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All in the family: An examination of community access cable television in Canada

Tuer, Dot

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Global & local perspectives on how **you** fit into the corporate multimedia network.

Cyborgs in Denial

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Cover Image Christopher Eamon & Kika Thorne
Photo (cover and above): David Rasmus

DOT TUER

It doesn't make me feel alone, it makes me feel comfortable. It makes me feel safe because I don't like to hear 'nothing.' I think just growing up in a house when I was little we always had the television on. It was never quiet in our house, and that's what I bring to where I live now. I bring that same sort of feeling. I get that instant family feeling when I turn on the TV.
— Lin, interview subject's text from Jim Miller's installation work, *Compulsive Viewing*.[1]

All in the Family

An Examination of Community Access Cable in Canada

A CORNERSTONE OF THE GLOBAL LANDSCAPE, a centrepiece of the family dwelling, television is undertheorized and overvalued, denied and embraced. To talk about television is commonplace, ordinary, so much a part of our lives as to resist commentary. Television offers grand narratives as truncated images: war and glamour, politics and love are reduced to the video clips of Operation Desert Storm, the intrigues of "Dallas," the lurid spectacle of a courtroom castration trial. Television, as artist Jim Miller discovered when he decided to investigate its communicative structure as one of viewing addiction, also induces the most personal of stories; evokes confessions of childhood memories and buried phobias. At once the purveyor of universalizing referents and the provocation for intimate projections, television as an infrastructure for information dissemination deeply entangles the viewer in the paradoxical relation of the very local and the vastly global.

It is this sense of entanglement, of entrapment, of the collapsing of memory with image, a collusion of sensation and transmission, that intrudes in any attempt to rationalize the omnipotence of the box as a transparent relation of power to ideology. In researching the history of community access channels in Canada, for example, my thinking about issues of citizen involvement and media self-determination was sideswiped without warning by particularized memories of the familial and TV. I have a crystalline memory of television punctuating family rhythms, fostering family feuds, with squabbling siblings gathered around the picture tube to watch Friday night's "Get Smart," Sunday night's "Walt Disney Hour." I can remember social despair when the prohibition of Batman from my viewing repertoire meant ostracism in the school yard. I can remember anti-social delight in faked high-school sickness which led to a steady afternoon diet of dreary B movies and turgid soaps. With the number of channels increasing in proportion to my teenage years, late-night baby-blue flicks, the staid upscale theatre of PBS, more reruns of Star Trek fed my already glutted television appetite. I have to admit, however, that televi-
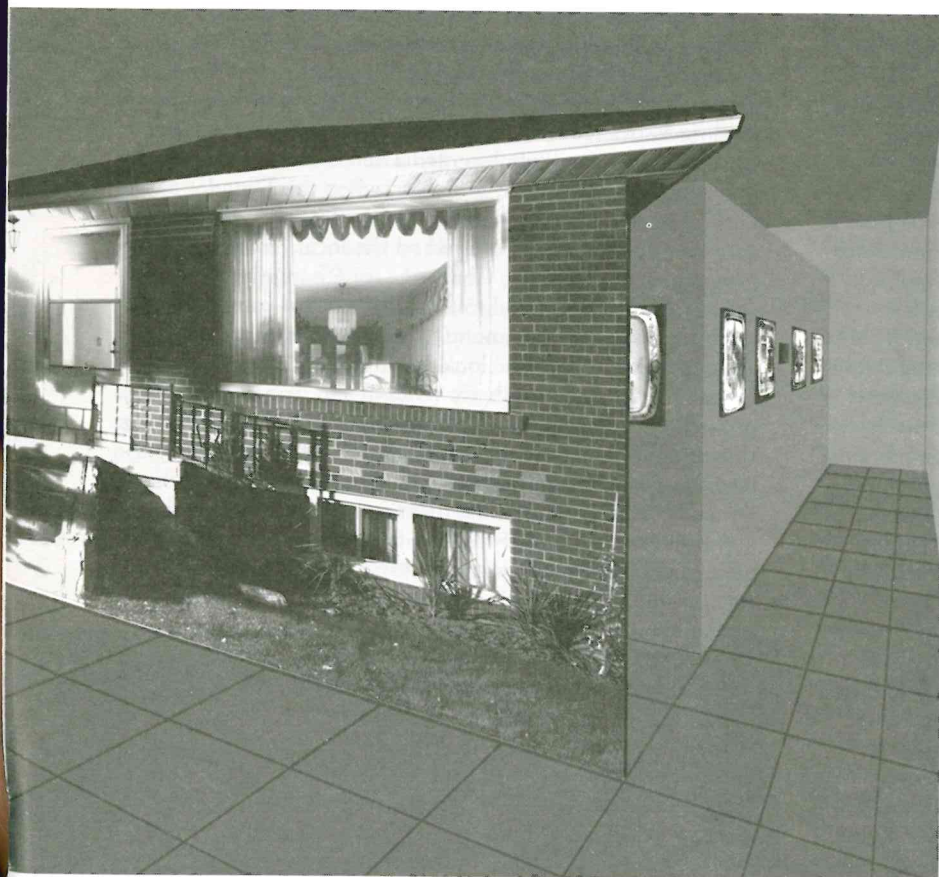
Installation Drawing #1 (for Compulsive Viewing), showing house facade mural in foreground, Jim Miller, 1992.

