

Independent Media and Other Popular Lies

Media Theory and Practice 101: Who Cares? Donald Rumsfeld, John Ashcroft, Condoleeza Rice, Colin Powell and you, if you have one hot damn left to give for freedom of speech in the US of A.

1. Do movies cause terrorism? My country is engulfed in some kind of "war" which was announced by a televised image of the exploding World Trade Towers, which many who were not there to smell the fire and death have acknowledged, looked more like a disaster movie than a disaster movie. Suddenly even the Defense Department takes note of the old question which has haunted Communications Studies since it began - whether the disaster movie created the strategy of the terrorist or whether terror created the disaster movie. Answer: The jury is still out but in the meantime, movies with Arnold Schwarzeneger about terrorists blowing up buildings are held from release because they now seem tasteless or perhaps historical or predictive, even. A simple girl, I had always thought ours had been a pretty violent culture to begin with, you know, before movies and TV, given our bloody histories.

2.) Freedom of the Press: Condoleeza Rice, National Security Advisor to the Bush administration issues order saying American news media can't play Osama Bin Ladin's videos and should not be told how many hundreds of Afghan civilians have been killed by US bombs. OK. OK. We know crises have always had their military agendas set, their ground rules ordered: for example, during the Viet Nam war, Lyndon Johnson used to call the network heads to "make suggestions" after every evening news show; the networks didn't show American dead there. Grenada, Panama, El Salvador went fundamentally unreported in the US dominant press until long after the facts and on the back pages of the Times et al, and the list goes on. National Security is at stake, they say. Our national existence is at stake, I say, if the citizens of this country are too afraid to stand up for our rights to knowledge. According to the MADRE website, Colin Powell, the great hope of the liberal coalition builders, won his stripes covering up the My-Lai massacre. The list of "evidence" which the US government claims proves bin Ladin is responsible the 9/11 terror attacks are posted on TONY BLAIR'S website. Huh?

3.) Who owns the mass media? Sorry, no longer a question: the corporations ARE the media. The fact of a real (not virtual) media monopoly determining what most people believe about any given issue is not as hard to demonstrate as it once was. Everybody knows that Rupert Murdoch, arch conservative Australian tycoon owns the National Enquirer, the Daily News and a hundred other newspapers internationally, Time-Warner-AOL is now an immense media empire(the name itself hides nothing. Then there's Ted Turner, Sony, Microsoft, you know the names. After the semi-literate election coverage of the presidential election/coup a year ago, everyone also knows that Fox TV news was deeply under the sheets with the current administration, with an actual Bush cousin as a central player. These days it is the place to go for 24 hour war-mongering, if this is your

thing. And these conglomerates own across mediums, e.g. Time Magazine, Warner Pictures, America On-Line, various publishers, scads of radio stations and so it goes. Though it is surely known that the multinationals own it, can we, “the public” see the transparency of agenda-setting and news invention/production itself? I'm not so sure.

4.) The Public Sector and freedom of expression: National Endowment for the Arts which had a modest but key media program – CUT; State Arts Budgets, some of which at one time funded public facilities for audio and video production - CUT; Media Arts Centers - defund them; Cable Access facilities – once required, now optional - let them rot; Public Television – HAH! Laugh if you can, as nearly all the rhetoric about “freedom of the press” and free access to information/knowledge in capitalist democracies are, gradually turned on their heads. What IS “the public” one might well ask, in the age of post-Main Street, unapologetic privatization of more and more spaces where most Americans spend time: work places, shopping malls, restaurants, cineplexes, sports stadiums and the ubiquitous 24/7 CNN-Fox-Al Jazeera-NBC ? National Parks seem almost anachronistic. Watching Jim Lehrer grit his teeth and tow the line, I think, Public Television, indeed.

But let's say you do see the writing on the wall. Its been this way for a while, you think, but its more obvious in a crisis. This is different, you think. Thousands of our fellow citizens have been killed and North Americans limp out of the illusory safety of our traditional isolationism – at least where our own borders are concerned. I go over this much traveled terrain because, as I write, there are picture on television of hundreds of men with turbans and beards riding horses across a land bounded by the great Khyber Pass on the one side and the explosive Middle East on the other. I have the disorienting sense of watching the Ottoman Empire as today's news. On another CNN off-shoot, it's been all anthrax. And everywhere else on the news in this secular state, they are saying God Bless America.

