

media activists and

social movements

by scott uzelman

# HARD AT WORK IN

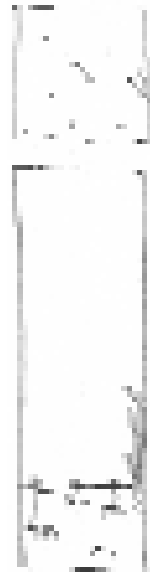


Running bamboo often gives rise to unwitting bamboo gardeners. A single innocent shoot can stand alone for several years and then suddenly an entire field of bamboo begins to sprout. This leaves the unsuspecting gardener with a new bamboo garden that stubbornly resists attempts to get rid of it. While on the surface each shoot appears to be an individual, related but separate from its neighbours, underground all are connected through a complex network of root-like stems and filaments called a rhizome.<sup>1</sup> During the years the gardener watched a single bamboo shoot grow tall, underground the bamboo rhizome grew horizontally, spreading throughout the yard, storing nutrients in anticipation of a coming spring. Like the bamboo garden, social movements are often rhizomatic organisms growing horizontally into new terrains, establishing connections just below the surface of everyday life, eventually bursting forth in unpredictable ways. And there, unseen amongst the grassroots, facilitating rhizomatic growth, work the media activists.

Media activists are crucial catalysts in movements for social and environmental justice. This chapter begins with a brief exploration of social movements as localized and networked communities of resistance that are dependent upon communication for their continued existence and growth. It then turns to the people who take up communication-centred struggles and examines their tactics and strategies. A distinction is made between alternative media activists, those who work to reform mainstream media, and autonomous media activists, those who seek to bypass mainstream media by fostering new forms of participatory and democratic communication. By directly confronting the mainstream corporate media, or by taking direct action to bypass them altogether, media activists facilitate the spread of social movement rhizomes.

### imagined communities of resistance and struggle

We often speak of social movements as if they are creatures with a coherent will of their own, as entities we can see and point to. But in reality there are no such objects to observe. Even the massive demonstrations against the institutions of corporate rule—the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization, or imperialist oil wars in the Middle East—are not in themselves social movements. Just as the single bamboo stalk is only a localized extension of a larger organism, demonstrations, uprisings, revolts, and even



revolutions are only the manifestation of social forces that are larger, more resilient and more widespread than these outbursts of popular discontent. “Social movement,” then, is just the shorthand we use to refer to the often diffuse and fluid communities of individuals and groups who resist various oppressive forms of power and control. Perhaps more importantly, social movements work to create democratic alternatives and to improve the conditions in which we live. These communities are, as Benedict Anderson famously stated,<sup>2</sup> largely imagined in that while most activists generally circulate within a dense network of fellow dissidents, they will never meet all of them in their local area, let alone the millions of people world-wide who are involved in similar struggles.

Communities of struggle and transformation are thus communicative phenomena. Social movements are dependent upon the establishment and maintenance of local spaces and diffuse networks of communication through which communities are imagined, developed, and mobilized for action.

Communication within social movements often grows like the bamboo rhizome—horizontally, in multiple directions, from many points, without a centre or clear hierarchy. These flows of communication are often experimental and unplanned; social movements frequently adopt new modes of communication and adapt them to meet their needs. Various communication technologies allow dispersed people and groups to foster a sense of connectedness, to recognize common interests and causes as they share their critiques of inequality and unaccountable power, their successes, defeats, strategies, future plans, and so on. Yet, despite the proliferation and global reach of communication technologies, creating such spaces is not an easy task. Social movements often confront near monopolies over the means of communication in the form of corporate media conglomerates and even public broadcasting systems. So much, then, depends upon the media activists.

### mainstream media and the mushroom treatment

“The media,” my dad never tires of saying, “subject us to the mushroom treatment. They keep us in the dark and feed us lots of shit.” On this he wouldn’t get much disagreement from people involved in social movements. Many excellent books have been devoted to the problem of the corporate media which cannot be summed up in this short chapter.<sup>3</sup> What must be

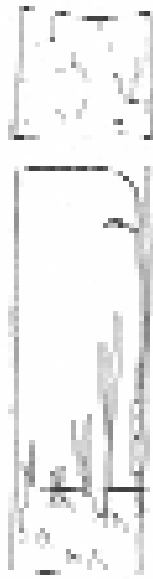


emphasized here are the ways in which the corporate media function to undermine the growth and development of resisting communities.

