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The Campaign Against 'Amerika': Catalyst for Media Democratization

Robert A. Hackett

This essay recalls an ad hoc protest campaign against Amerika, a television mini-series broadcast by the ABC and CTV networks during the fading years of the Cold War (1987). Depicting a fictional Soviet takeover of the US, the program aroused a storm of controversy in both the US and Canada, where it raised additional issues such as cultural sovereignty. The partners, activities and accomplishments of the protest campaign are described; it changed the program's discursive context and forced the broadcasters to respond. More enduringly, the campaign prefigured a later wave of democratic media activism by questioning media content, challenging the asymmetrical media-audience relationship, implying a new model of public communication, highlighting the contradictions between media imperatives and social movements, and providing a springboard for specifically media-oriented activism.

This essay exhumes, from the ephemerality of television culture, events from 1986/87—years when nightmares of nuclear annihilation still haunted the public mind. The Cold War had not yet petered out, and Mikhail Gorbachev's new leadership had not yet erased American perceptions of the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire," as it was called by the hardline anti-Communist president of the day, Ronald Reagan.

In many respects, today's politics and mediascape comprise a different world. And yet, the case discussed here has implications for contemporary projects to democratize communication. It concerns a protest campaign launched by social movements, one in which the media figured not just as conduits for mobilization and message dissemination. Rather, the campaign's defining target was itself a media event—a television network mini-series called *Amerika*.

For fourteen-and-a-half prime-time hours during the week of February 15, 1987, ABC—and the Canadian network CTV—broadcast a saga about life in the USA ten years after a bloodless takeover by the Soviet Union. Some sense of the film's flavor is conveyed by the characters listed in a *Viewers' Guide* which ABC, in an unusual step, had specially prepared. Devin Milford (played by Kris Kristofferson) was a former presidential candidate, an antiwar Vietnam veteran, and the son of a once prominent farming family in Milford, Nebraska—a family reduced, like most of the population, to poverty and despair under the new regime. By the

series's end, a martyred Devin had become a symbol of hope for the renewal of American patriotism. Peter Bradford represents another option: he is a pragmatist working within the new regime to make the best of a bad situation. His wife Amanda becomes increasingly disenchanted with the compromises he makes with the authorities. Devin's sister Alatheia Milford is uncomfortable with the propaganda she is now forced to teach in the local school, but is involved in a self-destructive relationship with Helmut Gurtman, the brutal East German local commander of the Soviet-controlled United Nations peacekeeping forces. Soviet administrator Colonel Andrei Denisov manipulates Peter Bradford to dismantle the structures and symbols of American unity, yet is himself strongly attracted to the original ideals of Americanism. He consorts with Kimberly Ballard, an actress who moves towards the underground resistance after some of her friends in an "outlaw theatre" group are arrested. Meanwhile, with the help of her Soviet lover General Petra Samonov, Devin's ambitious and cunning ex-wife Marion Andrews Milford climbs the new regime's political ladder, quite prepared to kill Devin if need be.

Amerika was remarkable, but not because it was original. The manichean theme of struggle between the forces of light (Democracy) and darkness (Communism), the ideologically loaded "epic" narrated through familial and sexual relationships, and even the specific premise of national degradation and Soviet occupation, had ample precedents since the emergence of mass television and the Cold War at the same historical moment. It *was* somewhat unusual that a network television program would wear its politics so openly on its sleeves, and that in the 1980s, before the era of large-scale international co-productions, a major network would stake so much of its prestige, prime-time and money (reported variously as \$30 to \$44 million) on a film premised so explicitly on "a right-wing paranoid's dream (Gitlin 1986).

What was most remarkable about the series, though, was the campaign of protest which it provoked in the months before it aired, a campaign involving a variety of disarmament and other citizens' groups. While the campaign faded to black almost as soon as the program itself, it is deserving of rescue from the historical amnesia of North American culture. Accordingly, this article first sketches that campaign and the ensuing controversy, particularly the tactics and arguments of the protest groups, and the campaign's achievements. I then argue that the campaign constituted, implicitly or explicitly, a challenge to the logic of commercial broadcasting. As such, it has lessons about the potential for a project like Free Press and other campaigns to democratize media and communications policy in the 2000s.

