Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

1987

Listen in

Tuer, Dot

LISTENING IN

by DOT TUER

The Installation

From March 31 to April 4, 1987, it was possible to put your ears to the world of shortwave radio and your eyes to the world of wirepress services and interactive database systems through an installation created by Oliver Kellhammer at A Space gallery in Toronto. On April 1, 1987, I as a confirmed technophobe, entered A Space to investigate this installation. Within twenty minutes I had not only learned how to access these resources, but was hooked on the flow of information available at my fingertips. For the next two days I used the assembled technology (which was inexpensive and by no means exhaustive) to monitor the news as it happened. X-Press, a consumer service offering a selection of wireservices, was connected to a computer at A Space through Rogers Cable. Available to individuals for $25 a month, X-Press's selection included CP (Canadian), AP (American), Washington Post (American), BPA (West Germany), CNA (Taiwan), Tass (Moscow), Notimex (Mexico), XINCHA (China), KYODO (Japan), OPECNA (Oil cartel) and AFP (France). This service, combined with the shortwave radios which brought in signals from all over the world, and ECONET, an interactive and international database, seemed to offer a limitless vista of information. In using the resources, however, quite another perspective emerged.

Through the X-Press service, one can type in key words and the computer will store reports referring to, or employing, these keywords. The words I listed included Nicaragua, women's issues, Latin America, socialism, left-wing, right-wing, communism, El Salvador, feminism, revolution, terrorism, and peace. Not one story on April 2, 1987, referred to these keywords. I then proceeded to edit all news stories which pertained to business topics. In so doing I reduced the number of reports on line from 425 to 15 within 30 minutes. Shortwave radio, while monitoring signals from around the world, is dependent as an informational tool on the power of the frequencies released. Thus Voice of America and Voice of Moscow had clear reception, and a high-powered station broadcasting from Quito, Ecuador
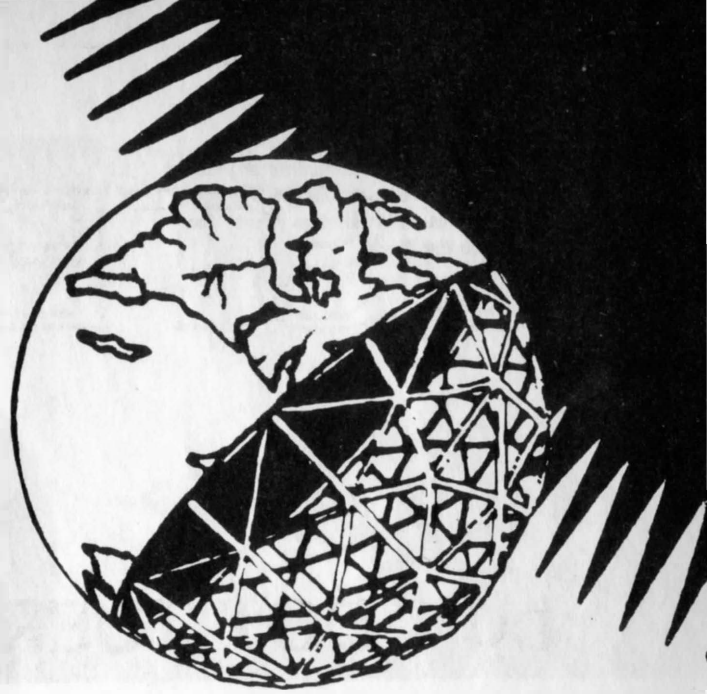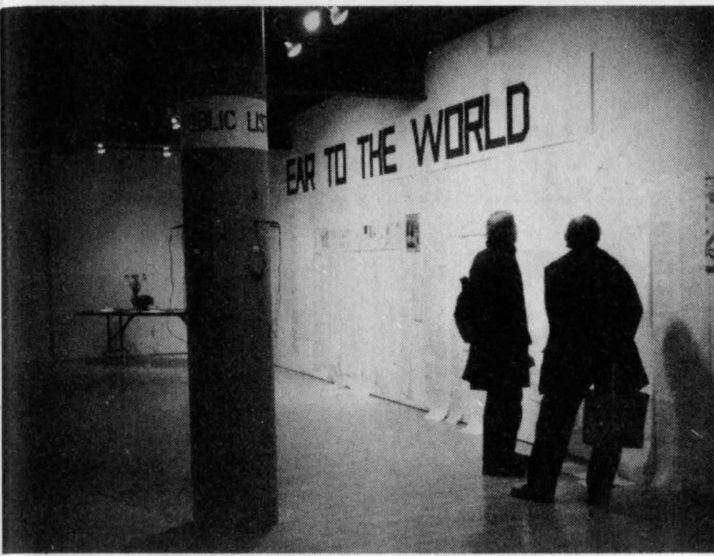
also proved to be an English-based American propaganda station. La Presna, Cuba, could only be received at night while Radio Nicaragua was permanently unavailable due to continuous jamming by the CIA. ECONET, as an interactive database where users from around the world can post stories and responses via satellite for $15 a month, has the potential to create an inexpensive and alternative media source. But although the bulletin board includes such topics as ecology, Latin America, development, and peace, information posted is limited as there are not yet members in sufficient numbers to provide extensive global coverage. Similar databases in formative stages which also exchange stories with ECONET (California) include Peacenet (American), Alternet (Ottawa), Greennet (Green Party) and GEONET (Europe).