4.) The new independent media, the Internet: May the gods bless Al Gore. He did a phenomenal job here. Each day, after a depressing look at the “war” from the point of view of the still-invisible Vice President Dick Cheney all over the TV news, I open my Internet Browser and look at my e-mail. A kind of parallel universe exists there. A sumptuous offering of e-mails and forwarded web sites awaits me every day. At a recent Feminist Teach-In on the 9/11 and after, I felt the best gift I could offer students was a list I compiled of sites and articles which have crowded my mailbox since September 11. These were culled from the contacts and connections I knew of and those of friends and colleagues, more every day which describe so many different worlds. besides a dose of old fashioned hope, or faith, if you will, in the ability of people to make a difference in history when they get together

5.) Independent Media

I receive a phone call last week from my old friend, reknowned trouble maker and new media genius, Dee Dee Halleck. As usual, she was pissed off, God love her. Out of Dee Dee's anger have arisen many of the most compelling and visionary experiments in independent media of the last 25 years from Paper Tiger TV to Deep Dish Satellite Network and the video version of Democracy Now. She asks me to look at the cover of the current Independent magazine, the monthly publication of a group she helped found in the late 70's called the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers. She was then and is now again on the Board and I served on it some years ago. For those of you who don't know it, AIVF is a loosely knit national organization of people and organizations involved in "independent" media production. It is a crucial organization. The listings of festivals and shows, job opportunities, grants, gigs and legislative and lobbying alerts are absolutely unique and essential to the "world" of independent media producers. Is that world itself a chimera as we sometimes experience it in our respective isolations? The Independent and AIVF give substance to that world.

Yet there are vastly different interpretations of what it means to be an "independent" in the world of media production. Indeed, I have always held that the phrase "independent film/video maker" is itself an oxymoron. Those of us who use the fancy equipment of our national vernacular – film/video – to express ourselves are, by definition, dependent on expensive resources just to get off the ground. We are subject Virginia Woolf's need, in order to write, of a few guineas and a room of ones own multiplied by 1000. We depend on access to cameras and editing equipment and harder to find than even these, we depend upon new or exiting modes of distribution to get our work seen. Whether we represent varieties of unadvertised subjectivities or create strange forms of beauty or unpopular opinions and ideas, we are by definition, dependent on some amount of capital intensive hardware, and the labor, often, of more than one person to make our work. This is why an organization like the AIVF (though there are really no others) so crucial to our very existence. It is people like the long list of AIVF board members and staff over the years who have helped invent and sustain us as a movement. It was a group of AIVF member who pressured Congress to create ITVS (The Independent Television Service) currently the largest organization and pot of money to which all US media makers can apply for project funding. You knew it, ITVS with its fundamental connections to Public Television present a whole other set of complications, but it does exist in the media universe to "serve underserved audiences, especially minorities and children." And it has supported a long list of non-fiction pieces about subjects not ready for prime time.

Oddly enough, the availability of portable video and film equipment was brought to you by WW II. Then the outgrowing of the first generation of video equipment by the networks, put more and smaller rigs on the market. But above all, it was the skewed version of events of the late 60's -- of the Civil Rights Movement and Viet Nam War -- on American TV's which gave powerful impetus to the burst of independent, critical media-making on social and political themes in this country. There were other sides to

these stories and a generation of young media-makers to build networks of equipment, skill exchanges and then distribution conduits for this work. They also demanded that state and federal governments support and then the new cable stations support “access facilities,” available to all with the contacts to find them. There is some excellent writing on these developments. ***I learned to edit video, with the help of friends, on access equipment generously provided at several regional centers by New York State in the mid-70’s.

Thousands of tons of US bombs are dropped in our name on a distant country called Afghanistan, yet rarely, and on direct orders from Condoleeza Rice, does anyone (on TV) mention that there are Afghan civilians being killed by the hundreds. References to them have certainly increased since several US service people were killed and wounded by “friendly fire.” Of course these announcements have been contained and sanitized by “official” declarations about the difficulty of counting civilian dead. Why is this, exactly? Because the civilians are veiled and bearded? The difference between 10 and 300 civilian casualties matters or the administration would not have placed a ban on reporting their numbers.

Neither did we hear much about the fact that the most likely perpetrators of anthrax mailings are the Right to Life cuckoo people who have used threats of anthrax repeatedly against abortion clinic workers. And it continues to amaze me that the news “readers” as they are more accurately called in the UK keep announcing one terrifying civil liberties abuse after another with straight faces. Anyway, we now discover, John Ashcroft says to the Senate Judiciary Committee that to criticize these declarations is to become an instant honorary member of Al Qaeda, so watch out. However surreal and dangerous the news is today, it is exemplary of the escalating myopia and univocal “coverage” of current events on the OLD mass media.

