

BOB DEVINE

Interviewed by Chris Hill

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HILL: Could you talk about the different interests that converged into support for public access, and also describe how those various concerns functioned for you and the communities and networks that you were working with and in contact with in the late 60s and early 70s?

DEVINE: In the late 60s and early 70s, particularly the late 60s, a confluence of people came together around public access and around small format video. Ralph Engelman [in *The Origins of Public Access Cable Television, 1966-72*, 1990] and David Armstrong [in *A Trumpet to Arms*, 1981] intimate it, and Patricia Mellencamp [*Indiscretions*, 1990] talks about it a little bit. One of the major elements of that confluence were artists who were enamored of the potential of new tools and possible new venues for work, who had strategies for using both in some constructive ways, and probably had visions of community art centers and the possibilities of those. There were also community activists coming out of a period in which the Kerner Commission [the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1967-68] had been studying the wholesale violence in cities and civil unrest, and made recommendations about the role of the media in that unrest. Community activists were looking at the possibility for a different way of enfranchising disenfranchised people. Probably there was a strategy around alleviating the pressure brought through civil disorder, because if you can bring voices and ideas into the mainstream then there's some diffusing of dissent, particularly violent dissent.

So you have those two elements [artists' and community activists' aspirations] but then there are other elements that enter into the picture. One was the policy activists, public policy makers, people both in government and the academy who were interested in telecommunications models, and the possibilities afforded by cable technology which offered a huge capacity for doing things differently. At that time people were talking about 20 channels. This interest in public policy goes back to 1948 to the notion of enfranchising and revitalizing local community political dialogue via telecommunications regulation. The public policy move was to make that work well somehow. In 1948 they tried enfranchising [local] UHF stations. They were a bust, a total economic bust, and they never happened. National networks were developed instead, not local political dialogue. At any rate, [in the late 1960s] a lot of public policy makers saw cable television as another avenue for revising and restructuring telecommunications policy. They were very willing to jump onto the cable bandwagon

because it represented a broader spectrum than was previously possible, and cable seemed to be economically viable.

And yet another element was a coalition of First Amendment people whose concerns, starting with the Jerome Barron case in 1962 and some key decisions—the Red Lion Decision, the *New York Times* vs. Sullivan—which were concerned with the marketplace of ideas in speech related terms, and in further interpreting Holmes' and Brandeis' mandates for a utilitarian view of the marketplace of ideas. They called for a marketplace of ideas that would produce and enlighten the polity and guarantee that the broadest spectrum of opinions could be heard, rather than autonomous individual expression and the protections there of...

And finally you have the Irving Kahns [president of TelePrompter Corporation, a cable company serving New York City in the early 1970s] of the world and the Sonys and Panasonics who were saying, first of all, that the [existing] marketplace was tightly structured and heavily monopolized by broadcast interests, and there was not a crack of daylight for an emerging cable industry to get in. And so there needed to be some wholesale restructuring and re-regulation. So that was the cable industry saying—we will throw our lot in with the people who are advocating change. Also the equipment manufacturers were feeling like there was a tremendous new marketplace for consumer technology and consumer services—software, in terms of programming and the actual technology hardware itself. Now that was an odd coalition because it covered the spectrum from the Left in the academy and the arts community, to the business community and a kind of libertarian strain, and it all came together in establishing a tremendous coalition to work toward public access.

The literature of that period tends to be diffuse and tends to talk in very general terms about empowerment, diversity of voices, effectiveness, new art forms, technological utopianism, a lot of threads that were relevant to the coalitions that were coming together. For me, that's where access started and that's why this strange kind of marriage happened between the activist element, the community-oriented activist element, and the community arts and arts element. That was a strange marriage that still has rocky relationships, but still is connected in certain ways.

The unraveling of that [marriage], involved first of all (and I confess to being of the first variety and that's why I think I can critique it) the technological utopianism—being fascinated with the technology without any real understanding of the context of its use, or what the economics of it were, or what the diffusion was about, or how it would be used. From the arts perspective, it was a fascination with new possibilities and new things that have to be investigated systematically. [Within that interest through the arts] was the coexistence of an almost Dionysian engagement with scientific work [including

technology-based art]. Another attraction was that video was totally liberating because the equipment was portable, detachable. It did television at a distance. It was decentralizable. It could go into the weirdest places and do the strangest things, do all things that film couldn't do without half of the controls that are inherent in a film process...