At the risk of drastically over-simplifying the problem, there are two primary impediments to any project that seeks to manufacture dissent. First, while social movements are dependent upon the circulation of what we might call counter-information—information critical of the status quo—the very structure, institutional interests, and routines of mainstream, corporate media effectively act as blockades to dissenting opinion. Giant, horizontally and vertically integrated media corporations have little reason to give sustained coverage to voices critical of the conditions in which such entities thrive. This is not to say that the media are completely blind to the excesses of capitalism, abuses of power by the powerful, routine acts of injustice perpetrated by dominant institutions, and so on. We are all too often exposed to images of horrific oil and chemical spills, sordid tales of corporate fraud and political scandal, for example. However, these sad stories are often individualized, lacking in history and context, and abbreviated into easily digestible sound bite explanations—a drunken oil tanker captain here, a few bad apples there.

On systemic issues, the media are, not surprisingly, almost asleep. For example, media corporations have no interest in challenging the spread of neoliberal economic dogma in any serious way because they benefit from decreased regulation, reduced corporate taxation, weakened organized labour, and so on. Indeed, in this race to the bottom they have been more like cheerleaders than watchdogs. On the growth of corporate power and simultaneous erosion of democratic processes and institutions, the media have little to say. They also have no interest in presenting a sustained challenge to the environmental damage wrought by consumer capitalism given their commercial function in attracting audiences to sell to advertisers. Name an oppressive form of power—patriarchy, racism, colonialism, ageism, homophobia, etc.—and it doesn't take much looking to find an example where the media has opted to exploit the negative representations that prop it up. In other words, on the issues around which social movements often congeal, the media tend to look the other way at best and, at worst, deliberately or unintentionally support them.

These tendencies are only reinforced by the mainstream media's privileging unidirectional communicative relationships. As mass media—commercial





television, radio, newspapers, and, to a lesser extent, the internet—privilege a one-way flow of information and entertainment, offer very few opportunities for public participation in the creation of content.<sup>4</sup> This is not just a product of technological form but rather of the manner in which media institutions have been constructed historically as profit-seeking, private businesses. The public tends to be positioned as consumers and only rarely as producers of content; people are encouraged to see themselves as spectators rather than participants.

This brings us to a second general point. The profitability of the corporate media depends on their ability to cultivate a specific type of person. In order to keep their customers happy (i.e., advertisers), the corporate media actively encourage us to see ourselves as individual, self-interested, acquisitive consumers rather than as collective, community-minded, inquisitive citizens. As vectors of advertising, the world they present tends to be de-politicized, a-historical, somewhat random, inevitable, and eternal. Any problems we might face are a product of our own individual failures and are solvable primarily through hard work (i.e., paid employment) and product purchases. In this land of market-believe, the good life becomes a lifetime of shopping, where freedom equals wealth, and solidarity means supporting the local pro-hockey team.

From these few points of a much larger critique of the mainstream, corporate media, it is clear that they represent an imposing barrier to movements for social and environmental justice.

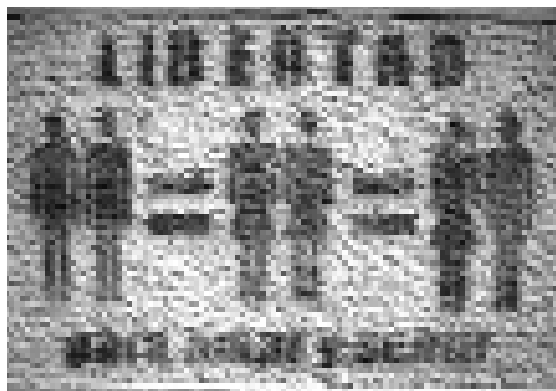
### **hard at work amongst the rhizomes**

The sorry state of the media system in most countries has inspired people the world over to challenge dominant media institutions, whether they are corporate or state-run, and to begin the work of building their own democratic media. A diverse range of activists and groups have employed numerous strategies to put an end to the mushroom treatment. Media activists have worked to: a) open the mainstream media to a wider range of ideas and perspectives; b) subvert dominant cultural, commercial, and political messages; c) reform media practices and ownership structures through regulatory or legal pressure; and/or d) bypass the dominant media system by creating forms of participatory and democratic communication that often radically break with established traditions. We might even see these world-wide efforts to challenge mainstream media as a unique social movement—a media democracy movement.