Reservoir

Tee

Meter   Service Drop

Filtering
and
Treatment

Well

Distribution
Mains

Antennas

Drop Line

Signal
Processing
and
Combining

Multi-tap

Earth Station

Feeder Cable

Pumping
Station

Trunk Mains

Water System

Local Programming Facilities

Headend   Trunk Cable   Trunk Amplifier

Cable System
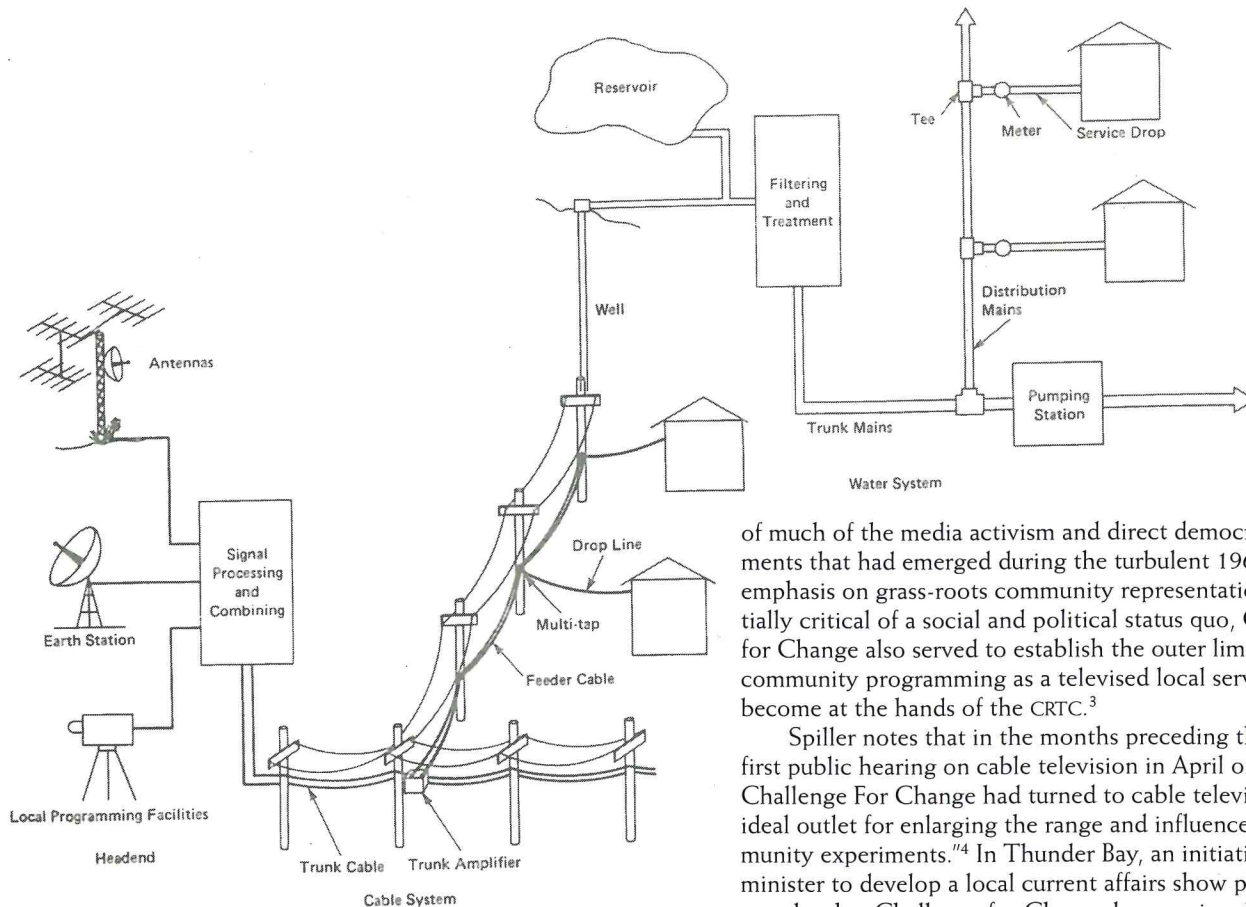
sion has produced in my own mind not a single memory of a single image from the cable community access channel.