Yet as I discovered in focusing upon one news item concerning AIDS, limited resources are better than no resources at all. In tracing the dissemination of a news story originally run by ECONET, which was subsequently picked up by the wire services through another source, and eventually appeared in a local newspaper a month later, Kellhammer's installation proved invaluable as a means to decipher the twists and turns taken by the 'free-flow' of information. For although *Ear to the World* did not provide an instantaneous and utopian solution to media decentralization, it offered the possibility of gaining a critical perspective.

An Example of Free-Flow Information

AIDS VIRUS MAN-MADE IN THE USA?
Hamburg (taz/g. id 25feb87)

On February 25, 1987, a report on AIDS from Hamburg was transported via satellite to individuals and organizations around the world using the interactive database system, ECONET. The report summarized an interview published by TAZ Berlin between Stefan Heym, a German writer and Jakob Segal, a former head of the Institute for General Biology at Humboldt University in East Berlin. According to the interview, Segal began his research after discovering a report published in English at a non-aligned conference in Harare, Zimbabwe which suggested that AIDS was an artificial rather than an organic virus. Segal traced this report back to a P- 4 high security laboratory at Fort Detrick, Maryland, which had been engaged in the manipulation of pathogenic agents (viruses) since 1977 and used longterm prisoners as test cases, granting them early releases if they survived the experimentation. Culling information from scientific and government sources, Segal arrived at a speculative and circumstantial theory on the evolution of AIDS. Segal begins by stating that the theory that AIDS was originally a harmless monkey virus (HTLV 1) transferred to human beings is "deliberate misinformation" and that there is absolutely no proof that AIDS originated in Africa, dating the first documentation of AIDS in Africa to 1983, versus 1979 in New York. According to research exchanged between the Pasteur Institute and Gallo, a scientist working out of Bethesda, Maryland, the HTLV III (AIDS) virus is genetically related to both the HTLV I virus (monkey virus) discovered by Gallo as well as a Visna virus which produces a brain illness in sheep in Iceland.

However, Segal explained, these two viruses are structurally so disparate that a hybrid could only have been produced by either an evolutionary miracle or genetic engineering. Segal thus concluded that such a hybrid was biologically engineered at Fort Detrick and tested on prisoners. Segal speculates that these prisoners demonstrated a slight infection which appeared to subside, were subsequently released, and headed for New York City where drugs and a homosexual milieu were readily available. The consequent outbreak in New York City (with the first reported case of AIDS in 1979) and the prisoners' release in 1977 coincides with the two to five year incubation period of AIDS. To back up his theory, Segal cited published U.S. congress reports which stated that experiments using radioactive material, viruses, and infectious germs had been performed on human beings and referred