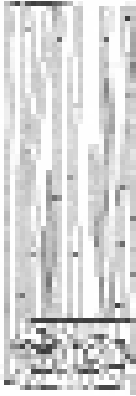
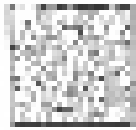
This is not to say that there is some imagined community of pure media activists that is distinct and separate from other social movements. Rather, media activists, and media activist collectives and organizations generally work within the more encompassing contemporary movement of movements to which we append various adjectives—anti-corporate globalization, pro-democracy, anti-capitalist, global justice, etc. Broadly speaking, we might call anyone who works to challenge or bypass the mainstream media a media activist. This broad definition would probably capture all sorts of people who focus their energies on the problem of the mainstream media. It also includes those who don't consider themselves media activists but who recognize that their concerns will be ignored or marginalized by the corporate media unless action is taken against them. But again, we shouldn't fall into the trap of thinking about pure media activists versus dabblers. Even activists who have made media democracy their primary focus also tend to involve themselves in other movements (e.g. environmental, women's, anti-racist, labour, etc.).

Media activists don't fit a typical age, gender, race, or class profile. They are found in so-called developing countries and in over-developed countries. They come from the ranks of the poor and from the affluent, the young and the old. Some practice their media activism in their spare time away from work and others are full-time, paid or unpaid, activists. They are sometimes professional lobbyists, lawyers, unionists, or workers in non-profit organizations. Some are students, others are teachers or academics. They can be musicians, artists, writers, photographers and videographers; a lot of them are Jacks or Jills of many trades. What motivates people from



“freedom to love and feel”

all walks of life to struggle to change the media-scape in which we live stems from a general recognition that the tools of communication that play such a central role in our lives are put to use in very limited ways, for very narrow purposes, and for the benefit of a small minority of wealthy



individuals. It is a struggle that often takes place beyond the eye of the mainstream media (for obvious reasons), tucked away amongst the grassroots.

### strategies of media activists: alternatives vs. autonomy

With this broad definition and sketch of the media activist in mind, it is helpful to make a distinction between two general strategies employed to remedy the problem of the mainstream, corporate media. Within the media democratization movement we can see a split between alternative media strategies and autonomous media strategies.<sup>5</sup> Whereas the former focus primarily on changing mainstream media content, the latter seek also to change the ways we communicate by encouraging participation and dialogue.

Alternative media strategies are those that focus primarily on challenging the mainstream media to become more accountable to the publics they claim to serve, or on using existing media structures and processes to distribute counter-information. Media activists committed to this strategy have employed a colourful collage of tactics. For example, a number of organizations have attempted to challenge corporate control through legislative or legal processes, in particular around ownership rules (e.g., the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom in the U.K. or the Council of Canadians in Canada). Others have sought to defend and expand public broadcasting; in Canada, Friends of Canadian Broadcasting has been on the frontlines against the continued onslaught against the CBC by right-wing pundits and political parties. Some campaigns have been carried out by media workers themselves to preserve their autonomy from the commercial logic of employers. Many groups, Greenpeace being the most famous, have become masters at opening spaces for dissent by manipulating media coverage through the production of spectacular events. We can also think of campaigns to better educate media consumers on the blind spots, double standards, biases, and effects of corporate media, through media literacy (e.g., Check Your Head or Media Education Foundation) and media analysis and monitoring (e.g., NewsWatch Canada, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting [FAIR] or Project Censored) as alternative media strategies.

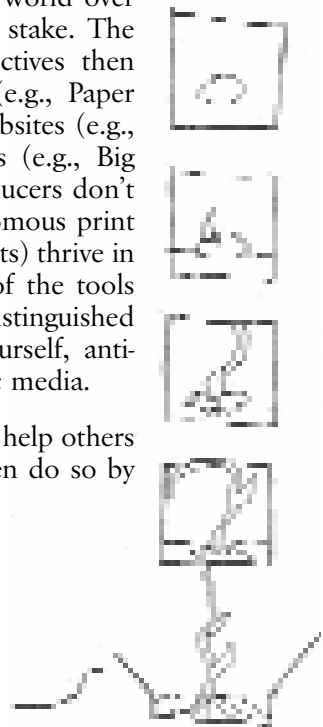
At the heart of this strategy, whatever form it takes, is a concern with disseminating counter or alternative information. What remains largely

unchallenged, however, is one of the key logics guiding the mass media—the privileging of one-way flows of information from the media to consumers. In other words, content and not form tends to be the central issue for alternative media activists.

