effective', so demand topics that 'resonate'. Several members assert that the NDW programming is relevant to men. They say men are interested in NDW topics and 'people don't want "women's" shows'. This view is not unique to NDW. Many feminists, including Paula Kassell (1996) in describing

her paper, agree that feminist media content is and should be interesting to men. Men are encouraged to join NOW – whose preposition is ‘for’, not ‘of’.

Once proposed by NDW’s programming subcommittee, ideas must be discussed and approved at an open meeting of the NOW chapter. Members rarely disapprove a proposal outright but occasionally this happens. They rejected mental illness as ‘too negative’. However, controversial proposals for shows about trans-sexuality eventually gained approval. NDW members are not distressed about NOW’s authority. One NDW member (and former NOW officer) explains, ‘Viewers need to be interested and NOW needs to be convinced there is enough interest’. She also hastens to deny that NOW acts as censor. Rather, she says, since choices must be made among possible topics, NOW must select the best. Deliberation and debate, then, begin early. What the partial list earlier demonstrates is a sophisticated sense of bringing the private into the public domain.

Once a month, the crew tapes two shows at the facilities of the sponsoring cable system. At least six members are needed at each taping; and the producer tries to recruit eight people, so someone can learn something new. For many years the cable system operator provided no production assistance.<sup>10</sup> This was a major source of anxiety, especially when the only employees around during tapings were clerical workers who could not answer technical questions or fix malfunctioning equipment. Run-down equipment continues to cause problems but now a company employee is assigned to help public access productions; and NDW crews find him accommodating. That said, taping sessions remain calm. While setting up, which takes an hour (or more), people offer and accept sisterly, friendly advice. When mistakes occur, no shouting or personal criticism is heard.

NDW members agonize over how much argumentation per se should be highlighted and whether or how to present opposing or anti-feminist viewpoints. Much of the logic here derives from an acute understanding of how the political right has manipulated journalists. One member concedes that a debate format might be more exciting. Another adds, however: ‘But the other side has so much control of the media, and we have so little time to put forth our arguments, that we need to exploit it. Why should we give up our time?’ A founding member says: ‘We don’t directly present anti-feminist content or shows that work against women. We do want to show good things.’ Several describe the ability to facilitate conversation without being adversarial as a prominent virtue of NDW hosts; again, testimony to the commitment to civility, even during debate.

The collective unquestionably expresses the voice of middle-class, middle-aged liberals. Most of the members live in reasonably wealthy towns. It is a somewhat embarrassed white woman who volunteers that, with the departure

of one African American member in order to become more active in African American organizations, only one Black woman remains active in NDW. This woman deals with her situation with equanimity. But they all explicitly define themselves as feminist, albeit jokingly or modestly. Referring to friends and family, one woman said, 'They call me a feminist when I have any opinion that distinguishes me from a doormat.'<sup>11</sup> The crew's apparent disinterest in extra-curricular socializing (no longer do they have one or two parties a year) is perhaps surprising, given the importance of a sense of community to other feminist projects and other public access collectives (Higgins, 1999; King and Mele, 1999). Moreover, in explaining the benefits to crewmembers of participating in such activities, NOW's own documents list 'camaraderie and a great time', along with learning new skills, personal development, and pride in accomplishment. NDW's rather thin sense of community at NDW is perhaps attributable to life-cycle dynamics: These people are all involved with families, volunteer or paid jobs, and a host of other community and social responsibilities that they take very seriously. Moreover, geographically they are spread out. But it also may be testimony to their instrumental view of their work.