In 1968, when the CRTC (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission) took over the regulation of cable television, I would have been ten years old. While CATV (cable television) originated in local business initiatives of the 1950s to wire individual subscribers to a central head end of powerful antennas that could pick up distant television channels, its present and future after 1968 rested within a negotiated settlement between private programming interests and government policy makers. As Frank Spiller points out in his assessment of community programming's history in Canada, the first public announcement of the CRTC regarding cable made it clear that the state's intention was to promote the regulation of cable service as a vehicle of local access production and programming as well as a monopoly right over signal distribution services to viewers in a defined geographical area. Cable television, the Commission pronounced, "can assist in the development of community identity through locally produced programmes," and facilitate "the enrichment of the community's cultural life through the distribution of Canadian-produced films, educational information, and other films of particular interest produced for public showing but not normally available in that area."[2]

A vague echo of the NFB's wartime travelling projectionists project to bring Canadian-made films to rural communities, this governmental interest in promoting community programming also coincided with the NFB's Challenge for Change efforts to link media access to participatory politics. An officially sanctioned programme intended to offer citizen groups and the disenfranchised the means of media representation, Challenge For Change became a short lived synthesis of much of the media activism and direct democracy movements that had emerged during the turbulent 1960s. With its emphasis on grass-roots community representation as potentially critical of a social and political status quo, Challenge for Change also served to establish the outer limits of what community programming as a televised local service would become at the hands of the CRTC.[3]

Spiller notes that in the months preceding the CRTC's first public hearing on cable television in April of 1971, Challenge For Change had turned to cable television as "an ideal outlet for enlarging the range and influence of its community experiments."[4] In Thunder Bay, an initiative by a local minister to develop a local current affairs show proved so popular that Challenge for Change became involved in the expansion of the programme by providing it with ongoing funding assistance and the training for portable VTR crews. This idealistic experiment in media democracy quickly came to a confrontational head, however, when the Thunder Bay City Council decided it did not like the feedback about its activities that was being offered on the local "Town Talk" programme. In response, Challenge for Change and Ottawa called for the city council to establish a board composed of a cross-section of the community that could "regulate" balanced programming. The local cable station claimed that it was ultimately responsible for content and demanded that all programming be pre-recorded and submitted for pre-viewing three weeks before scheduled broadcast. Straitjacketed by a myriad of controls and demands, the "Town Talk" crew abandoned its exercise in direct citizen control of the media.[5]

Spiller does not directly link the Thunder Bay experience of community access with CRTC policies regarding the relationship of the cable company to control of local programming, but an inference can be drawn between the Challenge For Change experiments and what would prove acceptable in subsequent state proscriptions on community cable access. On July 16, 1971, a Policy Statement on Cable Television issued by the CRTC emphasized the importance of representing a diversity of community interests through the local access channel, including both formal citizen groups and individuals. Local programming was deemed most effective when facilities and production values were simple and inexpensive. Direct citizen participation was to be seen to reflect fair and balanced access for all groups within a community, with conflicts over fair use to be referred to the CRTC for arbitration. Responsibility for content on the community channel and copyright of local cable production, then, as

VIDEO HUSTLER   PRO-GOLF   DRIBBLING
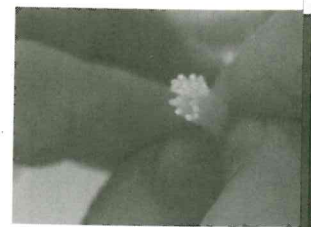
now, lay with the cable licensee.[6]

Since the CRTC looked favourably on cable licensee applicants who expressed a commitment to community programming, cable companies responded to this covert directive by building studios, hiring staff, and sponsoring training programmes. Community access by fiat, however, proved less easily realized in practice. A volunteer structure in a highly capitalized, labour and time-intensive industry clearly had its built-in anachronisms. Many individuals and groups burned out quickly. Groups with specific agendas that had little to do with community input overtook local facilities. With the exception of Quebec, where community groups could be granted a licence for the local access station and thus exercise direct citizen control over programming, cable companies use of community advisory groups and community input to shape programming proved sporadic and ineffective.[7]