But there was not much reality—is it going to accomplish anything, or does it accomplish anything? What are the limitations? On the art side [the preoccupation with technology] led to greater and greater systemic and technical viability. You've got to have color, got to have a better range, got to have higher resolution, got to have time code, got to have increasing sophistication. On the community activist side, there was less thought given to those things. It was just like—if the technology is there, it will liberate us all without any thought to how that works exactly and what that might be about.

That, for me, was one shortcoming of the vision. The second was the espousal of freedom of speech which the arts community adopted. My understanding of that situation is that those people who were in the game for arts really felt like untrammelled speech was perfectly resonant with everything that they were doing because it meant the ability to innovate, to create, and to push the boundaries of culture and society. And that what's protected [through the First Amendment] and so that was a resonant principle. For the community activists, the First Amendment was a resonant principle as well, because it felt like it was a direction that we wanted. People should be able to articulate grievances out of social position and critique the system and be protected.

The difficulty was that the view of the First Amendment and the marketplace of ideas is really a liberal pluralist notion that has some assumptions built in about the equality of entry into the marketplace and the structuring of the marketplace. So a lot of middle class, white, sometimes urban and sometimes rural folks were thinking along utopian kinds of First Amendment lines of thought, without any real critical inquiry into other models, like the utility model of the marketplace. It was more about individual expression. Autonomous expression works in the arts, it works for social activism. The residual effect in public access was that after some of these communities split off, access was left with autonomous expression being the only core value that was driving the system.

A third thread of critique is the language of empowerment on the community activist side. The language of empowerment didn't really work because people really didn't extend beyond the notion that if you give people the tools, they're empowered, if you show them how to use them, they're empowered. And most access turned out to be a passive system of—we'll wait for people to come and ask us to use the tools and then

they'll be empowered. The unraveling for me of that confluence of what turned out to be a media arts direction with what turned out to be an access direction and with what turned out to be a liberal social policy direction came about with video arts people splitting off, feeling that the First Amendment was not necessarily the core belief of the access system.

There was also a competition for the resources [in access centers]. There was an increasing need to upgrade the technical resources to do the things that we wanted and the venue wasn't quite a good enough venue.

I think Diana Agosta, Caryn Rogoff and Abigail Norman talk about this in their study of public access [*PARTICIPATE*, 1986], I think Ralph Engelman talks about it, I think a number of people talk about this notion. A CBS program that was to be a sampler on access initiated the first competition. There was a realization by video arts people that competition for [grant] resources meant no more collaborative strategies, and there was a splitting off with the access community going their own way. My sense is that for activists who were in the game for the notion of change and empowerment (and I include myself in this category as well) that community access is too slow. It was not radical enough, it was not critical enough, it was passive, it was too tied into city governments and franchises. It didn't move the change agenda along quickly enough or effectively enough. There was a bail out [with people thinking] there are other things I can do as an activist for community change; I can organize health care workers, etc.

Policy people split off because the strategy wasn't really recuperative, you didn't see quick results. And I think about Benno Schmidt's critique in 1972, talking about how access hadn't really created a viable marketplace of ideas, or a credible one. And that's still true. People could look at the strategy from a policy perspective and say it hadn't balanced the system by making more significant and equally balanced voices available. So the policy people bailed out, realizing that this wasn't really going to recuperate the system by adjusting it and making it a little bit better. And the First Amendment activists, particularly the original supporters that came from ACLU and civil rights kinds of supporters, realized that access, because it's franchised and government regulated, is very sensitive to public opinion, is very sensitive to balances of power, and can't always protect the First Amendment in the way that people might want to see it protecting the First Amendment.

The solution, and what was left, were people who were essentially interested in television. Media arts went a separate way, came back again and again to try to use the access community to further its agenda, but there was a structural tension there with media arts. And community activism tries on a regular basis to utilize access to move its agenda. So there's an interesting confluence in that all have an agenda that works well

for a time, and then, to my mind, comes unraveled, and moves in separate directions that better serve the ends that inspired that initial confluence.