These women have taken some pains to carve time out of their complex and highly 'over-committed' work and family lives to acquire the requisite technical literacy and to continue with the project. In 1994, 16 members completed a training course. By 2000, six of the original members were no longer active. Additional people have taken the course or apprenticed with the crew but finding enough crew members can still be difficult. People are busy. Nonetheless, one could argue that the need for complex skills, inevitable as it is, excludes people. Technology per se poses constraints on the potential for public access to enable public sphere activity. As perhaps the major instance of professionalism trumping principle, a male 'ringer' was for a time listed among the crew. A former cable company employee, he was apparently willing to direct shows when NDW was 'really desperate' for an experienced director. One member paid him an honorarium and, so that he could be included on NOW's roster, paid his membership dues. Although he was a 'nice guy', his benefactor conceded 'he is not really a feminist.' Another man is 'genuinely' active in NOW and NDW, although he crews infrequently, given his schedule as a university faculty member.

NDW members grow the cagiest when responding to questions of who and where the audience is. They concede, however, as one put it, 'It's very frustrating not knowing.' On the pessimistic side, they recall when, at the end of one program, they asked victims of workplace discrimination to contact NDW. The plan was to videotape people telling their stories. No one called. However, anecdotal evidence and direct responses, positive and negative, testify that 'some' audience exists. A show about female infanticide in India,

for example, evoked vehement criticism from an Indian viewer who rebuked the expert for discussing infanticide in public and contacted NDW to demand that the segment be deleted. More often, members simply say, as one stalwart said, 'I want to believe there is an audience – that [the program] is not a waste.' In her view, the shows are informative, broadly construed, and interesting to people with all kinds of views. She grounded her faith in NDW's audience in logic: 'Well-educated people tune into questions of importance. They *are* concerned with these issues.' A retired psychiatric social worker conceded that NDW's audience is 'still limited' – but growing. Meanwhile, she noted proudly, she was learning not only increasingly complex technical skills but also about significant, current issues.

Even as volunteers using volunteer talent and free facilities, NDW entails some costs, including paying for the blank tapes that are cablecast, archived, or given guests and sponsors. NDW nets at best a small profit from selling copies of tapes. Federal Communications Commission law forbids advertising on PEG channels but, as with public television, public access centers often accept corporate underwriting. On occasion, a few businesses underwrote NDW's 'thought-provoking' show. But soliciting sponsors takes time and this effort has fallen off. The collective is in the process of registering as a non-profit foundation, so it can apply for grants.

The organization works with a tacit and primitive hierarchy, in the sense that one person serves as executive producer. As such, she is the liaison and mediator between the NOW chapter (of which she is now president – not for the first time), cable company, and programming committee. Among other functions, she maintains the budget, handles publicity, and distributes the tapes. She produces the programs when no-one else volunteers (80 percent of the time). She is responsible for recruiting crews and ensuring that members learn a range of skills. Much like the suffrage papers that depended on one highly dedicated editor/publisher, NDW would be hard pressed to survive without her.

## **Conclusion**

NDW members sense the historical difficulty of producing, sustaining, and assessing social and political transformation. Nevertheless, they struggle together, holding firm to a long-term and explicitly shared commitment to protracted work at a variety of levels and in multiple contexts in order to produce incremental changes in social, political, economic, and cultural conditions. Generally, social movement leaders try rhetorically to minimize the slowness of progress. Referring to Marxism, Kolakowski (1968: 145–6)

acknowledged the huge amounts of collective energy required to produce small reforms:

[I]f the full extent of the disproportion between results and effort expended became public knowledge, the result would be so disheartening . . . that any social progress would be impossible . . . [I]n order to muster the energy needed to arrive at any change in human relations, this monstrous disproportion must be largely mitigated . . . by an artificial and mythological inflation of expected results as compared to the sum of expended effort, a sum which cannot be concealed since it is felt directly.

These women, however, persist in devoting time, energy, and money, knowing they are unlikely to see dramatic change.