In Vancouver, for example, Metro Media, which was founded in 1971 by artists such as Michael Goldberg, produced hundreds of hours of community programming through the local cable company—only to experience mounting frustrations over the cable company's censorship of sexually explicit educational material, the lack of copyright protection, and the lack of payment for technical expertise. In an attempt to circumvent the restrictions of private cable monopoly, an unsuccessful battle was fought in the early 1970s by Metro Media and Video In to secure support from the CRTC for an independent broadcast station. In 1975 a second bid for air time made by sixty community groups in the Vancouver area also ended in failure.[8] Community access, it appeared, was not conceived by the CRTC as a parallel communication structure to private and public broadcast channels, but rather as an addendum to a mainframe system that would function as a very local and containable pocket of participatory expression and citizen input.

In the same year that this bid by Vancouver community groups to enter into the television arena as a broadcaster

failed, the CRTC formally restated the principles of citizen access; requiring each cable system to provide a community channel with production facilities, while narrowing considerably the range of what would constitute community programming. Perhaps most significantly, an emphasis on the local origin of production prohibited the "bicycling" of programmes from one local community channel to another. While on the one hand this could be seen to actively promote local participation, on the other hand it impeded cross-country grass roots communication. It also blockaded the potential to develop a distribution system for alternative media and video art across Canada through cable television. A list of criteria compiled by the CRTC as an assessment guide for cable licensees' management of the community channels also affected the shape of future programming. For example, the CRTC stressed the importance of the number of groups involved, and the diversity of community perspectives represented, as indicators of successful community access. Programming that would serve a mass or general audience rather than specific interest groups was discouraged. Programming that was a clearly distinguishable alternative to broadcast television was encouraged.[9]

Ironically, although these guidelines were compiled by the CRTC, they were never followed up with a formal evaluation mechanism. Like the recommendation forwarded by the CRTC that cable licensees spend a "reasonable percentage" of their gross subscriber revenues on community access, CRTC policy principles concerning community access programming were voluntary rather than enforced directives.[10] In the negotiations over cable distribution between state and private interests, a pattern emerged that suggested that the two parties had settled into a cozy familial relation. Community broadcast access had become an administered paternalism. Cable companies, like good children, were awarded signal distribution monopolies in return for civic displays of goodwill towards community programming. The catch in this genteel relation is, of course, that children have a tendency to outgrow paternal authority. But now I am getting ahead of my story.

In a textbook on cable communication published in the early 1980s, the authors explain the basic functions of a cable system through comparison with a municipal water system: with the reservoir as a parallel to antennas and satellites, the local well mirroring local programming facilities, the filtering and treatment plant offering a similar function to signal processing, and trunk mains and trunk cables maintaining a steady flow of water and images to the North American home.[11] Such an analogy has its inverse reflection in the analysis of television viewing habits of Torontonians published by *The Financial Post* in 1963. According to *The Financial Post*, fluctuations in water pressure registered by a Toronto pumping station bore a direct correlation to the interruption
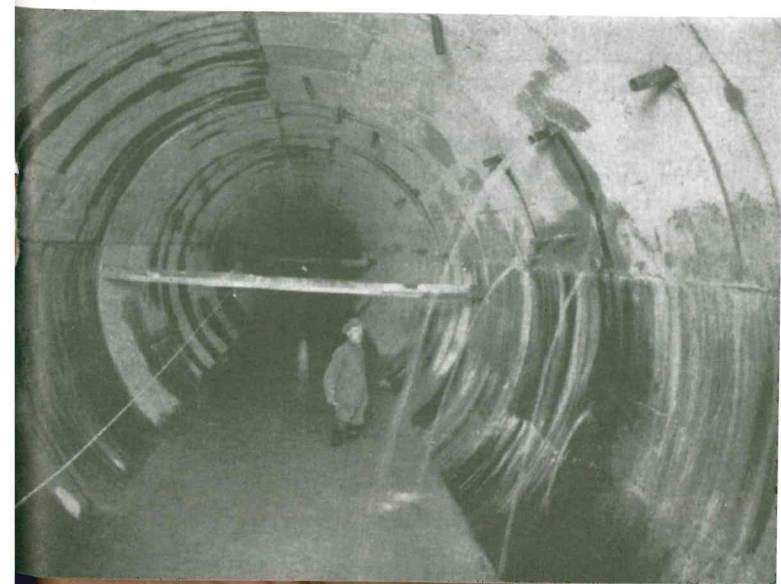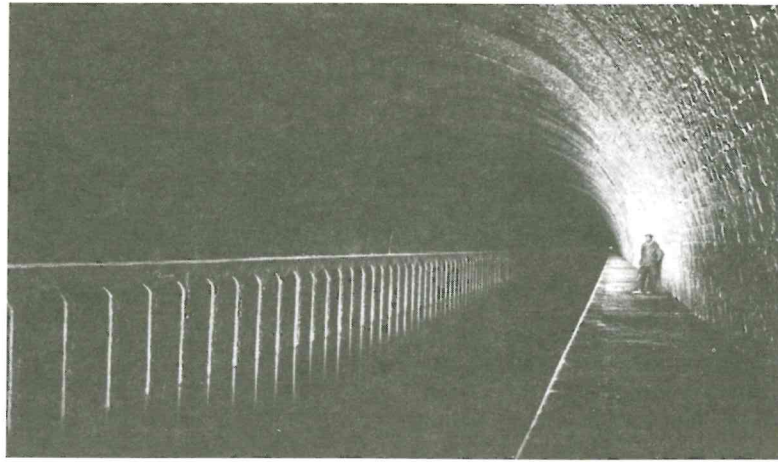
or end of a television programme. Producing a line graph charting the "toilet flow" of the city, *The Financial Post* noted that valleys and peaks were accentuated during prime-time hours. What such an analysis revealed, of course, was not only the degree to which television regulated the scatological habits of Torontonians, but also the degree to which television as a viewing structure had permeated the fabric and shape of the family life.[12]