The Emergence of a Controversy

The story of *Amerika* really begins on November 20, 1983, when over 80 million Americans were subjected to an imaginary nuclear war. That Sunday evening, ABC broadcast *The Day After*, a three-hour prime-time drama about the horror of a nuclear attack on a small town in Kansas. It was "one of the most widely watched and debated dramatic programs in television history" (Adams et al., 1986, 192). Nuclear freeze activists welcomed the program as "a 7 million dollar advertising job for our

issue", and prepared for a stampede of new recruits. Conservatives denounced the film as an attack on America's nuclear policies and a boost for Soviet propaganda. Seeking no doubt to deflect political criticism from the Reagan administration and its allies, ABC devoted a special issue of *Nightline* immediately following the film to a discussion of deterrence theory involving "mostly former government officials" (Adams et al. 1986).

In many ways, the program did not live up to its advance publicity and expectations. Its political impact was undermined by its avoidance of explicit political analysis, its failure to offer Americans any new information to challenge their pre-existing attitudes (already strongly favorable to a bilateral nuclear freeze), and its muted depiction of nuclear aftermath. One study even suggested that *The Day After* generated slightly increased optimism about the chances of post-nuclear survival (Adams et al. 1986).

Nevertheless, conservatives continued to call on ABC to "tell the other side of the story"—not, as some disarmament activists suggested, about life in a disarmed world, but about the consequences of abandoning America's "nuclear deterrent". Shortly before *The Day After* aired, Ben Stein, a former speech-writer for Richard Nixon, suggested in his Los Angeles newspaper column that ABC make a movie about life in America under a Soviet occupation (Stein 1983), an idea later advocated by Reed Irvine, head of the right-wing media watchdog group Accuracy in Media. This proposal found its way to ABC entertainment executive Brandon Stoddard, who asked Donald Wrye to develop a script and then to produce and direct the film (Gitlin 1986, 18).

ABC never publicly admitted that *Amerika* was a response to right-wing pressure, or an attempt to "balance" *The Day After*. Although ABC paid Stein a fee for the story idea, Stoddard consistently described it as non-political entertainment. However, the commercial pressures on network television make it vulnerable to political conformity with both elite interests and with perceived popular consensus (Hallin 1986b). As Gitlin (1985, vii) noted, *The Day After*, "muffled as it turned out to be, was dreamed up before Ronald Reagan came to office. In the ensuing political climate, the space for political diversity at the networks has shrunk." When *Amerika* was conceived in 1983/84, Reagan and his conservative supporters were in the political ascendancy, and superpower relations were at their worst in twenty years (the Soviets had shot down a Korean airliner in September 1983, Reagan had announced his controversial "Star Wars" missile defense program, and the deployment of new missiles was sparking massive demonstrations in Western Europe).

By autumn 1985, the first newspaper reports about the project began to ring political alarm bells. Despite ABC's secrecy about the plot, versions of the script were leaked to the emerging media monitoring group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), whose access to such inside information thus made it an instant media source, according to FAIR founder Jeff Cohen in an interview with this writer. And the plot had something to outrage almost everybody to the left of Darth Vader—an America weakened from within by apathy, feminism and peaceniks, and populated with opportunistic collaborators and an ineffective Resistance, acquiescing in its transformation into the Soviet-controlled puppet state of Amerika—until the spirit of patriotism is rekindled by Kristofferson's protagonist.

Small wonder that this scenario pushed political buttons. The Soviets themselves were amongst the first to protest, threatening to withhold co-operation from ABC News' Moscow bureau for three years if the network proceeded with the project. But the Soviets' blustering backfired. In the process of being taken over by the budget-conscious Capital Cities Communications – a precursor of media mergers to come – ABC had been considering axing the project for financial reasons. But the Soviet threats (slyly amplified by *Amerika's* supporters within ABC) backed the network publicly into a corner. With its reputation on the home front at stake, ABC pushed ahead with the project.

Filming began in spring 1986, in Tecumseh, a depressed rural Nebraskan town which doubled as Milford in *Amerika's* Heartland. Smitten by the glamour of Hollywood, the local press greeted the film with civic boosterism, and the populace lined up for jobs as extras. The relatively few Nebraskan peace activists who protested the film's militaristic implications were generally ignored or dismissed as spoilsports.

Nevertheless, an unusual groundswell of protest did develop within the US and Canada, a groundswell without a centre in any single organization, and one which (at least temporarily and ambivalently) included members of the political and media elites, as well as dozens of grassroots citizens' groups. The campaign coalition included religious groups, feminists, academics, professionals, peace education centres, disarmament and nuclear freeze groups, community and access media activists, media critics, friends of the United Nations, anti-interventionists, groups concerned with globalism, US-Soviet relations, peace, social justice and Third World solidarity.