Autonomous media strategies, on the other hand, attempt to bypass the mainstream media through experimentation with new forms of democratic communication that are relatively independent from corporate and government power.<sup>6</sup> Not only do autonomous media function as channels through which dissident perspectives can flow but they also often seek to foster new, more democratic and participatory ways of communicating. Where the hierarchical, point-to-mass structure of the mainstream media privileges representation and monologue, autonomous media often are much more open to democratic decision-making, popular participation in the creation of content, and dialogue between participants. In fact, many of them require it.

Autonomous media strategies often involve establishing more democratic and participatory forms of television, radio, print, and internet-based media. For people committed to autonomous media, it is not enough to open the mainstream media to a wider range of voices. We must also radically democratize the means of communication. To do so, autonomous media activists take up the tools of communication in order to tell their own stories. For instance, as prices have fallen, the video camera has become increasingly popular with autonomous media activists. We see video cameras employed at protests the world over to provide coverage of the events and issues at stake. The images produced by these individuals or collectives then often appear on community access television (e.g., Paper Tiger Television) as streaming video through websites (e.g., Guerrilla News Network), or in documentaries (e.g., Big Noise Films). However, autonomous media producers don't limit themselves to expensive technology; autonomous print projects (e.g. newspapers, handbills, and pamphlets) thrive in neighbourhoods around the world. Regardless of the tools they take up, autonomous media activists are distinguished by their commitment to an egalitarian, do-it-yourself, anti-authoritarian ethic in the struggle for democratic media.

Autonomous media activists also encourage and help others to produce their own media products. They often do so by





sharing skills through workshops and hands-on training sessions in which people are taught to use, for example, digital video and audio equipment, computer-based editing equipment, or are given tips for writing good eyewitness or investigative reports. This practice is carried out by Undercurrents, a group of video activists in Wales that is committed to encouraging and training people to use video for covering and disseminating issues and events routinely ignored by the mainstream media. In a less direct way, autonomous media activists are also teachers by way of the good examples they provide. Their very existence demonstrates what people with a few resources and a lot of boldness, energy, creativity, and commitment can do to become the media and democratize the means and processes of communication.

Autonomous media strategies also include experiments with new communication technologies. Here we can think of email as a powerful tool of dialogue and information dissemination, one that helped to defeat the initial negotiations for the Multilateral Agreement on Investment.<sup>7</sup> Cell phones and text messaging are also becoming increasingly useful in activating and coordinating spontaneous uprisings, notably in Venezuela (see below) and in the Philippines during the popular uprising, People Power II, in 2001, against the Estrada government.<sup>8</sup> Those autonomous media activists with technical skills like computer programming, webpage design, or electronic hardware maintenance play crucial roles in these sorts of experiments. A great deal of the energy and new ideas behind the Independent Media Centre movement, for instance, were generated by these skilled individuals as they worked to design and enhance the software behind the websites, to maintain the computer servers, to train others in these skills, and so on.

Besides experimenting with new communication technologies, autonomous media activists often engage in various forms of critique through artistic expression such as culture jamming or adbusting, billboard liberation, political graffiti and murals, street theatre and other forms of performance art, such as DJ-ing. To the extent that these forms of expression encourage public participation in the act of criticism, they are moving beyond the consumptive relationship encouraged by mass media. With this in mind, we could also include pamphlet or leaflet distribution, stickering, or posterizing in a list of autonomous media tactics.

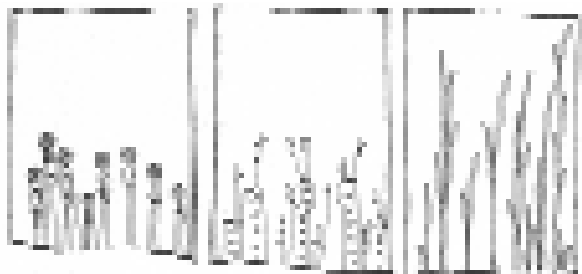
Of course, alternative and autonomous media strategies are not mutually exclusive; many media activists and groups employ both strategies as needed.

Independent Community Television (ICTV) in Vancouver, a small cooperative of grassroots video producers that encourages public access to community TV, serves as a good example of the fusing of both strategies. In 2001, ICTV applied to the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, the federal regulator of broadcasting in Canada, for a low-power broadcasting license in order to operate a non-profit television station that would serve Vancouver communities. Although their request had not yet been granted as of the writing of this essay, ICTV stands as a good example of an autonomous media collective that has attempted to use government regulation to open up spaces for autonomous media within the existing mediascape.