Paul Rutherford, in his history of television's early years in Canada, *When Television Was Young: Prime-Time Canada 1952–1967*, notes the rapidity with which the television became a fixture in the home, and the degree to which the effect of television on the family had become somewhat of a national obsession. From its inception, television induced an ambivalent reaction to its simultaneous presence as a miracle medium of fascination and an avenger destroyer of civilization. Speculative furor over television as an object of technological worship and revulsion found its focus in both media and civic circles over the effect of its gamma rays on the family unit and social values. Nancy Cleaver of *Saturday Night* declared television to be a "home breaker." Briefs to the 1957 Fowler Royal Commission on Broadcasting were more optimistic. The YMCA believed that television offered families "a window on the world." English and Quebecois women's groups, steeped in legacies of moral reform movements, saw television as an opportunity to promote wholesome and positive images of domestic life. Members of the Fowler Commission viewed television as a unifying source for the rejuvenation of family, serving as "a headquarters, a gathering place," enhancing family encounters in the home and strengthening the moral fabric of the nation.[13]

From the perspective of subsequent CRTC discussions over community access television, what is striking about this focus on the family was not only the reification of the home as the source of moral order, but the way in which television was contextualized as a fixture not of community, nor of the individual, but of the family unit. The connection of television to the nuclear family was everywhere one turned. It was on the screen, in media analyses. Its paternalistic structure of "father knows best" shadowed CRTC/Cable Company negotiations. It was the sinew that held together the living room and the nation. It was a central stage prop, a prime-time concern, an idealized "Leave It To Beaver" symbol that merged a televised technicolour never-never-land with dominant social mores. The relationship of community to television, on the other hand, was a sideshow: a government mandated afterthought important enough to be foisted onto the private sector as a civic duty, but not important enough to be embraced by the public broadcast network.

The results of the banishment of community issues to

Below: still from SHE/tv promotion tape, the SHE/tv Collective, video, 1993.
Far below: still from *Gulf War Fantasies*, Mark Surman, video, 1991.
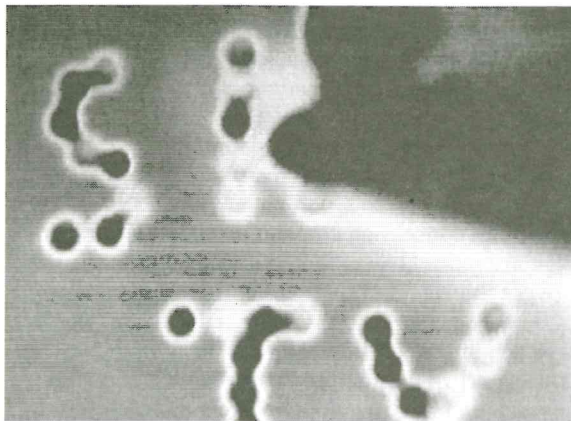
the sidelines of prime-time were played out in the arenas of reception and representation. At the more practical end of the image-chain, the CRTC marginalized the community channel at its very conceptualization through the insistence that it serve particularized interest groups rather than a general audience and that it be tied to low-end production. While the Fowler Commission called for television to "perform unifying and cohesive functions in our society,"[14] and Toronto viewers flushed their toilets in unison, the community channel was expected to engage audiences through a fragmentary and narrowcast pattern of programming. When combined with the CRTC's definition of the community channel's particularized interest groups as those "which, because of ethnic affinities or virtue of economic circumstances, tend to occupy a particular part of the community,"[15] the implications seems clear enough. Private and public broadcast channels would serve the interests of the whole: the family, the nation, what has come to be known as CBC culture. The community access channel would serve what was left over, picking up the pieces of race and class that government policy designated as part of community rather than as part of mainstream culture.[16]