Having shifted the analysis from programming to production and participation, King and Mele (1999) redefine the public sphere as meaningful action by local citizens and then proceed to find it. Higgins (1999) likewise offers a 'flexible' definition of empowerment as becoming aware of the self and others and concludes that community television is empowering. Stein's (2001) assessment of the democratic potential of public access television makes more muscular claims about its operation as a public sphere: access television enables 'ordinary people' to reframe the ideologies of commercial culture, to represent themselves to the larger community, and to exercise their democratic rights to free speech in ways not allowed by mainstream media. Stein emphasizes that wider distribution, preferably national distribution, 'is necessary both for the financial survival of serious access television projects and for their political reach and effectiveness' (Stein, 2001: 318). Even so, she concludes:

[Access television] provides a speech forum that is relatively free from economic and editorial constraints and that permits the discursive reinterpretation and refutation of media forms and symbols . . . [R]adical television invites viewers to re-examine and perhaps reformulate their existing viewpoints.

The notion that media literacy, empowerment of self and group, and activism through public access cable, counter mainstream hegemony is tempting, since this also largely describes NDW. If the personal is political, then personal transformation through NDW has engaged the public sphere. The activity goes beyond abstract discourse to real practice in the lived-in world. The collective prides itself on presenting a wide spectrum of viewpoints; the range of topics allows them to confront different people who face different problems. Although they entertain nagging doubts about the extent to which they are obligated to present counter arguments, NDW members understand the intellectual and moral vacuity of the myth of objectivity espoused by mainstream news professionals. Thus, in some ways, this public access television manifests two kinds of genetic inheritance: the interactive tradition of

salons and coffee houses for Habermasian impassioned discussion; and the dramatic tradition of feminist news. But evaluation itself requires looking at two major tensions explicitly confronting NDW and then considering whether additional standards should be applied. Garnham (1990) is wrong to dismiss the 'process' defense as untestable but correct in requiring public access proponents to measure success against (their) stated goals.

Straddling the line between feminist principle and efficiency in accomplishing its public sphere ambition is one tension marking NDW's work. Consistent with feminist action for well over a century, NDW is concerned with processes and not merely the short-term product. Commitment to group processes and group learning remains important. In contrast, NDW is not particularly self-conscious about how choices are made or who is involved in making them. The national NOW report sternly warned against steering committees; the task force strongly endorsed the idea of an executive producer, responsible for 'every' aspect of the program. Consistent with the NOW's overall structure, NDW is not committed to the anti-hierarchical sentiment that contemporary feminists elsewhere often demand. While not oblivious to the politics of decision-making, it is fairly casual about power and leadership. Unlike organizations that are highly concerned with feminist method (this fixation often derails projects and has even destroyed groups), NDW's main concern is getting the work done. In sum, on this score, the collective could be more self-reflective and self-conscious about both ends and means. They could experiment with alternative methods. However, the NDW collective can be commended for managing, in a relatively non-bureaucratic way and for a remarkable 10 years, to produce programming without pandering to middle-class sensibilities or minimizing its feminism.

A related tension concerns trade-offs between information and aesthetics. NDW's goal is not imitating broadcast news but providing feminist news, avoiding glaring technical errors, if possible. One possibility would be for them to hire professionals. Aufderheide (1992: 61) argues: 'There is no need to fetishize the amateur and the homemade; professional craftsmanship can improve the functioning of a public forum and enliven the public sphere as much as it can the realm of commerce.' Yet, communication, including news, is not a product to be produced however and wherever is most efficient and profitable. These women do not want merely to 'supervise' production. Nor should they be excluded from hands-on production. Mastering technology and participating in group work are among the goals. More importantly, professionalizing the news 'product' would change it. However, some members agree that the show needs improvement, needs 'jazzing up'. They would like to tape on location more. One member having recently purchased a van,

NDW can move props to the studio on taping days. Now they need money to build a nicer set.

NDW members' tendency to attribute the show's weaknesses to insufficient resources echoes an oft-heard claim that funding is the most critical problem for public access (Linder, 1999; Stein, 2001).<sup>12</sup> Yet, the 'talking head' format may suggest that it is the conventions and limitations of cable public affairs shows (the same ones marking cablecasts of city council meetings on PEG channels and speeches on C-SPAN) that constrain NDW's brand of publicness. Perhaps there is a certain irony in NDW's adoption of precisely that rational discourse that Habermas himself assumed would characterize public sphere activity. Others might argue that genuine public sphere participation entails inventing cultural- and gender-specific idioms (rather than imitating, however awkwardly, the dominant masculinist style of broadcasters). Still, NDW's calm, rational, moderate tone is its members' active choice. As Scott (1985: 285) notes, in that 'massive middle ground' between quiescence and revolt, 'resistance is a carefully balanced affair that avoids all-or-nothing confrontations'.

