RESISTANCE BY SATELLITE

The Gulf Crisis Project and the Deep Dish Satellite TV Network

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Before the United States entered the Gulf War in 1991, the Bush Administration misled the American public about its intentions in various ways, most typically by suggesting that US and 'allied' troops were being sent to the Gulf solely to protect Saudi Arabia. The Fourth Estate abandoned its watchdog role for what amounted to boosterism, and Bush and Baker wheeled and dealed at the United Nations as huge numbers were mobilised for ill-explained goals. The media were full of images of Americans in the Saudi sands, but there were virtually no American voices asking hard questions about why this colossal and expensive call-up was taking place just as forty-odd years of Cold War were ending and a recession was tightening its grip on the economy. As Martin Lee and Norman Solomon put it, 'American journalism surrendered to the U.S. government long before Iraqi forces did on the battlefield.'[1]

In this thin and frantic atmosphere in a country glued to the screen, viewers were surprised to see on their televisions a series of programmes which gave clear evidence of a strong nationwide movement in opposition to the Gulf War, which was articulately questioning the Administration's goals and policies in the Middle East. This series, the *Gulf Crisis TV Project*, appeared on cable and broadcast TV in the days just before the war began in January 1991. It stood in stark relief against the babbling background of experts and pundits available on the networks. The *Gulf Project*, produced by a small independent group working on a shoestring budget, was seen by viewers across the USA and Canada, and in various forms in Japan, Australia, France and the UK, and became a focal point of grass-roots anti-war activism around the world.

What made it possible for media activists to counter the consolidated might of the information industry, and to gain timely access to TV in a jingoistic climate in a country where the press had failed in two previous conflicts to question the official options presented to the American public? And what made this possible in a situation where the media arts world is being squeezed both by economic recession and specific attacks on arts budgets and public television?

The answers lie on several fronts. Two are technological: the development of inexpensive home video cameras now in the hands of the American public in millions, and the commercial availability of satellite time on hundreds of leasable, relatively inexpensive channels. But these answers do not exist in isolation. Here we will explore what kind of human infrastructure we created to interact with these technologies. Camcorders and telecommunications satellites were a *sine qua non* of our efforts, but it is worth stressing that their high-tech appeal should not be allowed to overshadow the very important organising work that was critical in making them useful.

The media picture

The Gulf Crisis TV Project was organised in the same way that a connect-the-dots puzzle is filled in. Once we had made a plan connecting producers, organisers, journalists, public access and public television stations and viewers, a picture of US opposition to the war could emerge and a different model of media production and distribution also came into sharper focus. In some cases we were able to rely on connections that were the result of years of organisation and co-operation. In other cases new relationships were forged. Historically, government and industry in the US have resisted state support of non-commercial and electronic media. In this unfriendly climate, efforts to create alternatives to commercial media have resulted in a hodgepodge of media institutions, each with its own history and goals. An inventory of the institutional and technological resources with which the project had to work will aid an understanding of how it was accomplished.

The Public Broadcasting System (PBS). Despite opposition from the commercial media, space for non-commercial television has been reserved in most cities since the 1950s. The funding for these stations comes from a combination of local viewer subscriptions, shrinking state and federal funds, and increasingly through corporate underwriting. The member stations regularly downlink programming off the PBS satellite network. The bulk of this material, often repackaged British

programming, comes from the big East Coast stations, though occasionally some PBS stations have demonstrated a willingness to air independently produced programming expressing controversial viewpoints critical of government policy. For the most part the stations are underfinanced, very cautious in their programming policies, and extremely vulnerable to the political exigencies of the times.

Cable TV. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the development of portable video equipment signalled the possibility of video production independent of commercial media. During the same period, activists saw the introduction of cable television into communities across the country as an opportunity to organise for community access to the media. As cable operators negotiated with city governments for franchise agreements (contracts granting the cable company permission to dig up streets and lay cable), citizen committees were formed to pressure the city into demanding something in return from the cable companies, namely some sort of public access TV.

Public Access TV. In 1984 Congress underlined its support for public access in the Cable Franchise Policy and Communications Act, which upheld the right of cities to include provisions for public access in their contracts with cable operators. The Act recognised that public access channels are often the video equivalent of the speaker's soapbox or the electronic parallel to the printed leaflet: they provide groups and individuals who generally have not had access to the electronic media with the opportunity to become sources of information in the electronic market-place of ideas. The soapbox analogy underpinning public access has had contradictory repercussions. The enemies of access – large cable operators who resent having to provide a public service, and interest groups offended by access programming – have characterised the free speech on access as wacky, irresponsible and/or obscene. Supporters of access have been energetic in their response. They argue that access is one of the few places where free speech, guaranteed by the First Amendment of the US Constitution, is actually tolerated. Approximately 1,400 cable systems across the US have channels and, in many cases, equipment and training available for use by residents free of charge. Many of the producers who contributed to the *Gulf Crisis TV Project* were already using their local access facilities for the distribution and production of programmes on various grass-roots social issues.