The protests focused on several themes. Most frequently, the film was decried for fostering an unduly paranoid view of the USSR, a criticism shared even by some Establishment figures, like ex-CIA chief William Colby. Other elite critics focused on the film's negative depiction of United Nations' peacekeepers as a brutal tool of Soviet domination. Prodded by concerned Americans and Canadians, UN officials and supporters joined the emerging controversy.

Critics further to the left were angered by the film's portrayal of socialist and even liberal interpretations of American society as Soviet propaganda, by its perceived stereotyping of women that provided grounds for a feminist critique of the film, and by its promotion of militarism. FAIR's founder Jeff Cohen called the mini-series a commercial for Reagan's Star Wars program (Waters 1986).

One suspects, however, that much of the opposition was animated less by the film's (mis)representation of specific groups and viewpoints than by the "structure of feeling" (Williams 1977) that it both expressed and evoked. *Amerika* was, in the very words of an ABC commercial, a "call to arms". It sought to "revitalize" American patriotism, without clearly distinguishing it from superpower chauvinism, and to equate it with an ideologically narrow set of values, such as "freedom" defined as rugged individualism. It created a mood of siege from without and betrayal from within, and provided a myth of national degradation and potential redemption through a charismatic (male) leader who personifies national ideals. It offered the pleasure of a narrative in which American audiences could, yet again, revel in seeing themselves as victims, underdogs and rebels—an inversion of their

system's real role in the world which had been evident in popular literature even following the US atomic bombing of Japan (Boyer 1985, 14).

In short, *Amerika* was a litmus test of political sensibilities. It was most likely to offend Americans whose social experience or historical memory—most notably from the counterculture of the Vietnam war era—gave them reason to fear the intensification of American nationalism into an unreflective chauvinism. It was a lightning rod for Americans who felt the dominant media had been complicit in the political consequences of Reaganism—renewed Cold War tensions, the containment of domestic dissent, growing economic inequality, and a militaristic and interventionist foreign policy. Similar sentiments regarding the US corporate media's complicity in massaging public opinion prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, catalyzed outrage and resurgent media activism two decades later (McChesney 2004, 279-80).

By the time *Amerika* aired in February 1987, the protest campaign encompassed a wide range of grassroots activities. FAIR set up its first formal office in New York City and took a leading role in developing critical media reaction to the mini-series very early on. The Philadelphia-based American Friends Service Committee, the Quakers, provided activists and the media with informational packets. Educators for Social Responsibility, with 10,000 members in the US, prepared teaching materials for elementary and secondary schools. Psychologists for Social Responsibility held a New York conference on "the psychology of enemy images". In the spirit of town-meeting democracy, local groups organized teach-ins and other public events, and approached local media outlets, especially ABC affiliates, for programming to provide alternative views. The California satirical troupe, the Plutonium Players, inspired "Amerikon" parties where radical "couch potatoes" gathered to conduct semiotic guerrilla warfare, challenging the frustration and isolation of viewing the program alone, and sometime generating local media coverage.

A great deal of the anti-*Amerika* campaign focussed on pressuring ABC and its local affiliates to provide counterbalancing programming. Indeed, one of the first organizations actively to mobilize on the issue was named Equal Time. It was not a well-heeled think tank, but consisted of two neighbors, Jane Schirmer and Barb Tiedje, working out of Schirmer's kitchen in Madison, Wisconsin, with her three small children as officemates. Using out-of-pocket money, the two women contacted hundreds of groups listed in a local church's Peace and Justice Directory, alerting them to propagandistic elements of the script. Schirmer and Tiedje also circulated petitions and collected thousands of signatures calling on ABC to grant equal time to opposing viewpoints. And they identified and contacted potential sponsors of *Amerika*, including the Chrysler Corporation which was preparing to buy millions of dollars' worth of airtime.

***Amerika* in Canada**

The campaign against *Amerika* extended to Canada as well, partly because Canada's largest commercial television network, CTV, decided to broadcast *Amerika*—the only non-American broadcaster to do so, even though most Canadian house-

holds could receive ABC directly through their cable service. Longstanding Canadian concerns about cultural sovereignty, combined with growing skepticism regarding the US role in the arms race, meant that Canadian audiences were not particularly likely to accept the film on its own terms.