Regardless of how we classify these experiments, what is important to keep in mind are the logics that guide different facets of media activism. The different logics are important not only to the way we conduct our politics but also to the way we conceive social change. Alternative media strategies, by demanding change of powerful institutions, in some respects take for granted the legitimacy of these powerful institutions. They may ask for more balanced news reporting or limits to violent entertainment. However, they don't demand that media corporations stop promoting endless consumption through advertising and they rarely advocate for public access to corporate media-making facilities. Rather, alternative media activists demand that the mainstream media temper undesirable behaviours and make room for other perspectives within existing formats. Autonomous media strategies, on the other hand, do not "clothe the emperor" by appealing to dominant institutions for justice. Instead, they work to undermine and subvert them through direct action to fulfill local needs in the here and now.

### helping the bamboo garden to blossom

The sceptic might look at autonomous media practices as little more than interesting but marginal experiments with little effect, something akin to pissing one's self in a dark blue suit: you get instant relief, you feel warm all over for awhile, and pretty much no one notices. If we take a narrow view and point at the small activist newspaper, or the local micro-radio station on their own, then the blue suit metaphor might ring true, especially to those who count success in terms of audience size alone.



However, looking at individual autonomous media examples is a bit like looking at a single filament of a larger rhizome. By taking the part to represent the whole, we fail to recognize each autonomous media experiment's interconnectedness with a much larger organism. When we look at autonomous media as a whole—as a complex media mesh of experiments in democratic communication—the number of people noticing increases exponentially.

Two recent examples stand out. First, we can think of the success of the Independent Media Centre (IMC) movement which, especially during large-scale events such as the 2001 Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in Québec City or the 2004 demonstrations against the Republican National Convention in New York, has routinely drawn hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people to its network of websites. Not only was the IMC network a focal point for people interested in the issues and events surrounding these protests, but it also served as a way for information to be distributed to other autonomous media projects.

A second example can be seen in a more localized event, one that had an impact on an entire region. During the coup against Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez in 2002, grassroots media played a key role in thwarting the attempt to overthrow the elected government. Because the mainstream media celebrated the coup and refused to cover the initial demonstrations in the streets, and resistance by elements of the military, community media proved invaluable in bypassing corporate control of the means of mass communication. Grassroots radio and television stations broadcasted the initial resistance to the coup and consequently helped to mobilize tens of thousands of people who took to the streets in protest. The resistance was further amplified through the use of cell phones to distribute information and mobilize popular resistance. Two days after it had begun, thanks in part to grassroots media, the coup regime collapsed.<sup>9</sup>

We may advocate for autonomous media practice for the simple reason that it seems unlikely that governments—the majority of which seem to be under the sway of free market ideology—will move to regulate the mainstream media or to spend the money necessary for public broadcasters to fulfill their public service mandate. And asking for media corporations to willingly change is a bit like asking a tiger to become vegetarian. Faced with these obstacles, the way towards media democratization may not only be through the mainstream media but may also require going around them. Rather than waiting for the powerful to be swayed by the force of

our arguments, it might prove more effective to get on with the work of experimenting with autonomous media in the hope that we can help the rhizomes of social movements to flourish so that one day they might rise up from below and blossom into beautiful new bamboo gardens and a full-fledged media democracy movement.

## notes

<sup>1</sup> The rhizome metaphor comes from Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London, U.K.: Athlone Press. They use the metaphor to describe horizontally linked, non-hierarchical forms of social organization, thought, communication, etc. (pgs. 3-25).

<sup>2</sup> For information about the notion of imagined communities, please see: Anderson, Benedict. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised Edition. London, U.K. & New York: Verso.

<sup>3</sup> More complete critiques of the corporate media include: Nichols, John & Robert W. McChesney. (2000). *It's the Media, Stupid*. New York: Seven Stories Press; Shoemaker, Pamela J. & Stephen D. Reese (1996). *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences On Mass Media Content*. 2nd Edition. New York: Longman; Hackett, Robert A. & Gruneau, Richard. (2000). *The Missing News: Filters and Blind Spots in Canada's Press*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives; and Herman, Edward & Noam Chomsky. (1988). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books. For a recent empirical study of the influence of corporate power on the media, see Hackett, Robert A. and Scott Uzelman. (2003). "Tracing Corporate Influences on Press Content: A Summary of Recent NewsWatch Canada Research," *Journalism Studies*. Vol. 4 (3): pgs. 331-346.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, the internet offers unprecedented opportunities for dialogue through email and information dissemination through web pages. However, corporations still hold the balance of power in attracting audiences to commercially-oriented websites through advertising and in their ability to guide the development of the internet.