HILL: There were a number of groups during the early 70s that played out different models of access. For example, Peoples' Video Theater in New York had this idea that they could videotape an interview on the street and then invite people back up to their loft at night, which was their theater where the tapes were replayed, and where they promoted further discussion around the subjects that were generated during the day. There was also the model that George Stoney probably introduced through Challenge for Change, which was that people in communities were working on social issues, and if those issues could be put into a televised form, a video form, they would translate into some kind of power for the community because they could be promoted at the level of government, and possibly be used to lobby for change. I wonder, were any of those models of particular interest in the late 60s? These models could all be considered access in one form or another.

DEVINE: Those projects were fed by ideas coming through the arts as well. Process work where the engagement with the thing, whether it's performance or exhibition, engenders processes that are greater than the actual materiality of what is presented. And the same was true in access as within some of the video arts applications. You were doing something by way of setting up a dynamic that changed relationships. The hard part was that in access people lost that very quickly. I spent a lot of time stumping for the process dimension, saying there is always something else going on, and you're working a community's capacity for dialogue, and its capacity for forming public opinion, and its capacity to interact and build associations and to think about realities in different ways, rather than just making programs. That has taken all kinds of directions in video art where it was strong from the start, because it felt like the video art people were much more interested in those curious little dimensions of process that reflected on people's experience of media, their relationship to reality, ontological and epistemological questions, and playing with the process dimension of that. In access, I feel like it got lost a little bit and so the kind of stuff that People's Video Theater was doing...that was much more process-oriented in terms of a community talking to itself about issues, kind of got lost. ..

People tend to think more in terms of exchange value than they do use value, and the exchange value is: does this have a market? Does it have sufficient spectacle? Is it sufficiently unique and distinctive? Does it focus a personality, the artist? All those questions assume—this has exchange value and it will sell tickets to a museum or to a public access show, it will attract eyeballs. And not the other side of it which is—what's the use value? What sense do people make of this? What do they do with it? Where do they go next with it and what happens in that interval of experience and reflection, and

then the next action that they make? That's always been the more interesting to me, but I think the seductions of the other are just overwhelming.

HILL: I think that one of the things that happened at the end of the 70s was that much of the media arts field in general shifted to gambling on a product for television as a way of getting an audience. There was also a shift in technology, a high-end technology, that became available to makers, for a price. The whole emphasis on high-end post-production then took away from the notion of process. In the early 70s editing could be clumsy, and the work didn't have to be about editing. It was really about the act of recording and documentation, and the interaction between the performance and the documentation was critical. Much of the interesting work from this period plays out the performance/process interaction.

DEVINE: Yes, and it moved it toward commodity culture and away from some of the most interesting parts of video art. That's a sad reality.

HILL: The audience or social feedback component suffered.

DEVINE: I went back recently and looked at all the Challenge for Change stuff that I had, the *Societe Nouvelle Newsletter* from 1969-73. I looked at a lot of the articles and each one was that scientific mentality of—this is an experiment and this is what we learned from it. I think a lot of the things that are learned from it are process things. They're not production things. They're about how the arrangement of the playback generates certain kinds of dialogue or doesn't. They're about how the participation of people in the editing generates a certain kind of interaction versus other kinds of interaction. They're about the levels of control that people had. All these process dimensions, article by article, small projects—[Canada's Challenge for Change] Alberta and Video St. Jacques—and they unfold over time and become this kind of process orientation, and I think that we lost it in moving access to this country. I think we lost that process orientation that—this is about engendering relationships between people and their reality, people and their consciousness, people and people, people and society, societies and societies. And that there's an underlying dimension of power. That's a lot more interesting to me and that was lost. And it's interesting to me in the art. I was totally enamored of Peter Campus' work because of what it made you talk about and the ways that it structured interactions and would move you to say—OK, that's changed my social being. It's not just that I saw something and it was interesting and he was a fantastic artist. Relationships were changed.

HILL: Gregg Bordowitz did a tape recently called *Fast Trip Long Drop* (1994) about being HIV positive, and there's a really interesting scene where Jean Carlomusto, who works with Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York, is sitting in the editing suite and

talking about how looking at footage shot at ACTUP demonstrations from a few years earlier has taken on this whole new dimension, because so many of the people who worked with ACTUP had died or are in a different state of health than they were when the footage was shot. And she said that the process of editing has taken on a whole other meaning because it underscores that they had documented this community that has changed so quickly, so that by just sitting and watching the footage you're sharing this history with whoever you're sitting next to, a history which is moving more quickly than anyone is comfortable with. That was a reflection on process that was unusual to see in work that was made so recently...