While positioning community access as a function of exclusionary rather than inclusionary forces can arguably be seen as a cynical rereading of an idealistic experiment, the cumulative effects of private sector monopoly over the access channel are telling. Charged with the civic responsibility of representing diverse cultural interests, yet ultimately in the business of making money not social change, cable companies steered clear of controversial or politically charged materials that might actually address the relationship of "ethnic affinities and economic circumstances" to mainstream television culture. Live telecasts of multicultural folklore, local sports events, and school board meetings more often than not became the cable company's formal commitment to alternative programming. Due to the built-up experiences of volunteer burnout, in many cases the response of the cable company was to function more like a local broadcaster than an access channel: with the hired staff of the cable company rather than "communities" producing much of the programming materials.

Artists who from time to time chose to work through the cable access system encountered the same obstacles that had frustrated Metro Media's ambitious embrace of cable access. Artists' commitments to community based production, alternative media image structures, and the exploration of issues of race, class, and cultural diversity, were just as often stultified as facilitated by the cable access structure. Lack of artistic control and financial support meant that realizing these goals on the community channel over an extended period of time was for all practical purposes impossible. The result was a chequered pattern of artists' interventions. In some cases, such as "The Gina Show," John Anderson's highly anarchic and wacky cultural magazine-format programme produced by Vancouver's Pumps Gallery in 1979, or Eldon Garnet's OCA student show "Three Hundred Dollars," produced in the mid-1980s, programming ceased when the individual artist could no longer contribute the necessary volunteer energy and resources. In other instances, such as

the recent "Living With AIDS" project organized by Michael Balser, for which Health and Welfare Canada provided production funds for video artists to make work about HIV and AIDS, the project was subsequently yanked from the air by Rogers Cable in response to the screening of Gita Saxena and Ian Rashid's *Bolo Bolo*, a piece which contained images of two men kissing.

Obstacles notwithstanding, the community access channel continues to attract media and community activists seeking an alternative voice to prime-time broadcasting. More often than not, however, the degree of access is directly related to the attitudes and practices of the specific cable company and the professional staff running the community channel. At Rogers Cable 10 in Toronto, for example, community production studios are technically sophisticated but difficult to access. Programming is highly corporate in both structure and style. It is tightly controlled by the staff members, and rarely addresses the actual communities in its broadcast catch-area, which includes the gay activist downtown core, and large housing developments such as Regent Park. Typical fare concentrates on live coverage of events such as the Canadian Club Speakers Series, the Cancer Society Fashion Show, Festival of Festivals Trade Forum, high school intramural sports, and City Council meetings. The "Lemon-Aid" phone-in show on cars, and a new-age psychic reading tarot cards for an audience, augment live coverage with in-studo production.

By way of contrast, Maclean Hunter's Cable 10 community channel is known in cablevision circles as the radical fringe of access television. Serving the Parkdale/Trinity area, Maclean-Hunter's cable access enjoys a degree of community involvement that functions in inverse proportion to the production facilities and equipment it houses and in direct proportion to the commitment and enthusiasm of volunteers and production staff. The large number of artist-run spaces and artists located in the area is reflected in the shape of its programming. YYZ, an artist-run centre, broadcasts in-house video art programming on cable, and independent artists contribute their work to be screened on the channel. However, at both the production and distribution levels, most independent video and film artists refuse to work with the cable access structure, citing lack of copyright control and financial remuneration as major concerns. Rather, it is in the area of community activism that the most consistent commitment to access television has occurred. In turn, this commitment is nurtured and reinforced at Parkdale/Trinity through the roles that programme manager Manny Floriano and production facilitator Mark Surman have played in promoting broadcast access for a diverse number of community voices.