Moreover, much of the film was actually made in Canada. Lured by the professionalism of local film crews, the (then) cheap Canadian dollar, and other economic considerations critical to the film's completion, the producers shot a number of scenes in Toronto during summer 1986, with tax-funded logistical help from civic authorities (including the police and fire departments) and the Ontario Film Development Corporation (OFDC), whose mandate includes facilitating film production in the province. Officials co-operated with the producers by keeping film locations secret and refusing to discuss the script.

As in the US, Canadian opposition emerged in an *ad hoc* way, first surfacing at a Toronto public meeting in July 1986. Sponsored by Performing Artists for Nuclear Disarmament (PAND), the panelists included an outspoken media critic of the film, and director Donald Wrye, who reportedly participated only on condition that the press be barred due to its "self-serving" coverage.

The outcome was the formation of Propaganda Alert (PA). Launched by Laura Sky, Toronto film-maker and founder of Media People for Social Responsibility, and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio producer Max Allen, PA was an *ad hoc* alliance of actors, writers, peace activists and media people. Born of outrage, and without precedents for fighting network television, PA's precise objectives and strategy were not obvious givens. In the end, PA took a position both against state censorship, *and* against state subsidization of "hateful and destructive propaganda." Rather than try to sabotage the production, the group chose to stimulate public awareness and debate over the ethical implications of the film's messages, as well as the manner of its making—the film-makers' disruption of neighborhoods, schools and hospitals without adequately informing residents about the nature of the project; the collusion of public authorities with the film-makers, without sufficient prior public debate; and the self-censorship of Canadian cultural workers resulting from their economic dependence on foreign projects and fear of blacklisting—in ironic contrast to the film's intended message of (American) freedom and civic engagement (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 1987, 20). In part, PA chose these issues to make *Amerika* a local concern, to drive home the point that Cold War paranoia was being produced in Torontonians' backyard, and that they had some stake and responsibility in it.

PA's small core of activists generated a whirlwind of activity, from virtual street theatre to political lobbying. They contacted peace and social justice groups in the US, working particularly closely with FAIR, Equal Time, the Committee for National Security, and church groups, to form a network to exchange information and to plan action. (Ironically, such American connections probably provided the cachet to make *Amerika* a major media issue in Canada.) Acting on tips from informants, they charged around Toronto to photograph the filming on location and to hand out leaflets to spectators. They obtained a leaked copy of the script, and after marathon photocopying sessions in those pre-Internet days, made it available at several locations for public perusal. In the venerable tradition of conscientious dis-

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sent, they sought to document, to witness and to testify about an activity they regarded as a public wrong.

In addition, they lobbied relevant civic and provincial politicians and officials. They asked for details and questioned the appropriateness of government support for such productions, touted the possibility of criminal charges for disseminating hate propaganda, and wrote to institutions (including a Catholic school and the University of Toronto) that lent logistical support to the production. The protest campaign sprang up in other Canadian cities, including Vancouver, where this writer acted informally as a faculty advisor to the Simon Fraser University Media Group, a student club that prepared an educational package for high schools, contacted local disarmament groups, arranged public panels, and wrote to CTV and the local press.

After all the "colossal dirigible of hype" (Bacchus 1987), the actual airing of *Amerika* in February 1987 was anti-climatic. Even at forty million viewers per night, the ratings fell short of ABC's hopes and the 1983 audience for *The Day After*. The program itself proved to be not quite the Cold War cartoon that many protesters had anticipated. To be sure, some scenes were as inflammatory as any ever seen in television entertainment: tanks rolling over defenceless refugees, the machine-gunning of Congress members. Yet the dialogue, however cliché-ridden, was several shades of sophistication beyond *Rambo*, and the two key Soviet characters were portrayed more sympathetically than many of their American counterparts. Adopting some of the conventions of realist epics (Testa 1987, 27-28), *Amerika's* pacing was often far slower than the standard Hollywood action film; some observers found it hypnotic, others simply boring. The movie's political messages were somewhat ambiguous, bearing the imprint of producer Wrye's efforts to bend the right-wing paranoid premise of a Soviet invasion to other purposes—notably a sermonette on the need for a revival of an altruistic, communitarian and almost spiritual brand of American patriotism. Conservatives complained that the horrors of Soviet occupation were underplayed. While such complaints arguably demonstrate the insatiability of the neo-conservative agenda, they also suggest that *Amerika* was not simply a Cold War Reaganite entertainment. Speculatively, the film might be seen as an expression of national angst in response to the dawn of the post-Cold War era. If the self-identity of American nationhood had long rested heavily on a Manichean contrast with the archetypical Soviet enemy, then the latter's disappearance might cause America a loss of collective purpose, even a more basic kind of disintegration (Galtung 1987; Wright 1989). Perhaps *Amerika* can be read as a lament for that condition and a call for inner renewal—one that unfortunately, appears to have been pre-empted by the 21st century "war on terror".