It's interesting that you got involved with setting up the media library here [Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio] and the Community Media Center here as early as you did. You actually set up the media library before the portapak came into existence or became widely available. What were the things that brought you to focus so specifically on media and to either anticipate or to pay attention to video as early as you did?

DEVINE: We got into video pretty early, and that was novel all by itself, but the intellectual climate had to do with Marshall McLuhan bursting on the scene in 1964. He'd actually been around long before with *Understanding Media* and it was fashionable to be reading Gregory Bateson, and it was fashionable to be thinking along the lines of the information economy of the United States. And there was also the 60s activism, and the essential aspect of information was that it was a resource like no other for an economy. When you reproduce it, you double its reach. You don't diminish the original. And so the natural conclusion for those of us who were heady with Bateson and McLuhan to jump to was that the information we had ought to be made available. How do you do that? Well, we had an institutional base [the college], that's good. We'd copy anything for anybody who sent us tape. But not only that. Put stuff in as well as take stuff out.

HILL: So you're talking about the Antioch Free Library?

DEVINE: Yes, the Antioch Free Library was started in late 1966, saying—we'll copy anything that we have for anybody. We had taped Alexander Karensky, we had taped Martin Luther King, on 2-inch tape. It was fantastic, a 2-inch machine that weighed about 4000 pounds, but it was portable because it had two handles on each end and you could take it anyplace. But it was 2-inch, helical scan, open reel to reel. And we had just moved in late 1966 to a stand up machine that I think was 1-inch. At any rate it was another odd, weird format, and we had not gone through the progressions to get to 1/2 inch and certainly not to J1 or any kind of standard until 1969 or whenever that happened. People were bringing tapes in, sending tapes to us. We were sending tapes out and thought this is a neat thing and it was a great role for Antioch to be playing

because Antioch was committed to social change and to revolutionary activity. The other influences were that people were starting to talk about cybernetics in an entirely different way. Not Norbert Wiener cybernetics, but some emerging sense of ecology and interrelated systems and systems theory. And so thinking about information as an economy and as an ecology were part of the thinking that went into that. We ran the video tape free copy library through 1978 or 1979, when we just ran out of steam, and also ran into the horrible tape mold that grew on our early stuff, and so had to just stop doing it.

HILL: Who was interested in copies of your tapes? Were they people from the community here in Yellow Springs?

DEVINE: No, from around the country. It was people who were doing video elsewhere, at institutions and other video groups. The Black Panther Party sent us tapes and we sent them tapes. Some activists. The other dynamic that entered the picture here is that Antioch started its network of campuses in the late 60s—1968 or 69. The Antioch Baltimore Center was really process oriented video. Media Study's Video Ball at Antioch was really institutional analysis, social analysis using video. The whole curriculum there was geared toward that. And so again, it was another process oriented center, and the natural interchange was that we were doing process work at the same time that we were making information resources available. And we did—I don't know how many thousands of tapes we copied over the years. It got to be quite a chore because there was no money involved. You send us the tape and then we send it to you. And then later on I think we started charging postage to send it back because we were doing 25-50 a week, tapes from all over the country, and that was getting to be a real onerous task for a bunch of hippies who didn't have a whole lot of spare time.

HILL: The work that was happening in New York through the Alternative Media Center and George Stoney and Red Burns? It seems like that was set up at the same time that you set up the Media Center here. Did you see yourselves working along a similar model?

DEVINE: To tell you the truth, we didn't even know about them. Steve Christiansen and I met Red Burns at an Aspen Institute conference in 1970 or 71. She was learning how to do video at the time and we were talking about what we were doing and they were talking about what they were doing and we decided that these were people who we had to know, so we went there to see what was up. Obviously we'd been connecting with other people in the city [New York], but that was also about the time of the emergence of *Radical Software* and Raindance. And actually an Antiochian was kind of involved in the initial Raindance group, Louis Jaffe. We got connected with *Radical Software* and started to interchange and interact with them. That was all new territory,

and we hadn't really thought about that level of networking until that time, and then it was clear that a lot of people were doing the same thing that we were doing, and a lot of them were doing it better, doing more interesting stuff. The interesting fallout for us was that it completely altered our curriculum because nobody had ever defined a curriculum for Communications at Antioch. Nobody had even said the word "television," and so our curriculum really became shaped by what we saw people doing in New York City, in Los Angeles, around the country.