Access stations generally programme locally produced material. Imported programming – programming from outside the local community via satellite or otherwise – makes up a small percentage of access

fare. Many local cable networks in fact demand local sponsorship or production of all programmes. Access programmers who picked up the *Gulf Project*, for instance, did so on their own initiative, either because they appreciated more diversity on their channels or because they wanted to encourage more activist use of access.

Satellites and uplinks. Transponders on domestic satellites, owned by multi-national corporations, are relatively easy to rent at a reasonable cost, ranging from $250 to $800 per hour. Uplink services, which transmit the signal to the satellite, are available on the open market. A broker can shop for the uplink and the satellite time for you, or you can do it yourself once you know a few of the right questions to ask. Contrary to what many believe, tapes originating from home video formats, provided the signal quality is stable, can be transmitted by satellite without technical problems. Programming schedules can be listed in national magazines which reach an estimated 4 million home-dish owners, as well as institutional dish owners, like universities. Dishes with a price tag of under $1,000 are now proliferating.

Paper Tiger TV. Paper Tiger TV is a media collective who began producing programmes for public access cable in New York City in 1981. The shows set out to 'smash the myths of the information industry' by featuring critical 'readings' of various media products – newspapers, magazines, Hollywood films and TV – as well as offering sympathetic profiles of alternative media efforts.

The collective has very consciously tried to develop a model for low-budget production, and to share it with others through networking and aggressive national and international distribution of 200 of their programmes to access channels, museums, schools and community groups. The collective's work is done on an all-volunteer basis, except for two part-time distribution co-ordinators. The group has a fluid membership which expands and contracts on a project basis, and currently counts on some fifteen active members in New York and a similar number in San Francisco. Paper Tiger supports its work through distribution of tapes and through grants from the state and the occasional foundation, not to mention the sale of T-shirts, Tiger badges, books and many hours of volunteer labour.

Deep Dish TV. In 1985, Paper Tiger received a grant to distribute programming by satellite to public access centres around the country. The collective quickly expanded their original proposal for transmitting Paper Tiger shows into a plan to package and distribute the work of many other grass-roots video producers. The first series, transmitted in

1986, was designed to lay the foundation for an ongoing satellite network. The work of over a hundred producers was included in hour-long compilation programmes on themes such as militarism, labour, racism, and US policy in Central America. Clips were interspersed with 'segues' made by the Paper Tiger collective.

The success of the first series proved that there were at least 300 public access stations willing and able to downlink programming from a satellite, and that there were many producers willing to share their work with the network. By 1990, Deep Dish had grown into a national organisation, with a steering committee and three full-time staff (with medical benefits!). Every year the network distributes a spring and fall season, each consisting of one hour a week for thirteen consecutive weeks. Several different programming styles are used, including compilations co-ordinated by regional producers across the country, curated series, and tapes submitted in response to national solicitations. Past series have included *Green Screen: Grassroots Views of the Environmental Crisis*, *Will be Televised: Video Documents from Asia*, and *Behind Censorship: The Assault on Civil Liberties*. Deep Dish, funded by private foundations, state arts funds and individual contributions, provided the critical link between the *Gulf Project* and both a national audience and producers in all parts of the US.

Media arts centres. In many major cities in the United States there are facilities which make video equipment available to independent producers at subsidised rates. These centres also host public screenings of independent work and send out newsletters which reach local independent producers. Media arts centres were another important source of independent production for the *Gulf Crisis TV Project*.

Community radio. Across the US and Canada can be found a variety of small non-commercial stations. One group of these stations, the Pacifica Network, has a national news programme and programming syndicated via satellite. Pacifica stations are directly financed by listener contributions, giving them an independence cherished by listeners, whose numbers during the Gulf War swelled as they had during the Vietnam War. Pacifica provided analysis of the war and coverage of anti-war activities, including the *Gulf Crisis TV Project*.

Small publications. Another important component of the media picture is the variety of small newsletters put out by church groups, activist organisations, media groups, schools and others. These were critical connections to grass-roots constituencies interested in getting involved with the *Gulf Crisis Project*.