NDW is freed from economic and editorial brakes confronting commercial television. But technology – in the sense of figuring out how to use it in a sophisticated, dramatically persuasive way – still disciplines its style. Far greater technical resources and theatrical skills than NDW can muster are necessary to reach third-wave feminists, much less non-feminists. To the extent that NDW has goals beyond mastering technology and media literacy, to the extent that NDW wants to promote public deliberation among non-feminists on news issues from a feminist perspective, its efforts are less successful. In my view, this is not so much a matter of lack of time, commitment, imagination, or even money. Rather, technical and structural demands within public access channels themselves still present material barriers to access. To be sure, I am not calling for mimicking billboard bandits, pirate broadcasters, hackers, media hoaxers, and other 'vernacular media wrenchers' of culture-jamming (Dery, 1993; Harold, 2004), or the public access shows that provoke outcry and controversy with their rejection of conventions of decorum. These win publicity for their causes or critiques but do not and are not intended to stimulate deliberation, much less deliberative democracy. Even DeLuca and Peeples (2002: 130–1) assert (or concede) that the public screen promotes not dialogue but distraction, 'endless proliferation and scattering of emissions without the guarantee of productive exchanges'. The point is that not all new technologies – even highly decentralized ones and even computer technologies, utopian rhetoric about the emancipatory potential of the internet notwithstanding – offer seamless opportunities for effective engagement.

The final question is whether evidence of engagement with the larger public is necessary to deem these efforts to enter the public sphere successful or whether it is sufficient to say NDW members constitute a deliberating public. Practicality requires sacrificing Habermas' ideal of face-to-face public dialogue but, hypothetically, evidence of literal public interaction is relevant. Furthermore, stubborn balkanization among niche audiences applies powerful brakes on opportunities for public deliberation. Notably, few public access studies that start with public sphere theory (including this one) ask whether 'outside' audiences accept the invitation to reformulate their views. I see this as a 'medium effect', not a methodological choice. In some sense, this is not an issue for print-using social movements. Although they lack direct personal contact with their audiences, producers and readers of the feminist press have testified that they enjoyed a sense of community, enabled by small-scale or indirect contact. Dedicating maximum space to community/reader access, including readers' submissions and letters to the editor, has been a critical, feminist principle for some 150 years. In contrast, while a public access crew may think of itself as being in conversation with its audience, the producers cannot 'deliberate' with their audience, which remains abstract and highly distinct. The producers cannot assert that they have an active audience, much less one with which they form a larger deliberating community. Thus, at best, the NDW collective is its own deliberating body. Even this is constrained during the complex activity in the studio – lighting, sound, camera operation, and floor direction. Such tasks require intense concentration from amateurs no less than professionals; this prevents listening to the host–expert interaction, much less discussing it.

Yet, at least the mediated communication here constitutes interaction with and intervention in material lives. Power circulates through the social body; resistance is never reduced to a single locus of revolt (Davis and Fisher, 1993). Tensions aside, NDW has negotiated a partial way of serving these complex and even contradictory purposes. They transform news from women's domestic and personal, as well as work, worlds, and make it public news, available for discussion. Furthermore, they reject the notion of the public as merely a collection of individual consumers. They operate with a sophisticated sense of the public as a potential collectivity with real material and intellectual needs.