But a kind of parallel universe exists when I open my Internet Browser and look at my e-mail. A sumptuous offering of e-mails and forwarded web sites awaits me every day. When I spoke at a Teach In lately, I felt the best gift I could give students was an updated list of websites where they could find other legitimate points of view on the history of the US and the Middle East, the view of Bush’s War from other parts of the world, and most importantly to me, the array of independent humor, points of view, alternative histories and takes on what happened of import in the world today created by individuals and organizations, small and large for whom independence of thought and ideas matter – in short, another world. Here is a sample of web sites and some of their titles:

rawa@rawa.org - Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan
info@altnet.org -FREE SPEECH, R.I.P. -Headlines: Elkader, Phoney Bombs Fool
Taliban
<http://www.indymedia.org//> Howard Zinn speaks to anti-war teach-in

Forum: Transforming Crisis: Alternatives to Globalization and Fundamentalism
<http://www.madre.org/> JUSTICE NOT VENGEANCE: A MADRE TOOL KIT
takeaction@act.actforchange.com: Defend Civil Liberties Flash Video; Write Congress
 here to Oppose Military Tribunals
 A Call: Massachusetts Womens' Peace Congress, Northampton, Nov. 10
cinema@WMM.com News You Can Use
<http://www.markfiore.com/animation/fresh.html>- Great Toons!
<http://congo.indymedia.org/>Dans les rues de Kinshasa : indignation et colère
www.protestgraphics.org - "Act Like Its a Globe Not an Empire"
 Why the CIA did not know - from article in Atlantic Monthly by ex-operative
<http://www.agitart.org/pages/frover.html> - THINK AGAIN
[http://www.merip.org/-Middle-East-Research-and-Information-What-Went-Wrong:The
 C.I.A. and the failure of American intelligence](http://www.merip.org/-Middle-East-Research-and-Information-What-Went-Wrong-The-C.I.A.-and-the-failure-of-American-intelligence)
<http://www.dawn.com/2001/12/04/> - Pakistan's Internet Edition
 Celene a Havana - Estamos con ustedes

My country is engulfed in some kind of "war" which was announced by a televised image of the exploding World Trade Towers, which many who were not there to smell the fire and death have acknowledged, looked more like a disaster movie than a disaster movie. I'm not even going there, not too far anyway. That is, going to the old question which has haunted Advanced Communications 301 - whether the disaster movie created the strategy of the terrorist or whether terror created the disaster movie. On this we shall never make progress. It always seemed like an irrelevant question to me anyway though gallons of ink have been spilled on the subject, as apologists for one side or the other have pinned rapes, murders and mayhem on the imaginations and products of mass movie makers, lyricists and TV producers. Witness Tipper Gore against metal and rap, etc. A simple girl, I always thought it had been a pretty violent culture to begin with, given our bloody histories. I leave the rest to the Baudrillardians and their ever-reproducing simalra. Anyway, they are all probably saying, "told you so" today.

Summarize dee dee letter

Then a phone call from my old friend, reknowned trouble maker and new media genius, Dee Dee Halleck. As usual, she was pissed off, God love her. Out of Dee Dee's anger have arisen many of the most compelling and visionary experiments in independent media of the last 25 years from Paper Tiger TV to Deep Dish Satellite Network and the video version of Democracy Now. She asked me to look at the cover of the current Independent magazine, the monthly publication of a group she helped found in the late 70's called the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers. She was then and is now again on the Board and I served on it some years ago. For those of you who don't know it, AIVF is a loosely knit national organization of people and organizations involved in "independent" media production. It is a crucial organization. The listings of festivals and shows, job opportunities, grants, gigs and legislative and lobbying alerts are absolutely unique and essential to the "world" of independent media producers. Is that

world itself a chimera as we sometimes experience it in our respective isolations? The Independent and AIVF give substance to that world. And here, with the vast number of interpretations of what it means to be an "independent" at this moment, is the center, as you will see, of my tale.

Later that day, Dee Dee forwarded me and others a letter she had written to the magazine. It follows here:

Letter to the Independent, the AIVF Magazine from Dee Dee Halleck

I have received several calls from members who are upset over the cover of the recent issue of the Independent. The image of a fire blasting plane coming toward the reader would seem to be blatantly insensitive to the recent events. Even if one concedes that this is not a "terrorist" at the helm, the image of a grinning white male pilot is problematic to many who are very concerned that our government has compounded the tragedy with our own grinning "fly boys" who daily rain death and destruction on a very very poor country and its peoples.

Instead of an image so militaristic and resonant with so much tragedy, there could have been a different type of cover... I wonder why there could not have been some reference to the many valiant efforts that independents have made to address this crisis: from emergency screenings, daily news (The War and Peace Report); the World in Crisis reports from Free Speech TV; the specials by World Link; the discussions with media workers affected at Ground Zero; the brilliant offer by Women Make Movies to send tapes about the Middle East for free to schools and organizations; the children's special that Skip Blumberg did on PBS; the ongoing coverage at local community stations of peace rallies and vigils; the dedicated documentation of the incidents against people of middle eastern background; the bravery of many Middle Eastern filmmakers and news gathers; the dangers faced by free lance and network crews in the war.