Connecting the dots

In August 1990, as bombers, troop transports and aircraft carriers were converging on the Gulf, links between the agencies we have described were still only a remote possibility. All we had was a critical sense of urgency and a feeling that the world was racing towards war while basic issues were not being addressed. At this stage 'we' were four people and a table in a corner of the already overcrowded Paper Tiger office. Our decision to go ahead was based on our lack of trust in the Administration's stated goals which, together with the large-scale mobilisation of military might by the US and Britain, led us to suspect that a major conflict was just around the corner. What could we reasonably expect to do?

On 28 September 1990, the National Coalition to End US Intervention in the Middle East held a big 'teach-in' in New York, which was taped by volunteers. At Paper Tiger we made a programme out of that material and sent it out. At the same time, other video groups were starting to send us tapes – The National Center for Defense Information, Labor Beat in Chicago, and more. When we put the list together with other information we had about upcoming anti-war activities, it was clear we had enough material to assemble some kind of series.

The first problem we faced was finding funding. Paper Tiger had a one-room office and an edit system. Deep Dish had a fax machine and a list of cable stations. We needed money for mailings, for more editing equipment, and of course we needed a camera. We came up with a modest budget ($25,000) and started floating proposals. By October, frenzied efforts had raised enough money to have one person working full-time. An initial sale of home video rights of our potential shows and some individual donations meant we could go ahead. Meanwhile, credit cards filled in the gaps. By November we got a larger foundation grant, small by independent documentary standards but enough to get four of us working.

The other big problem was time. The Deep Dish method depends on being able to elicit responses from independent producers around the country who must be told we are making a show, decide what to do, shoot and cut something and send it back to us – a process which normally takes several months. The people we were appealing to were video-makers connected with the hundreds of public access centres linked by Deep Dish TV. A separate grass-roots outreach was made to the large number of peace groups starting to mobilise in an attempt to

get people involved on all levels from producing tapes to 'sponsoring' shows for their local cable station.

Uplinking and downlinking

Once we had decided to go ahead, we had to let people across the US know as soon as possible that the shows were coming. This meant naming the shows, booking satellite time well in advance, and letting station managers know when and how they could pick us up – all this with only a rough idea of what the shows would look like.

In consultation with Deep Dish, we decided to start with four shows. Getting 'good' time slots was an important priority, and getting them on the satellite channels which our downlinkers were accustomed to using limited our choices. But it was essential to be able to send out the shows on a schedule so that programmers and viewers could pick them up easily. Working through satellite brokers, Deep Dish finally booked the shows on to a satellite (the one used by the Playboy channel) so that each show would be fed twice, on 7 and 9 January 1991. Transmitting a show twice is more expensive but it was important to create as many opportunities as possible for stations with very small staffs to pick them up.

Putting a signal up – uplinking – is less than half the battle. Once we had satellite times we had two big outreach jobs to attend to. First, cable stations and dish owners needed to know the exact time of a feed and which satellite and which channel on the satellite (transponder) the programme would be on. We had a very short time to develop our publicity material, get it out to the access stations and do follow-up calls and mailings. Ensuring that people with dishes downlink to complete the information chain was a major effort.

The other part of the outreach was to the public, to get people to encourage their local stations to tape and run the shows. Stations without dishes would need extra encouragement to get them to 'bicycle' tapes from stations with dish facilities. Stations with programming restrictions needed to hear from local sponsors of the programming. Here links with local peace action groups were essential. A key moment was a massive meeting in New York of several thousand peace activists from around the country. The *Gulf Crisis TV Project* provided everyone attending with a packet of information describing how they could get involved, both as producers and as media activists lobbying local stations for more debate around the crisis in the Gulf. The links forged at this time were critical in expanding the scope of our efforts at every

stage of production and distribution, and represented a new kind of relationship between media and peace activism.

Making the shows

As well as doing outreach, we had to get busy actually making the shows. We had four shows and we divided up into four groups of two. Each pair of co-ordinating producers would be responsible for one half-hour. A few other volunteers would help us log tapes. By 1 December, tapes were coming in by the dozen – 120 by our 15 December deadline. The biggest task was simply to keep track of the material and figure out who would use what.

Our office was full of people madly putting together outreach material, some sitting on the floor stuffing envelopes, someone else on the one phone trying to work out if a call was from a producer who could send us material, a station that could run the show, or a peace group that could use it. Tapes were coming in from practically every state in the country, and in practically every format. We transferred these from 8mm or VHS to 3/4˝ and logged them for editing. Meanwhile we were producing more material of our own, running out to cover anti-war convocations or to interview key people with the one Hi-8 camera that producer Jen Lion had contributed for the duration.