Its unexpectedly ambiguous and confused politics, and its relatively low ratings, probably contributed to the rapidly fading newsworthiness of *Amerika* within days of its funereal procession through prime-time. That is not to say that the protest campaign itself was without enduring significance.

The Protest Campaign's Achievements

The protest campaign changed the communicative context of the program. It turned it from another piece of network entertainment which one could consume, into a controversy which one had to discuss and choose sides. The campaign successfully defined the program as the site of conflict. Normally, in a conflict of narrow scope, "the weaker party has much to gain and little to lose by broadening the scope, drawing third parties into the conflict as mediators or partisans" (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, 116). The campaign successfully broadened the conflict and evoked or forced responses from players not initially involved.

The media/movement dynamic was a familiar one: the media helped to amplify the protest campaign, but its sometimes negative framing also helped to contain it (Gitlin 1980). In the Toronto press, a survey by local activists suggested, *Amerika* received more coverage in 1986 than any other single peace issue. In the editorial pages, debate raged. Many letters vilified the film, but others opposed the protesters, usually developing one of two arguments: first, it was entirely appropriate to emphasize the menace of Communism; second, the protests jeopardized the economic benefits of US film production in Canada. In Vancouver, press attention was most piqued by the SFU students' open letter calling, not for censorship, but for a voluntary boycott of CTV's advertisers if the network did not provide counterbalancing programming – an inflection of commercial television's own ideological rationale of consumer choice. The letter provoked an editorial in Vancouver's larger daily (*Vancouver Sun*, Feb. 10, 1987) accusing the group of "economic terrorism". (As risible as this response was in light of press silence about the censoring impact of commercialization and corporate concentration, advertiser boycotts are a controversial tactic amongst progressive media activists; FAIR avoids them on the grounds that they validate advertiser power over media content.)

Still, media frames were not entirely negative; they situated the campaign in the sphere of legitimate controversy rather than deviance (Hallin 1986a). Moreover, the campaign did attract attention to its issues, and stimulated a good deal of critical commentary on the film itself. The pre-Internet media system was not entirely monolithic, and the campaign was able to exploit such openings as the apparent disdain of some print media journalists for the dominant medium, television. The controversy received prominent coverage not only in newsmagazines like *Newsweek* and *Maclean's*, but also in weekly television listings and periodicals such as *Vogue*, *TV Guide* and *People*, which usually steer clear of "politics" (as they narrowly define it) in favor of personalities, stars and glitz. Some of these magazines ran scathing previews of *Amerika*. For instance, *People's* critic denounced the film for irresponsibly exploiting fear and world tension, describing the spectacle of UN troops demolishing the refugee camp as "the most manipulative, hysterical and violent scene I've ever seen on TV, one clearly designed to make you scream: 'Nuke Moscow!'" (Jarvis 1987, 9). The campaign was even able to dent the informal truce which normally inhibits television networks from criticizing each other. NBC's late night talk shows satirized the mini-series; news anchorman John Chancellor denounced it.

In addition to coverage of the controversy itself, some broadcasters provided

counter-programming as a political alternative to *Amerika*—a gambit perhaps without precedent in television history (Cohen 1987, A11). Discovery Channel aired about sixty hours of Soviet television; Rogers Cablevision in Canada followed suit. Phil Donahue's talk show broadcast for a week from the USSR. Ted Turner's Atlanta superstation aired twelve hours of programming on disarmament, Soviet-American co-operation, and a documentary on how American media have stirred up Cold War tensions. Turner himself spoke out strongly for improved superpower relations and against ABC's "irresponsibility". Arguably, such counterbalancing would be less likely today, given the higher degree of concentrated ownership in corporate media, their greater symbiosis with government, the conscious right-wing mobilization and "Fox effect" in corporate broadcasting, and the climate of ideological conformity during the "war on terror" (Knightley 2002; McChesney 2004).

By enlarging the scope of the conflict, the campaign not only created new alliances and networks; it also motivated individuals and groups who were not otherwise involved but who shared some of its concerns to take supportive action. For instance, Propaganda Alert's photos of extras dressed as UN troops on the streets of Toronto may have been instrumental in arousing UN officials to speak out against the film. After PA intervened, the University of Toronto withdrew permission for further filming on its campus, and avoided identification in the film credits. The rector of an Anglican Church wrote a lengthy column in Canada's largest daily, the *Toronto Star* apologizing for renting church accommodation for extras without considering the implications of the movie. Unbeknownst to the protesters at the time, they were also encouraging soul-searching amongst some of the members of *Amerika's* own cast (Taylor 1986; Calixto 1987, 30).