HILL: So initially, all this activity that happened at Antioch with the Free Media Library and with the Community Media Center was really coming out of the radical climate here at Antioch itself, and your connection with these various liberation movements and projects for social change.

DEVINE: Yes, and the anti-war movement at Antioch had been central, and there were civil rights struggles here in Yellow Springs and others nationally. In all of the movements, Antioch was involved; it was very tied into liberation struggles nationally because our students went out [regularly to different cities] on co-op work study and then came back, and brought back the culture of change constantly...

HILL: Were you aware of anything that was happening on the community level—wasn't there a school strike in Brooklyn, or was it Brownsville, in the late 60s where video was shot?

DEVINE: Not until after the fact. And that's one of the roles that *Radical Software* played. There wasn't a publication, there wasn't a way, there wasn't a network, and then literally out of thin air a network of people was constructed who were thinking, doing, and who were pushing the activist envelop. Again, you look through *Radical Software* and you can see that same confluence of people that were into technological utopia, people that were into community activism, people that were into art, and people that were into information/environmental issues. I could be totally mistaken, but that was the central organ of connecting and making a national and international sense of what people were doing in very fragmented ways all over the place.

HILL: When you were active here in Antioch in the late 60s, before you became aware of these projects which were happening at the same time in New York and in other places, how did you feel that the media project here functioned if you were to look at social change as being the goal? Did you see yourself being revolutionary, or did you see yourself in a position of integrating various parts of the citizenry in another way because a revolutionary struggle might splinter off a vanguard movement from the rest of the citizenry? The discussion around revolution was happening in a very specific way in the late 60s and especially in Yellow Springs, and public access winds up having to

work directly with municipal administrations. How did you see yourself in terms of the overall picture of social change, with the radicalness of it on the one hand, and the need to integrate larger percentages of the population into it on the other?

DEVINE: Two things. One is the new take that we had, and we put together a major in Communications in 1969. It was a real interesting major. We were all reading Roland Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*, and trying hard to think about revolution, but art was inseparable from the communications activism. They were absolutely inseparable. They were part and parcel of the same package. For us it was a new take because for the first time we were reading the Leftist literature of the 40s, 50s and 60s, where communications was relegated to a very secondary position. There is a distrust of anything but print on the Left, generally, and media was part of the opiate of the masses. And so the new take for us was—no, media is absolutely central and essential to what we're doing, and the art is inseparable from the social change.

That was a really interesting concept because it was a differentiating point in moving forward. And we asked—what are the skills to make this work? Part of that was that we had kids, literally, I mean kids, working for city governments and helping to write franchises for major cities as part of their co-op jobs. And they came out of our program post-1969, and they were writing the franchises and working in city government, and that was a revolutionary activity, that was a structural radical change rather than a confrontational radical change. That was part of our program. It's a really critical point to understand, for myself and for anybody trying to think out that period in time, that it was really hard to differentiate what was arts-oriented movement motivation and what was social change-oriented. The confluence was not just a convenient marriage in many cases. It was that these two things came together and fit together hand in glove.

HILL: Because they were both focused on structure and media?

DEVINE: And both focused on change. That was sort of the underpinning of the curriculum here.

HILL: I didn't realize that you were doing all that so early. It's interesting to see that happening independent from New York, because it's so easy to look to the concentration of energy in New York.

DEVINE: Well yes, but you know, like all social movements and like all historical periods of time, things seep up like ground water in many places at once. There's not authorship because literally from coast to coast, every place that we looked, people had been doing the same things and looking at *Radical Software*. Everybody is thinking about these same things. And we thought we were the only people doing that. This is

what the times are for, and the fuel for that is that those were tumultuous times, those were civil libertarian times, those were liberal apologist social democracy times, those were information economy times. And there was this new technology that gets melded in there and makes the whole stew have a distinct flavor.

Bob Devine is currently President of Antioch College and a member of the Communications Department. Starting in the 1970s he was involved with training organizers, advocating for and writing about public access cable. He was the first director of MATA, Milwaukee Access Television Association, and was a consultant for the organization and start-up of Manhattan Neighborhood Network.