The first series

Our first four shows were *War, Oil and Power*, which dealt with the interconnections between US energy and military policies; *Operation Dissidence*, which looked at how the war was sold to the American public; *Out of the Sandtrap*, which explored how a Middle East war fitted into US foreign policy in the post-Cold War period; and *Bring the Troops Home Now!*, which looked at grass-roots anti-war organising and resistance in the military. Since no single producer could possibly view all the material we had coming in, we depended on each other to pass along something that looked relevant for a particular show. Teach-ins, demos, interviews, theatre pieces, art videos, Public Service Announcements, all went into the logs on cards. Then there was the day we sat around and traded items from the hundreds of cards. 'Who is going to use the prayer meeting from the group in Fort Wayne?' 'Who wants oil well shots?' 'Did anyone ever send us footage of people chained to gas pumps?'

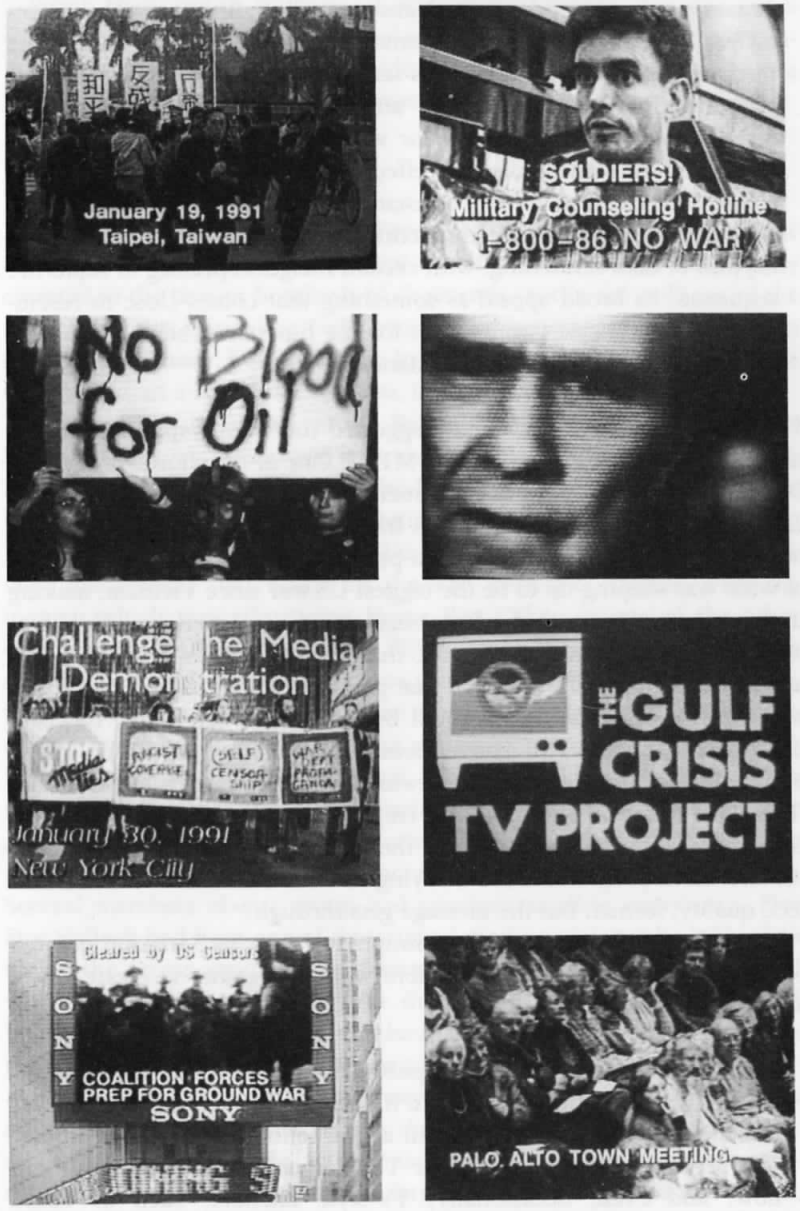
The material we received varied a great deal. We had short pieces produced by local cable stations where people at shopping malls and filling stations were interviewed on their feelings about the looming

war. We had footage of prayer sessions, sit-ins at oil refineries, vigils, anti-war rallies, and civil disobedience. People sent entire town meetings (taped for local cable shows) where Gulf crisis options were being debated; they sent in rap videos and video art pieces. In many cases our initial solicitation elicited material, but often people would call us. For instance, we might get a call from Pennsylvania. 'We're having a vigil and a procession with a veterans for peace group. Is there anyway you can get a camera here? We are five hundred miles away and have only one camera.' – 'Well, it might be a little tough. Have you talked to your local cable station? Let me give you a couple of names.' At other times there would be no local cable station, in which case we would ask if anyone in the local peace group had a VHS camcorder. 'Just get a long shot that shows what town you're in. And a couple of short interviews, and send us the tape. Sure, we can broadcast it.'