Surman, an environmental and media activist, has sought to facilitate community involvement in cable access by encouraging groups to form independent production collectives with a standing agreement to produce a given number of hours for the community channel. Through this collectivization of cable volunteers, there can be a continuity of programming interests without burning out any one individ-

Top: still from *Breasts, Boobs and Bazoombas*, Karen Poce, video, 1993.
Below: stills from SHE/tv promotion tape, the SHE/tv Collective, video 1993.
Far below: still from opening sequence to the Maclean Hunter Cable 10 (Parkdale/Trinity) series "Nocturnal Transmissions," Michael Hardy, 1992.
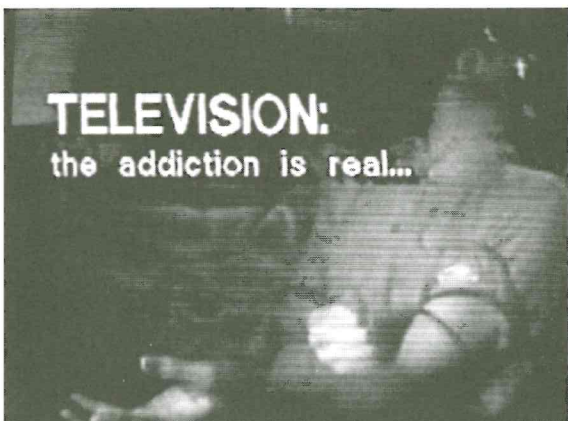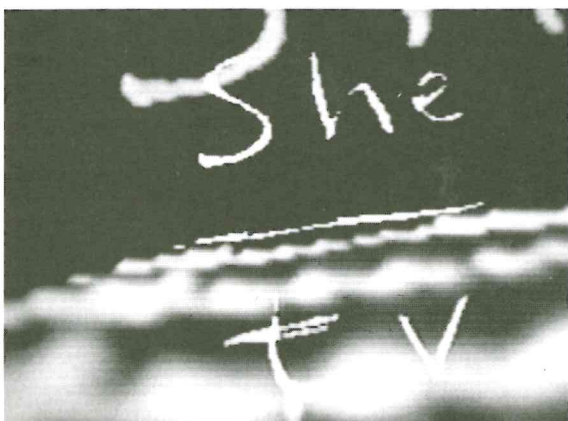
ual or community group. Moreover, not all members of the group need to have achieved the same technical skills at the same time. Taking turns planning and producing programming encourages the exchange of ideas and of strategies. A decentralizing approach to production also decentralizes decision-making around programming, shifting the impetus for programming ideas from the station manager to independent collectives.

Under this umbrella access structure, programming and production collectives such as This Island Earth, Undercurrents and SHE/tv have emerged to give Parkdale/Trinity a distinctive and distinctively alternative broadcast flavour. This Island Earth, a coalition of environmentalist concerns, has covered topics ranging from the anti-car movement to the inner workings of a local food co-operative, and accommodated individual interventions such as Mark Surman's critique of the Gulf War aired ten days after the war began. Similarly, Undercurrents, a loose information collective committed to alternative media perspectives, covers everything from anti-racist and Clayoquot demonstrations to issues of Free Trade, animal rights and First Nations sovereignty. SHE/tv was founded in 1991 as a "forum to encourage expression by women" offering "supportive atmosphere, access to broadcast, and hands on training."[17] Encompassing a diversity of women's perspectives, SHE/tv has produced a number of programmes, including Jennifer Chang Alloy's documentary examination of women and traditional Chinese medicine; Karen Poce's homage to female anatomy *Breasts, Boobs, and Bazoombas*; and an experimental work by Kika Thorne, *Complications, Part One*, that seeks to engage a television access space as an integral part of a media practice, and as a formal framework for images.

In addition, shows such as "Full Effect," an arts coverage programme, "Motions in Poetry," Bart Cross's interviews and readings by local poets, and "Nocturnal Transmissions," Michael Hardy's entertaining satire on television addiction, spice up a weekly schedule that also accommodates the typical cable fare of local council reports, religious services, community news and local sports events. Through its mix of programming and the commitment of its staff and volunteers, Maclean Hunter's community channel in Toronto stands as an example of how community access television can work to democratize television, extend media literacy and expand the formal language of the medium. It must also be pointed out that in the larger context of the regulated cable industry, it stands as an anomaly. As Kim Goldberg writes in her book on community television, "a fundamental problem has always dogged community access television. It is a democratic concept without a democratic structure."[18] And it is this contradiction, she suggests, of "a collectivist, pluralist, egalitarian concept embedded in a hierarchical, privately controlled, corporate structure,"[19] that makes a channel like Parkdale/Trinity the exception rather than the rule.