Artist Oliver Kellhammer (near r.) and participants in the five-day hands-on installation event "Ear to the World."
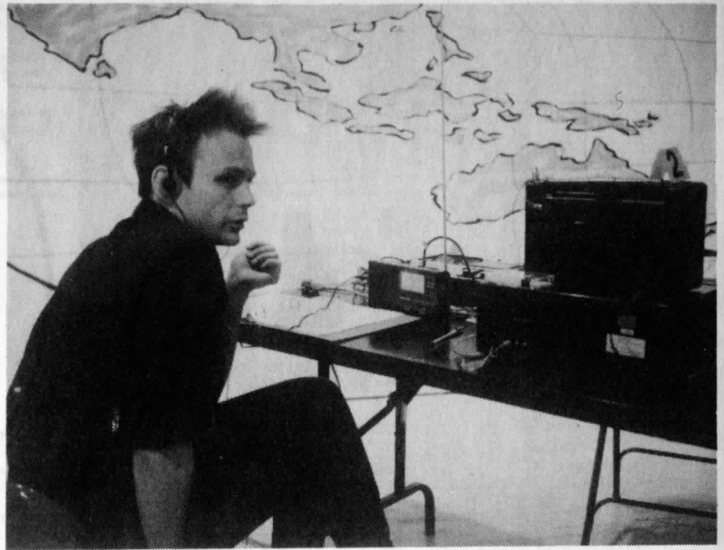
to statistics from Fort Detrick which detailed the number of test persons, lethal cases and prisoners released.

March 30, 1987
18.42 EST
SOVIET-AIDS *1st Ld*
1st lead 454 (Updates with U.S. denials, no pick-ups)
Moscow (AP)

On March 30, 1987, AP ran a news wire which reported a TASS wire story on AIDS. TASS stated that an article published in a Soviet military journal claimed that the virus causing AIDS was artificially produced in a U.S. army laboratory and leaked accidentally to the populace. The article, written by Peter Nikolayev, did not identify the scientists but located the source of the virus to Fort Detrick which was once the army's centre for the development of biological weapons. AP reported that such allegations began appearing more than a year ago, and that the Pentagon and State Department has denied them, saying that Fort Detrick never experimented with AIDS. AP ends the article by stating that Soviet scientist Viktor Zhdanov has said that 32 AIDS cases have been registered in the Soviet Union, all but two involving foreigners.

SOVIETS ACCUSED OF AIDS 'MISCHIEF'
*The Toronto Star, Tuesday April 28, 1987.*
Washington (Reuter)

In this report, appearing almost a month after the original AP wire, Reuter states that American experts, who are not identified in the article, claim that Moscow is waging an effective 'black propaganda' campaign against the United States. According to Reuter, the origin of AIDS is a mystery, but in recent months new publications around the world have lent credence to the allegation that AIDS was a

gene-splicing experiment performed at Fort Detrick which went 'badly awry.' Herbert Romerstein, a U.S. Information Agency specialist on Soviet 'disinformation' claims that this campaign, concocted by the KGB, has been very successful, with the March 30 TASS report published in newspapers in Japan, Jordan, Morocco, Ghana, Finland and the United States. Reuter reports that Fort Detrick is the site of government 'medical' research including AIDS but experts say there is no evidence that the virus was created in any laboratory. Reuter quotes a Soviet AIDS specialist, Victor Zhadnov, as discounting the theory, and states that some scientists have theorized that AIDS originated in an African monkey.

But, states Reuter, the "made in the U.S." story will not die. A State Department report on Kremlin disinformation states that the charge first emerged in the Soviet Literary Gazette in 1985 but had little impact until it was repeated in a study purported to have been done by French scientists and distributed to delegates at a nonaligned summit in Zimbabwe last September. The State Department states that the report's authors, Jacob Segal, his wife Lilli, and Ronald Dehmlow, are not French scientists but East German propagandists. The State Department further claimed that the allegation did not catch hold until it was published in Britain's *Sunday Express*, a conservative newspaper, although it already had been reported in Third and Second World newspapers. U.S. officials state that Moscow's objectives in this blame-America disinformation campaign include:
1. Discrediting Washington in Third World nations where anti-American feelings run high.
2. Discouraging contact between U.S. and Soviet citizens.
3. To increase pressure of NATO allies to remove U.S. military bases due to a fear of AIDS outbreaks originating from U.S. servicemen at these bases.