While material from all over the country was coming in, we shot material of our own – dozens of interviews with progressive figures who were not showing up in the mainstream press, Vietnam veterans, economists, journalists, media critics – which helped round out the picture. We also taped agit-prop theatre and performance pieces, poetry, comedians, rallies, art videos. The result was a series of four fast-paced half-hours, an information collage quite unlike anything on TV. People like Dan Ellsberg, the Vietnam-era Pentagon employee turned anti-war activist, and the author Grace Paley were intercut with student leaders from Louisiana, soldiers resisting call-up orders in Hawaii, and Middle East scholars like Edward Said and Eqbal Ahmal. Viewers saw performance artists like Paul Zaloom and media critics like Laura Flanders from Pacifica radio and Jeff Cohen from Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting. They saw Los Angeles anti-war rockers and Bronx anti-war rappers – in short everyone the networks had not consulted.

While it is difficult to describe the *Gulf Project* to someone who hasn't seen the shows, an outline of the contents does suggest the richness and variety which we used deliberately to transcend the normal barriers between 'public affairs programming' or 'news' and other television forms. Since we had footage on every format from home video VHS to professional Betacam, the shows had a 'home-made' look, one that we encouraged with abrupt cuts and high-handed juxtapositions.

One viewer who saw the shows the night before the war started said he kept switching channels and coming back to the one programme that didn't look or sound like the rest of the material on the air waves. 'It was,' he said, 'like an explosion in my head!' As Janet Sorenson put it:



The Gulf Crisis TV Project, photos by Martin Lucas

It seems no accident that the tapes' montages of commentaries, demos, performances, concerts and speeches all move with a compelling rhythm. Certainly the atmosphere of the period influenced the lively sense of the tapes. This sense, coupled with scenes of direct action and angry commentary and with the fact that dates for marches and phone numbers for war resistance groups were often flashed on the screen, made for effective agitprop. *Just Say No* (1991), a tape documenting military resistance abroad, uses a rap soundtrack produced by soldiers in West Germany. Its visual pacing mimics the rhythm of disk-scratching, with certain images repeating in rapid fire sequence. Its broad appeal as something that comes close to resembling a music video is important for the function it serves – to alert soldiers to the possibility of resistance.[2]

The *Village Voice's* Amy Taubin suggested the shows 'appealed mainly to incipient teens rebelling against MTV.'[3] One of the shows' producers, Dee Dee Halleck, dubbed them 'America's Angriest Home Videos'. *The Gulf Crisis TV Project* programmes framed crucial questions that were not being asked by the mainstream press about the goals and purposes of what was shaping up to be the biggest US war since Vietnam, making it clear to any viewer that a large segment of the American public was not on board the war bandwagon, that the public was being manipulated by the Administration, and that people resented it. And they did it with a style that was oppositional but intimately televisual, however much the boundaries of conventional documentary or public affairs programming were broken. As *Newsday* writer Jonathan Mandel said, 'The video they make . . . does not employ what one could call sophisticated production techniques, and the various segments that make up the half-hour programme are dizzying in their difference of tone, subject, quality, format. But the message gets through.'[4]

Not only did the message get through, it did so, as Sorenson pointed out, in a way where style and content worked together to create a new kind of TV meaning:

> Like a teach-in it happened in a public place, that is, the space of television. Anyone could wander into it clicking through the channels, as one might wander into a teach-in at the central square of a campus. The series made use of familiar TV conventions in its timing and flow, and even, occasionally, TV-style anchors, such as Laura Flanders' particularly effective introduction to *Operation Dissidence*.

> Like a teach-in, it offered 'experts' – Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Rabab Hadi, Judith Williamson, and Daniel Ellsberg. But also like a teach-in, the tapes afforded a balance between experts and an open-endedness which showed individuals, some politically active for the first time, voicing personal reservations and responses to the war.[5]

Where did it go?

The audio-visual home of both Paper Tiger and Deep Dish is public access cable television, an important viewing audience, but one usually counted in the tens or hundreds of thousands, not in the millions of the network ratings game. The *Gulf Crisis TV Project* was shown on cable in the US and Canada, but it was also broadcast on public television across the US, and, in a condensed version, in the UK and Australia as well.