<sup>5</sup> The distinction I make between autonomous and alternative media strategies originally appeared in a Master's thesis I completed at Simon Fraser University. See Uzelman, Scott. (2002). *Catalyzing Participatory Communication: Independent Media Centre and the Politics of Direct Action*. Unpublished Master's thesis: Simon Fraser University. Published online at: [http://www.global.indymedia.org.au/local/webcast/uploads/thesis-complete\\_pdf\\_.pdf](http://www.global.indymedia.org.au/local/webcast/uploads/thesis-complete_pdf_.pdf) [accessed July 12, 2004].

<sup>6</sup> For readers interested in more examples of autonomous media projects, portal-type webpages are always a good place to start. For a list of autonomous radio stations throughout North America visit Alternative Radio's website. Media Channel provides an extensive database of autonomous media organizations and media activist resources. Free Speech TV is a useful starting point for finding autonomous TV and video projects.

<sup>7</sup> The Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) was a sweeping trade agreement that would have greatly reduced the ability of governments to regulate corporate direct investment. The negotiations, carried out in secrecy by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, stalled in 1998, in part because of grassroots resistance organized largely via email and the internet. However, despite the initial victory, the idea of the MAI seems to live on in smaller regional agreements that continue to be negotiated. For more information on the MAI see: Clarke, Tony & Maude Barlow. (1997). *MAI: The Multilateral Agreement on Investment and the Threat to Canadian Sovereignty*. Toronto: Stoddart. For more information on the grassroots resistance to the MAI, see: Dyer-Witheford, Nick. (1999). *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pgs. 229-230.

<sup>8</sup> For readers interested in the use of cell phones during the People Power II uprising, see: Rafael, Vicente. (2003). "The Cell Phone and the Crowd: Messianic Politics in the Contemporary Philippines," *Public Culture*. Vol. 15 (3), pgs. 399-425.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on the role of the corporate media in the attempted coup in Venezuela, see: Everton, Robert. (forthcoming 2005). "Media, Civil Society and the Dynamics of Regime Change in Venezuela." *Global Communications: Towards a Transcultural Political Economy*, Paula Chakravartty et al. (eds). Durham: Duke University Press. For discussion of the role of alternative media in grassroots resistance to the coup, see: Wilpert, Gregory. (2003). *Community Media in Venezuela*. Published online at: <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/articles.php?artno=1054>. [accessed August 23, 2004].

"not one more death. not one woman less"

Ni una Muerte +  
Ni una Mujer menos  
Memoria Feminista



“every day, i wash my brain with tv”

## web resources

Adbusters: [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)

Alternative Radio: [www.alternativeradio.org](http://www.alternativeradio.org)

Big Noise Films: [www.bignoisefilms.com](http://www.bignoisefilms.com)

Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (Canada): [www.presscampaign.org](http://www.presscampaign.org)

Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (UK): [www.cpbf.org.uk](http://www.cpbf.org.uk)

Check Your Head: [www.checkyourhead.org](http://www.checkyourhead.org)

Council of Canadians: [www.canadians.org](http://www.canadians.org)

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR): [www.fair.org](http://www.fair.org)

Free Speech TV: [www.freespeech.org](http://www.freespeech.org)

Friends of Canadian Broadcasting: [www.friends.ca](http://www.friends.ca)

Guerrilla News Network: [www.guerrillanews.com](http://www.guerrillanews.com)

Independent Community Television: [www.vcn.bc.ca/ictv/1pages/welcome.htm](http://www.vcn.bc.ca/ictv/1pages/welcome.htm)

Independent Media Centre: [www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)

Media Channel: [www.mediachannel.org](http://www.mediachannel.org)

Media Education Foundation: [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org)

NewsWatch Canada: [www.sfu.ca/cmns/research/newswatch/intro.html](http://www.sfu.ca/cmns/research/newswatch/intro.html)

Paper Tiger Television: [www.papertiger.org](http://www.papertiger.org)

Project Censored: [www.projectcensored.org](http://www.projectcensored.org)

Undercurrents: [www.undercurrents.org](http://www.undercurrents.org)