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Tom*

A Proposal For

A NEW

TELEVISION

NETWORK

Submitted by:
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For a New Network

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A NEW TELEVISION NETWORK

PREFACE

This is a plan to save TV.

At least it's an attempt to set aside one little corner of the electronic spectrum so that people who care about making the world a better place can get their ideas seen.

In the early days of broadcast TV, the government reserved hundreds of channels exclusively for non-commercial use. Over the years, with continuing support of the Ford Foundation and others, the system of Public Television grew on those channels.

Now, some 40 years later, broadcast TV is only part of the picture: satellites and cable bring multichannel capacity to most American homes, but there are no systemic safeguards in place to assure the existence and growth of non-commercial, socially relevant TV. Compounded by public policy of deregulation in the 1980's, the new electronic marketplace is almost exclusively in the hands of commercial interests.

As a result, in a world with literally hundreds of TV channels, with dozens of new ones every year, not one has come on line which is dedicated to CHANGE--to ideas and people who are trying to make the world a better place.

This is a critical moment in the history of media...there is a real need to set aside an electronic haven which can be a home for independent voices and non-corporate, frequently populist, environmentalist, global and human rights-1st TV.

It must be fresh, vital, experimental and always activist.

It must be nurtured and supported so that it can grow in size and influence for decades to come.

INTRODUCTION

The video revolution of the last decade has given consumers new tools and new choices. Remote control wands and VCRs have changed viewing habits. Camcorders are becoming as prevalent as still cameras. Local news broadcasts often show videofootage taped by citizens that just happened on the scene with camcorder in hand. Public access centers in cabled towns and cities train members in production techniques and activist groups are commissioning producers to create informational videotapes for fundraising and education.

Once limited to three or four channels, 57% of American homes now have cable television, a majority of which have access to 30 channels or more. Close to three million homes now have satellite dishes. Unfortunately, the proliferation of channels and program services has not resulted in the great diversity of programming once envisioned by policy makers, media critics and activists.

For over twenty years, the most thoughtful, innovative and provocative video work has come from the independent producing community. Not glitzy enough for commercial exploitation, independent productions have been mostly consigned to public television, and, more recently, to The Learning Channel for exposure. Both outlets have significant weaknesses in dealing with independents. Their institutional mandates keep the number of hours allocated to independent programs to a minimum. They are not independent networks. The work of independents is an isolated and small part of their financial and philosophical commitments.

This is a proposal to launch an alternative electronic network submitted by an ad hoc group of independent producers, curators, distributors and community activists, whose substantial experience in the field of video production is widely diverse. As long-time active participants in media and proponents for change, they see

in the current somewhat unsettled media environment an opportunity to reach out to an audience that has been heretofore largely underrepresented on, and ignored by, television and cable networks. They are seeking a regular slot for highly irregular programming, programming that can become an important part of the daily lives of millions, programming which will become an accepted and welcome alternative for the 1990's and beyond.

With the nineties have come new configurations of technology ready to be used for alternative, socially responsible purposes. No longer stuck with being the passive recipients of programs and videotapes produced by others, the public now has the means of production in its own hands. The means of distribution is the next target. Indeed, the potential exists to move beyond the phenomenon of a mass media dominated by relatively few producers and distributed to a mass audience of many consumers.

At the same time, there is emerging a new awareness and commitment of public interest advocacy groups to inform and activate the citizenry on issues that include long term health care, women's rights, energy conservation, toxic waste and economic injustice. Many of these groups are already actively working with video and documenting their research on videotape. Television and video are increasingly being used as tools of empowerment in formal and informal learning situations.

More and more people are turning away from regular TV. Recent figures show network audience levels decreasing as cable and satellite services expand. At the moment, what is new in programming is happening on a small scale for targetted audiences. Corporations and government agencies are using national satellite networks for on-the-job training. State governments are using local networks for education. SCOLA, an international network connected to over 35 countries, delivers foreign TV news to over 700 schools, institutions and individuals. McDonald's, Burger King and the Ford Motor Company all have their own networks. The technological possibilities exist for delivering vastly different

electronic choices in the year 2000. BUT, it will look the same and be the same nine years from now unless a long-term commitment is made to building new forms.

The new alternative network will be the first of its kind, a prototype network that will celebrate inventiveness and empower individuals to better understand and deal with the realities of their lives. The programming will reflect the personal insights and creative imaginations of independent producers, expand the mission of the media arts centers, incorporate the resources of nonprofit public interest groups and utilize the capacity of modern communications technology to educate and inspire a regionally and culturally diverse population to become informed and active citizens in their communities.

This proposal explains what it will take to make this network a reality...both to secure its future and to begin in 1991 a pilot/test project.

THE AD HOC COMMITTEE FOR A NEW NETWORK

The video pioneers and media activists that comprise the Ad Hoc Committee for a New Network* bring with them decades of experience in a broad range of media activities. Collectively they represent thousands of hours of television productions and curatorial skills, years of community organizing, video distribution and exhibition, and lifetimes of work as educators, independent producers and community activists.

Their credits include a succession of firsts, as founders and co-founders of innovative initiatives that have helped set the stage for decentralizing broadcast television: Deep Dish TV, the first national public access satellite network; "The 90's", a ground-breaking video series in its third season, seen on 150+ public TV stations, with major national funding for 1991; TVTV, a production entity in the early seventies that experimented with low-cost portable video equipment and led the way for what later became ENG (electronic news gathering); Appalshop, a media arts center founded 21 years ago to record the stories of the Appalachian people; Open Studio, a community access production and broadcast service that operated at San Francisco's public TV station, KQED, for seven years, producing over 700 aired programs in collaboration with community organizations and artists; Downtown Community Television in New York City; and the Neighborhood Film Project in Philadelphia, to mention only a few.

Their mission statement and organizing principles** encompass their commitment and goals. As producers themselves, they are confident that they can work with the independent community and the public interest sector to identify the voices and visions that will be the hallmark of a new form of contemporary alternative TV.

* See Appendix A

** See Appendix B