Broadcasting the shows on the Public Broadcasting System meant a big increase in audience, and it is worth exploring this in some detail. PBS set up a satellite system in the late 1970s which was designed to link over 200 non-commercial stations located everywhere from San Juan, Puerto Rico to Anchorage, Alaska (and as far away as Guam, we later discovered) that make up the PBS network. Anyone with the money, which typically means Home Box Office or one of the other cable giants, can buy time on the PBS satellite. Buying time for what is called a 'soft feed' allows the user to provide material that local stations may take up. It also gives the user a chance to publicise the show to station managers and programming managers on the DACS system, an internal electronic mail system that PBS uses to alert local stations to their feeds. The trick is then to convince each individual station to tape and air your show. When we started the *Gulf Crisis TV Project*, we planned to use this system to increase viewing of our programmes. Several members of our group had previous satellite experience. Dee Dee Halleck had been one of the original media activists who lobbied to set up the access aspect of the system, while Martin Lucas had worked with documentary-maker Ilan Ziv during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, putting together a one-hour special on that war which was picked up by several stations in the system.

Before we set up a soft feed, however, we talked with several stations about sponsoring our programmes. Any PBS station can sponsor a show to the system as a whole. In practice, the cost of producing programming means that usually only the larger stations, or groups of stations, actually do so. We were pleasantly surprised when we approached a

young, innovative station in Philadelphia, WYBE. Programming manager John Vernille indicated that they were willing to sponsor the first four shows to the PBS system and work on the publicity to get stations to notice them. This meant our shows would have a 'hard feed'; the imprimatur of a PBS station meant the material would be looked at more seriously by other stations.

As soon as we could, we sent out a calendar with the dates, times, satellite name and transponder number for each of the first four shows. This meant that people in each local area could call their cable or public TV station with extremely specific information about how and when to downlink the shows. In areas where the stations might be reluctant to show the programming, outreach co-ordinator Cathy Scott organised 'phone zaps' whereby local viewers could call in and ask for the shows to be scheduled. The 'zaps' were not only useful in getting shows on the air, they were important in giving people in a local community a focal point for expressing their opposition to what was becoming a headlong rush to war.

Getting on PBS was a big boost for our work, but our core audience is and was the public access viewership which the Deep Dish Network reaches, and there our goal was not to 'capture viewers' but to encourage the widest possible dialogue and interaction. One important Deep Dish concept is the 'wraparound'. To every station we sent programme information we also sent a request for the national shows to be set in a context of local programming. Many cities responded by putting together panel discussions, call-in shows, live coverage of town meetings where the war was discussed. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the cable studio was going live with a group discussing ecology issues as the 'wraparound' for another Deep Dish show about the environment. They simply pulled out a monitor with CNN's war coverage into the studio and shifted their discussion to the war. In Burlington, Vermont, footage of the local Army Reservists being sent off to the Gulf became the most requested repeat in the history of the cable station.

Impact

Over thirty PBS stations from Anchorage, Alaska to San Juan, Puerto Rico aired the *Gulf Crisis TV Project* to an estimated 40 per cent of the PBS viewership. The largest PBS station, WNET in New York, ran the show three times in a week in the days just before the war began. In addition, hundreds of local cable stations ran the programme, some picking them up off the satellite, others by 'bicycling' the shows from

stations with dishes. At the end of each half-hour we indicated the Deep Dish phone number. The phones rang round the clock for a week at our tiny New York office. While a few of our callers were furious, most were wildly enthusiastic, calling from as far away as California and Florida to tell us how important the shows were for them.

In Canada, Vision TV cable network, which links to some three million households, put aside two hours of its regular programming on 15 January to present the Gulf shows back to back. Vision Director of Programming Peter Fleming said, 'In light of concerns about the role played by the media in the unfolding of the entire crisis, it's the kind of programming we feel strongly compelled to present.'[6]

On Channel Four in Britain the four shows were condensed to one hour, dubbed *Hell, No, We Won't Go*, and run with a half-hour on UK anti-war activism. The effect of seeing the level of opposition in the US on British television – which was almost entirely wedded to the notion that America was monolithically behind the war – was electrifying. Channel Four's Alan Fountain suggested to us that the programme changed the tenor of the debate around the war in the UK.

In addition, some 2,000 copies of the show were distributed as home videos, winding up at rallies, at picnics, in living rooms, used by schools, peace groups, and so on.