Fraser (1997: 82) notes that, at least in stratified societies, publics function both as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment and as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. Their emancipatory potential resides in the dialectic between these two functions. I argue that both because there is no single public sphere and because no single medium is perfect, agency in the public sphere requires many people using

many technologies. No single mechanism can fully support deliberation among publics. NDW is participating in the larger project, on behalf of public deliberation and visibility.<sup>13</sup> Like the salons, coffeehouses, and newspapers of old, such public discussions are too small-scale and diffuse to effect these purposes alone. But neither do internet sites, protest rallies, and microradio individually satisfy. To the extent that the public sphere is a processual ideal, then even *gestures* toward this require leaps of faith.

Let's concede that dialectic involves imperfections, that feminist activism inevitably involves trade-offs, and that the extent to which media technologies can be used for progressive ends lies in some unquantifiable space between boon and doom. If so, NDW is one feminist head on a hydra-headed monster clawing its way into publicness. NDW provides news through which women can exchange and develop ideas, and learn about their own lives, including how they can take action even with respect to conditions that are not of their own making. NDW provides a space in which to oppose the definitions of both the private and the public that are otherwise privileged by mainstream news. As such, it is worth the effort.

## Notes

- 1 Moreover, counter-publics need not be seen as the binary opposite of the public but one kind (of many) of a public.
- 2 Dawson (1994) mentions the role of the Black press in providing a basis for the post Civil War Black counter-public – although his account of the disintegration of the Black counter-public does not address why the Black press is no longer effective. More to the point, Fiske (1993) and others show how Black Liberation Radio, a one-watt station operating since 1986 from a Springfield, Illinois, housing project, produces Black knowledge, i.e. produces counter-knowledge, a counter-history and counter-identity and, thus, a counter-future.
- 3 Quite likely, not only were the newspapers Habermas celebrated not models of disinterested rationality but US newspapers also never provided the required opportunity for rational discourse on public matters. Schudson (1996) says citizens were never widely involved in rational-critical debate. More importantly, 'mainstream' newspapers have always cooperated with government and economic spheres, by getting and disseminating information (and outright public relations material) from government and corporate sources, accepting advertising, and exploiting subsidies in the form of postal rates and tax breaks (Cook, 1998).
- 4 Pacifica stations occasionally air feminist programs; and WINGS (Women's International News Gathering Service), for example, furnishes feminist news stories to radio stations. To be sure, pirate and short-wave radio, and grassroots television thrive in many other countries.
- 5 Jacobson (1977) passionately asserts that only local, municipally controlled cable can foster participatory democracy. Gillespie (1975) does worry that 'production

elitism' and citizen apathy may limit public access cable television as a site of decentralized citizen participation. Discounting public access programming as 'merely' one way, some video democracy prophets (see Hollander, 1985) restrict their enthusiasm to interactive experiments such as cable voting.

- 6 Ironically, Louis Hiken describes how an activist engineer once built a microradio station literally – in a matter of minutes – while talking to some media activists. Ironically, only the teenage daughter of the host, Paper Tiger director Jesse Drew, was brave enough to accept the invitation to transmit; the adults were immobilized at the prospect of trying to sound like a left-wing Walter Cronkite (in Soley, 1999: ix).
- 7 As shows directed at a broad audience, newscasts, ironically, are perhaps the exception.
- 8 Paula Kassell participates in the programming subcommittee but does not work with NDW's technical crew.
- 9 They seemed unconcerned with confidentiality and the show is public and names appear on documents. Nevertheless, no members' names are used here.
- 10 A male cable company employee said condescending things to me about 'those women'.
- 11 She apparently borrowed this from a NOW tee shirt that itself did not include the rest of Rebecca West's full quote on this (i.e. 'doormat or prostitute').
- 12 Linder also accuses profit-minded cable companies of actively trying to diminish public access. Halleck (2002: 98) agrees, adding that news media, often owned by the same conglomerates as cable companies, denigrate public access shows by sensationalizing ones that feature kinky sex and Nazis.
- 13 This 'efficacy belief' (Nelson-Kuna and Riger, 1995) works at the political/collective level rather than at the individual/psychological level. Scholars likewise, I must add, have little sense of their audience or impact, bespeaking an even more fantastic efficacy belief.

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