The three stories listed above, with the first report emerging from an alternative databank network, point to the magnitude with which media now engages in an active practice of disinformation, and the imperative which we as consumers face to establish a diversity of informational sources
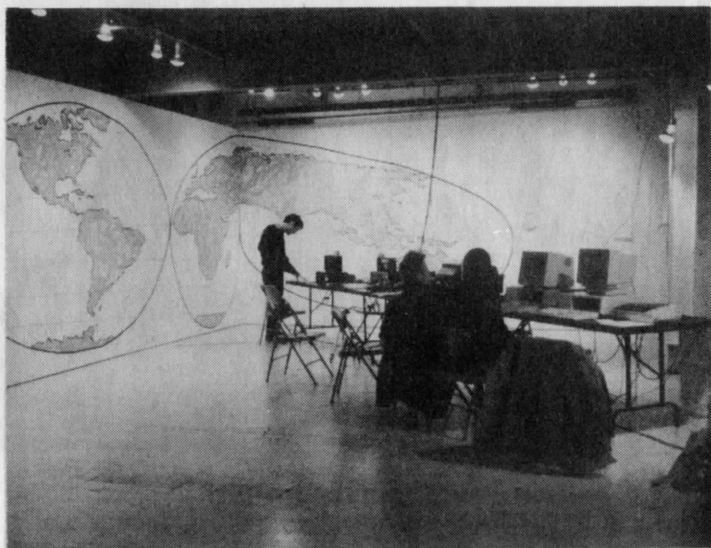
if we are to discover what distortions, convolutions, and inaccuracies plague our reception of 'news.' It is not that diversity will guarantee us accuracy or 'truth,' but it will allow us to achieve a perspective from which to ascertain the context in which disinformation is disseminated on a global scale. In reading through the three AIDS stories, none are exempt from generalizations and unidentified sources. But their juxtaposition does allow us to discern what news is deliberate misinformation. The mysterious report tabled at Harare, Zimbabwe is never properly identified. It could either be a classified document leaked from the CIA or indeed a concoction of the KGB. But in gaining access to the Segal interview in TAZ, the degree to which the U.S. State Department is capable of twisting information to identify the original report with Segal when he himself states in interviews that it was a lead which he followed up, is mind-boggling. 'Black' propaganda is clearly not a Soviet invention, but a conscious strategy which both powers are actively engaged in.

Community Access

Oliver Kellhammer's *Ear to the World* installation does not propose a solution to the growing complexity of media issues. But in bringing together informational technology which can be easily accessed by a layperson, and organizing a workshop, a panel, and a lecture on global communication issues, he offers a community the possibility to exercise options within this fantastical morass. By providing access to the wire service, *Ear to the World* allows one to examine the relationship between 'information' as it is reported and the context in which it is reprinted by local newspapers. Access to shortwave radio increases the diversity of information available, circumscribing the very narrow confines of wireservices which are little better than the extensions of state ideologies. Access to interactive databases gives the individual and the local community the potential to confirm or deny mainstream media reports, obtain alternative in-

formation from countries not covered by mainstream media, and *exchange* ideas. And while most of the discussion generated by the panel and lecture during *Ear to the World* emphasized the degree to which doublethink, duplicity, and the economic imperatives of capitalism control our access to global information, little was made of the potential for community organization of resources which the actual installation by Kellhammer demonstrated.

Herbert Schiller, as the academic star of the event, was particularly pessimistic. After all, as he pointed out, video was once heralded as a revolutionary tool of the masses and look where television is now. But if one slides out of his superstructural thinking and back into the concerns and possibilities of a local community, the global picture is not so grim. For as Schiller has pointed out in his writings, before the United States began to control the flow of information in the Western sphere through a commercial empire disguised as the ideology of freedom, Britain and France controlled communication through a vast colonial empire. Yet there have always been alternative sources of ideas and information. Travellers, pamphlets, discussions, letters, and independent reports by journalists all contribute to the dissemination of information which is not framed by the vast resources of economic and political powers. Likewise, Nick Fillmore's analysis during the panel discussion of American correspondents in the Vietnam war operating as extensions of the State Department, and his analysis of the American slant in Canadian newspapers during the Nicaragua elections does not eliminate alternative points of view and grassroots opposition. This is not to underestimate, however, the effectiveness of mainstream media in disseminating official ideologies and positions. But in order to conceptualize the possibility of a community-based flow of information we have to recognize that we do not live in a totalitarian vision no matter how slight or how localized the alternative communication systems are.