The use of the *Gulf Crisis TV Project* tapes in Japan, as related by Tetsuo Kogawa, Japanese social critic and media activist, gives some idea of the creativity and imagination of users of the shows:

> The Japanese people were told by US media that 90 per cent of the US population supported the war. We had no opportunity to evaluate this position.... Seeing the *Gulf Crisis TV Project* videos was a turning point for us. The timing was very good. Even the traditional left in Japan has suddenly become interested in using new technology: otherwise they cannot break through.
>
> I circulated over thirty copies of the Gulf Crisis videos to key persons in various organisations and friends of mine in many locations throughout Japan. All of those who received the tape were very interested in the video and they either personally or with their organisations duplicated it and circulated it to other groups and individuals. So that one package of video made a loose network.
>
> Each person and each organisation who received the video began to connect with each other. The act of duplication, transcription and translation became a means of organising: after they received the tape,

groups made copies and sent them to a new group. Many collaborated in making the transcriptions and translations and sending copies to those who received the video next. The complete text of the four programmes was entered into several computer networks, and became the basis for articles in newsletters and periodicals on the left.[7]

As the air war started in mid-January 1991, the mainstream press rallied round the flag. At the same time opposition to the war was building up steam. Project Co-ordinator Cathy Scott worked with Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, a media watchdog group, and others to put together a demonstration on 30 January that took thousands of protesting people to the headquarters of the networks. Our success with the first series and our sense of outrage at the media-managed war made us feel it was critical to keep making shows.

The second series

For the first series we fed four shows as a block on the satellite, but for our second series we decided to adopt a weekly approach which we hoped would encourage programmers to pick us up on a regular rather than *ad hoc* basis.

The content of our first series had to a large extent been dictated by the material people sent us. For the second series we started by hammering out topics we felt were being dealt with by the mainstream press either poorly or not at all. These included issues of media censorship, racism, resistance in the military, Middle East geo-politics, economic issues surrounding the war, and, in an effort to do globally what we had done nationally, a show looking at the anti-war movement around the world. Having six shows meant we had room for more producers. We approached several people informally, based on the need we felt for increased representation from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The group we ended up with consisted of over a dozen people, about half of whom had not worked with Deep Dish or Paper Tiger before, representing Latino, African-American, Caribbean, Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds.

As producer Dee Dee Halleck noted, for the second series:

> The goals were even bigger this time around as the situation of the real war going on added tremendous stress to everyone involved in the project. For the first series, we had been motivated with the urgent need to *stop* the war from happening. Once it had started with its inexorable pattern of destruction and violence, it was hard to feel any power to affect the outcome.[8]

The pressure of having to put out shows once a week was tremendous. We thought of ourselves as a collective, but without really acknowledging it we had moved into a situation of producing shows as individual producers without creating an effective framework for collective discussion of the content or direction of the shows.

Just getting us together was tough, and getting the shows out for the deadline was tougher. Our pairing of producers, intended to complement skills, worked well in some cases and very poorly in others. We now had a multi-cultural group, and issues of racism and sexism, from which we had assumed our larger goals would exempt us, came to the fore. As producer Dee Dee Halleck put it:

> The office was often chaotic and tense, but in spite of, or perhaps because of the difficult circumstances, there was a healthy autonomy given to the producers which resulted in shows that are very strong, often brilliant. More difficult were the personnel relations between show producers and among the larger group. It had been naive at best to assume that twelve headstrong creative people could be almost randomly paired together to make a television series in such a short time. It was even more naive to expect difficult racial and national tensions to be erased easily in a common project.[9]

But somehow, amid crises and problems, a series of shows came out. They looked more 'produced' than the first series, and the tone was one of anger, passion and deep commitment to political engagement. Our effort to give voice to the many communities opposed to the war was successful to the extent that viewers saw Arab-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, African-Americans and protesters from Mexico to London to Amman stating a clear-cut case for an end to the Gulf War. As French media activist Nathalie Magnan noted: 'It's like the first series tried to be polite. In the second series they were saying, OK, guys, we tried to be polite and it didn't work. This time we're going to really give it to you.'[10]

For our second series, as for our first, we were counting on transmitting both to public access cable stations, via Deep Dish, and on PBS through WYBE, the Philadelphia station which had sponsored our first four shows. However, at the last possible moment, after our publicity

had been distributed, WYBE pulled out. Programming manager John Vernille told us that the infant station was suddenly facing a licence challenge from the Federal Communications Commission on the technical grounds that their signal was interfering with that of an FM radio station. Since the FCC has the power to revoke a station's licence, they could not risk any other problems. This was early in February, and US forces were waging war in the air (and on the airwaves) with full ferocity. A 'rally round the flag' mentality had set in, and the climate that had allowed us access to the broadcast media had altered extensively.

Ultimately we soft-fed four of the shows, and a few PBS stations picked them up. But from 19 February, a show ran each week on public access cable. *News World Order* looked at media coverage of the war; *Manufacturing the Enemy* focused on the racism faced by Arab-Americans; *Global Dissent* brought together anti-war material from around the world; *Lines in the Sand* looked at US and European policy in the Middle East; *Just Say No!* dealt with resistance in the military; and *War on the Homefront* pinpointed the economic background of the war. The series ended with *Veterans for Peace*, a live feed with a telephone call-in produced by a veterans group in Boston.