Or a look back at the many media makers who have long worked to counter the stereotypes and offer counter views of the region: Jayce Salloum, Indu Krishnan, Simin Farkhondeh, Paper Tiger, Marty Lucas, Ilon Ziv, Jon Alpert, etc.

Or perhaps there could have been some reference to the extreme censorship which is being enacted, both by the military and by ceos of media corporations such as CNN who asked that pictures of civilian deaths be down-played and prefaced with reference to the deaths at the

WTC.

The title under the animation still has the title: Do It Yourself Block Buster: A Texas 3D shop takes on Disney." Even if there were no tragedy, and no war, I would question the very notion of "taking on Disney" in terms of competing...I question whether these animators are authentic independent or only Disney wannabes. And since when do Independents strive to be "Block Busters"?

I cringe to think that this is coming from an organization I have long supported and of which I am currently a board member.

It is a shame on us all.

DeeDee

The I became very indignant and righteous and wrote the following, cc'ing all on Dee Dee's and my lists (gulp) :

Dear AIVF Board and Members,

I am one of those who spoke with Dee Dee Halleck about the dumb, demeaning cover of the last Independent. (See her letter below.) As an ex-Board member and person with a publicly demonstrated sense of humor, I must say, I wondered if our unique organization had completely forgotten who and what it is. Certainly the trend in the Independent toward pandering to a fictitious readership of upscale, yuppie, Sundance wannabe's has been long in the making. And yes, it is harder than ever, as we all know, to remain "independent," when relatively independent funding sources have been so radically altered and cut in the last years and the world so often looks like one endless market. But those who are going to Hollywood are already reading Variety, not The Independent. So why not work to provide a critical, meaty, substantive, challenging, politically out periodical which would offer, as the Independent once did, a real alternative to the trade magazines covering the newsstands with Disney and Lucas home how-to guides.

When I was on the Board, there was an ongoing a debate about how to reach that young and snazzy "indie" (read Steven Spielberg's second cousin) who would flood our coffers with young and snazzy dollars. But we have nothing to sell but flows of ideas, commitments, and networks for same -- NOT found in the dominant media. People who need us will find us if our ideas matter to them, inspire and sustain them and keep them on a collective map. Dee Dee's letter suggest what the sources for some of these may be. I admit that I have long looked in vain for serious criticism in the magazine and had essentially given up, as many friends and colleagues have, using it largely for festival and related announcements. Perhaps, as Halleck suggests, now is an opportunity to re-ignite the organization and its monthly publication with the political and critical mission it once had. The 20th Century is over. The old left and the old "independent media" are

morphing into other things. Wouldn't it be interesting to have a public print and Internet forum somewhere between hermetic academic debates, the bankruptcy of most of the current "artworld" and the myopic dumbness of the mass media and its hand maidens to track these developments as if they mattered?

Big advertisers don't own us. In fact, we are irrelevant to them and have no reason on earth to imitate the purveyors of instant this-or-that, fantasies of fame and fortune or the fake innocence of the market's "new," "broadcast quality" or neo-liberal "truths." Those of us who make media which picks arguments with the corporate ones don't do it for those reasons. There is a thrill all right, but it is the thrill of making noises, however challenging to distribute, which put the lies we live with day and night to shame. And satellites and the Net are, in fact, offering vast new distribution possibilities. It is the pleasure of representing ideas and peoples unpopular in the marketplace or shunned and blacklisted by the World Order right now which makes us work and smile. Oh, the glamour.

Though the tone of this letter is sharp, I write it because AIVF still matters and not as an alternative Hollywood or Madison Avenue or Microsoft -- rather as an organization for people who take giddy joy in inventing the tricks and know-hows. sounds, texts and images for fighting the domination of these vast predators on every aspect of our lives.

In solidarity,

Joan Braderman

What a rant, I thought later, reading the dismayed note from Elizabeth Peters, the excellent and hard-working Executive Director of AIVF. Though I received a number of "right-on" e-mails from others, I felt like a jerk for waxing so vehement when the magazine represents an organization which has been so crucial to the continued existence of people like Dee Dee and me, and wrote:

P.S. Addendum to my letter on The Independent cover et al

I got very steamed up about all manner of things today while pondering the current Independent cover. Besides this immediate mistake on the part of the Editors (the cover at this particular moment in history), I raised issues which are broad and complex and am by no means asking the dedicated current Director, Editors and staff of AIVF to shoulder all of my complaints, or for that matter, to take the state of the discursive worlds we share as their own responsibility. I know from experience how difficult it is to keep the organization up and running and how hard the staff and Board work to do so. I value their hard work, talent and commitment. And as is, AIVF and The Independent do serve many key networking, community building and information sharing functions. Rather, as a member of the organization, I hope, with Dee Dee, and if they are still there, a number of others who have expressed similar views over the years, to help open what may well be a utopian conversation about the shape and direction of the magazine.

Best,
Joan B.