The discussions surrounding Oliver Kellhammer's installation pointed to the degree to which a perception of mass media as a monolith chimera creates an atmosphere of

passive resignation and armchair critiques. For if one is looking for the grand revolution conceived in dialectical economic terms, then the degree to which capitalism and disinformation affects mass media reporting will invariably overwhelm and discourage. But if one believes in the possibility of community action, then Kellhammer's demonstration of alternative database systems, wireservice networks and shortwave radio signals provides an inexpensive base from which to build an alternative information system. The title of Herbert Schiller's lecture was "The World Information Order," a political demand being made by non-aligned and emerging nations of the world to redress the 'free-flow' of American information. Emerging nations are demanding regulation of communication and satellite transmissions so that their airwaves are not filled with American TV and their monitors with American wireservices. Needless to say, as Susan Crean points out in an article on the "New World Information Order" in *This Magazine*, May 1982, it has not received much coverage in the great 'free' press network of North America. But in the same way that the emerging nations are organizing as a group to politically oppose American hegemony, so local communities, in a different context but with similar concerns, must begin to organize the right to self-determined access to information. ECONET and similar interactive databases only function through the cooperation and enthusiasm of those who post information on a bulletin board. No one creates the news in this context for you. You create it yourself through interac-

tion. And for a few thousand dollars, Toronto could establish a listening post which would link a local community here to other local communities around the world. This, of course, could not redress the immense power of the mainstream media nor guarantee the election of the NDP, but it could create a very modest, interactive, activist, vision of an alternative communication system.

Dot Tuer is a writer living in Toronto.
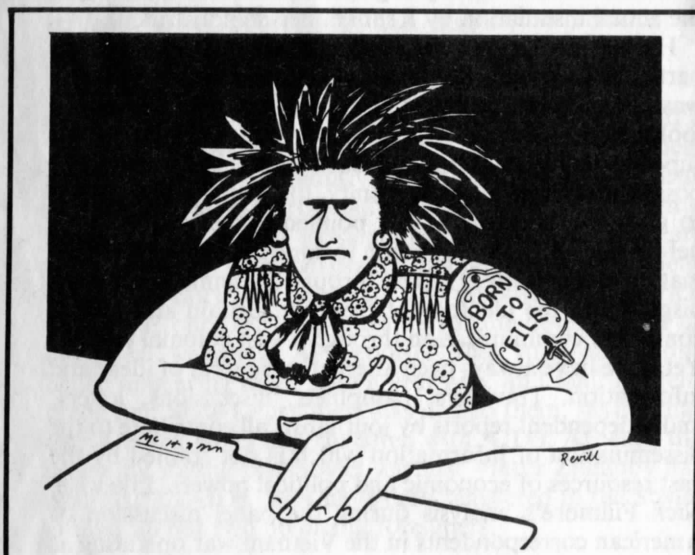
Room of One's Own, a quarterly journal devoted to creative and critical writings by women, invites submissions for a special issue: "Working for a Living," to be published Summer 1988. Poetry, short fiction, graphics and reviews (query first for reviews) should be sent with SASE to "Working for a Living," *Room of One's Own*, P.O. Box 46160, Station G, Vancouver, B.C. V6R 4G5. Deadline: 30 November 1987.

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MONDAY TO FRIDAY
NEWSWAVE
11 am - 12 pm
Toronto's only alternative, electronic, community and current affairs news show. Features include; Eco-Media, Shortwave excerpts, O.P.I.R.G. Radio, European Profile from Radio Netherlands, The City Hall report from Ald. Jack Layton, Labour Reports, The Pink Antenna, David Roch — Almost Live, Sky Gilbert's Theatre Beat, Commputer Watch, plus many more community interest columns

SATURDAY
FILE 88
10 am - 11.30 am
CKLN's international news magazine with reports and documentaries from The Development Education Centre on College Street, the Canadian Alliance in Solidarity with Native People (CASNP) and community groups active in world affairs. Other features include specials from Community Radio stations around the world including El Salvador, Chile, Cuba and European stations.
CRITICAL CULTURE
11:30 pm - noon
Host: Ann Gibson
Insight from those who create, effect, challenge or change culture in all its forms. Interviews, documentaries and critical reviews of our culture.

SUNDAY
TITLEWAVES
7:30 pm - 8 pm
Hosts: Gordon Platt, John Ball
Produced by the Canadian Book Information Centre, the show is an up to date look at Toronto's literary scene. Titlewaves reviews new publications, interviews authors and announces local literary events.