The last three shows in the series came out after the war had ended. The loss of the PBS connection, along with the startling rapidity of the ground war, meant that the impact of the second half of the series was less than that of the first part. Nonetheless, we had succeeded in putting together an amazing amount of material in a very short time and getting it out to large numbers of people. In the months following the war the shows continued to go out to schools, universities, cable networks, festivals and media arts centres around the world.

Recent rulings by the Federal Communications Commission threaten to undermine public access cable. The FCC has ruled that local telephone companies may now provide video services directly to the home via phone lines. Previously only cable companies, under strict franchise agreements which included provisions for public access, were allowed to provide video services. The FCC has no plans to require that telephone companies provide public access to video 'dialtone' systems. The FCC is even considering adopting policies to allow cable companies and telephone companies to enter into joint ventures under which neither would be required to obtain a franchise. Present cable franchise agreements, some of which extend well into the 90s, must still be honoured, and telephone companies are not technologically ready to take immediate advantage of the government's green light. Despite this, the deregulatory fever, begun by Reagan and continued under the Bush administration, poses a huge long-term challenge to the public access movement.

With *The Gulf Crisis TV Project*, Deep Dish made its first intensive efforts to get PBS affiliates to downlink its programmes. Since that time, collaboration with the community-oriented PBS affiliate WYBE in Philadelphia has continued. Recently, WYBE presented another Deep Dish series on the PBS satellite. The series, *Behind Censorship: The Assault on Civil Liberties*, attempts to show the links between the issue of censorship in the arts and other restrictions of civil rights and liberties, and includes programmes on political prisoners, reproductive rights, and the struggle for self-determination in questions of language and culture by non-white people. Many PBS stations downlinked and broadcast the series.

The receptivity of these PBS programmers bodes well for the future programming offerings of the Independent Television Programming Service (ITVS), established in 1990. After several years of lobbying by an alliance of independent producers, the US Congress allocated a three-year budget of over US$20 million to fund a programming service which would supply PBS stations with programming that was independently produced. The first round of programming is still in the pipeline, and will be available for broadcast in early 1993. The reallocation for the next three years of funding is currently the target of conservatives like Senator Jesse Helms. Helms and his cohorts would prefer to eliminate federal support of public broadcasting altogether. Failing this, they will probably focus on the cancellation of further funding of ITVS. The real test will come when the first crop of programming is released. The controversy that is sure to arise will put the concept of independent programming in the limelight. Our hope is that the controversy can be used to expand support for innovative programming initiatives.

Finally, the international links formed by the *Gulf Crisis TV Project* are one of the more important, and as of now, one of the more difficult aspects of our effort to assess. Models of media vary widely from country to country. It is clear, however, that the proliferation of the profit-making 'American-style' model of television will continue to use new cable and satellite technologies to outflank older media under state control. At the same time, as the Gulf War made clear, the waning empires of the North will increasingly depend on international alliances to reinforce their hold on the world's strategic resources and to destabilise alternative centres of power.

Here the role of activist media in helping to forge a growing international grass-roots movement has become significant. A dioxin-producing chemical plant forced to leave Arkansas in 1990 by local citizens' action, for instance, was greeted on its arrival in Malaysia in 1991 by local environmentalists with a full range of information on the plant's deadly by-products. Increased threats to international peace and to the environment, hand in hand with a proliferation of commercial, entertainment-oriented broadcasting models, mean that the international connections formed by grass-roots media workers will become ever more critical.

NOTES

1. Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in the News Media* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1991), p. xxiii.
2. Janet Sorenson, 'The Missing Links: From Censorship to Access', *Afterimage* (Rochester, NY) vol. 19 no. 6, January 1992.
3. Amy Taubin, 'Talking Back to Television: the Gulf Crisis TV Project', *The Village Voice*, 5 March 1991.
4. Jonathan Mandel, 'Stay Tuned for America's Angriest Home Videos', *New York Newsday*, 25 February 1991.
5. Sorenson, 'The Missing Links'.
6. Peter Fleming, press release, Vision/TV, Toronto, 19 February 1991.
7. Tetsuo Kogawa, 'A Japanese Perspective on the Gulf War', unpublished interview with producers of the *Gulf Crisis TV Project*, February 1991.
8. Dee Dee Halleck, 'Chronology of the Gulf Crisis TV Project', unpublished article, August 1991.
9. Ibid.
10. Informal conversation, September 1991.