During a one-day seminar/workshop on cable community access recently sponsored by York University's Advanced Research Seminar in Democratic Participation, Mark Surman echoed Goldberg's critique in his assessment of the issues facing access television.[20] Linking media access to issues of media literacy, he also noted that barriers to community par-

ticipation lie beyond the administrative stranglehold of a corporate cablevision over broadcast access. At stake in Canada, Surman pointed out, is not only access to television production and distribution, but access to a critique of mass-media images. Unlike the United States of America, where a fair-use law permits commercial television to be footnoted for the purposes of educational or artistic critique, in Canada it is technically illegal to use any clip taken from commercial or public television for any purpose without prior copyright permission. Correspondingly, cable companies who are legally responsible for content keep a strict eye out for possible infringements of copyright and/or libel. The result is a stranglehold by corporations over both the mechanisms of reception and of representation.

And it is at this more ephemeral end of the image-chain, where representation and the symbolic economy of cultural exchange meet, that the future directions of the cable industry threaten to erode the fragile and already contradictory space that community access television creates for alternative media expression. Having come of age in a New World Order of transnational capital and the restructuring of resources, cable companies are demanding circulation for their image machines that is "free" of state regulation. Governments, anxiously patrolling the porous borders of information, are acquiescent in their dealings with an industry that has grown from locally based signal distributors into some of the largest corporate infrastructures in Canada. Instead of asserting a regulatory authority over this proliferating communication sector, the CRTC recently endorsed the cable industry's attempt to move towards self-regulation (read deregulation) through its voluntary establishment of operational guidelines and national standards for community access. Thus, it is now within the jurisdiction of the cable television operator to decide how community access production resources should be allocated, and to determine what programming is deemed most appropriate for the communities it serves. The cozy familial relationship between government and business continues to flourish, except that it is now business that dictates the terms.[21]

Meanwhile, back at the family home, the Toronto viewer is no longer experiencing television as a unifying narrative of family and nation, no longer flushing that toilet in harmony with his or her neighbour. Surfing across an information net that has grown to include specialized entertainment and news channels, pay-as-you-go television, home-shopping networks, phone-sex, on-line database services and much, much more, the contemporary television viewer is atomized, fragmented, alone but still a mass. Turning on the television to embrace a global "community" of images, to feel that intimate hug of fantasy, it is no longer a family feeling but a technologized self that is reflected back. In 1994, as the "Brady Bunch" recirculates in a live theatrical setting as camp, the trope of the family is replaced on television by a more engrossing promise of a fantastical real. Rape and castration trials, endless talk-show confessionals, recreated at the scene of the crime vignettes, polls, and electronic town halls sever the body from its lived presence while simultaneously offering a salve for its ideological dismemberment. An opaque screen that veils reality as image, and unveils identity as sub-

ject to the paradoxes of a vastly global and highly local infrastructure of communication, television's evolution as a means of representation is eroding the meaning of media intervention and alternative grass-roots participation.

In this context, community television itself becomes a pastiche. A recent work by video artist Steve Reinke, *Squeezing Sorrow from an Ashtray* (1992), identifies its production source as community cable television in 1979 because, according to Reinke, it had that community access "look."[22] At the other end of the image spectrum, public service announcements on Parkdale/Trinity sponsored by media environmentalists urge viewers to say NO to television and turn off their sets altogether. What seems to be at issue here, then, is not only access to the means of production, but access to representational narratives and to distribution structures that can actually change how people view television in relation to themselves. Camcorders and computer bulletin boards, the cable industry's affirmation of its "commitment" to community television access and the promise of five hundred television channels, all offer the illusion that grass-roots participation and technological restructuring are marching forward hand and hand. But at the same time, the mantra of the 1990s has become the withdrawal of government from a social contract and the end of the nation-state as a means for a citizenship to negotiate a terrain for its own collective self-determination. How are we then to begin to conceptualize, or reconceptualize, the relationship of community access to community control of broadcast in a brave new world of open skies, and endless border wars of information? The answers to this problem have never seemed more pressing, nor more elusive.

Dot Tuer is a writer and media theorist who has written extensively on film, video, photography and the visual arts for Canadian and international publications. In addition to her writing she is also the curator of a number of film and video programmes, and teaches at the Ontario College of Art. She is currently researching a book on issues of technology in Canadian art.