Of course, not all the stakeholders reversed their stance. Ontario officials and politicians, Toronto's city council, the administrators of a Toronto Catholic school where some scenes were shot, all sought to sidestep the issue, disavowing responsibility for the film's content. Nevertheless, they were feeling the heat. An OFDC official paid Laura Sky the backhand compliment of describing *Amerika* as the most difficult production he had ever worked on, given the unprecedented furor.

Even some of the most powerful players in the media system, advertisers, were moved to respond to the campaign out of self-interest. Two months before airtime, press reports identified Chrysler Motors as a potential major sponsor, one intending to purchase about 38 of *Amerika's* 204 commercials for an estimated seven million dollars. It seemed like a "perfect prime-time marriage" between "an automaker that wraps itself in the flag and a mini-series that will deliver 12 hours of...tub-thumping, old-fashioned patriotism" (Gunther 1986). A Chrysler spokesman praised the projected large and upscale audience for the program. By contrast with advertisers' avoidance of *The Day After* due to right-wing attacks, a left-oriented protest campaign did not seem to pose a problem.

Undaunted, Equal Time (the two neighbors in Madison) organized a petition, forwarding thousands of copies to Chrysler chairman Lee Iacocca (and easily surpassing the mark set by *The Day After's* detractors). The petition deliberately avoided calling for the program's cancellation, a consumer boycott, or a withdrawal of sponsorship. Instead, it took the high road of "informing" the corporation of public outrage. (Other protesters were less restrained; one Chrysler stockholder and

former UN official proposed a divestment movement or buyers' boycott.) Iacocca sent Equal Time a personal letter of thanks for informing him of the opposition—then, dramatically, he withdrew Chrysler's sponsorship about two weeks before *Amerika's* debut, publicly citing the incompatibility of its "upbeat" commercials with the film's "intense and emotional" subject matter and portrayal (Boyer 1987). However, many observers, including ABC executives, felt that the protest campaign had achieved a stunning victory. In local markets, a number of other advertisers followed Chrysler's lead.

The networks with so much invested in the project could not afford to ignore the issue. As the maker and US broadcaster of *Amerika*, ABC had most at stake. Its interests, however, were not monolithic. As an advertising-dependent media enterprise, it clearly had a stake in maintaining profits through attracting large audiences to commercially viable programming. But it also may be worthwhile to produce expensive and even controversial programming which might not reap short-term profits, but which might enhance the prestige of the network (and make money through overseas sales or a second run in the schedule). Each national TV network also has a stake in maintaining its own political acceptability -- in particular, in relation to the dominant forces in the White House and Congress which are key news sources, and which have so much potential power over its legal and economic environment. Yet at the same time, as a result of their head-to-head competition for a mass national audience, the commercial networks are strongly imbued with a sense of populism, one which impels them "to avoid controversies that seem likely to offend the mass audience, or to jump on the bandwagon of what seems a safe and appealing majority sentiment" (Hallin 1986b, 15). Moreover, commercial media organizations need to maintain the appearance of integrity, objectivity, and autonomy, for the sake of public credibility—which in turn reinforces their economic, symbolic, and political capital.

ABC's responses to the unanticipated controversy illustrated this corporate balancing act. Essentially, its response boiled down to four tactics.

First, ABC attempted to legitimize the program as non-political entertainment—or even as thought-provoking drama, above and beyond run-of-the-mill prime-time fare. Yet ABC did not present that line consistently. Writer/director Donald Wrye described *Amerika* as "really just an entertainment" at a Toronto forum, yet elsewhere, he labeled it "a moral lesson in the way democracy can fail" and the value of American patriotism (Santarossa 1986; Mieses 1987; Gottlieb 1987, 42-43). Departing further from the "just entertainment" line, ABC Community Relations division produced a *Viewer's Guide to "Amerika"* that was skewed heavily towards the symbols and agenda of the political Right.

Second, perhaps caught in their own contradictions, ABC and CTV riposted to the protesters, raising the spectre of "censorship," or (more cleverly) suggesting that the controversy would inhibit creative programming in the future – a question-begging exercise that assumed that *Amerika* was, in Wrye's words, "thinking person's television" (Blair 1987, 6).

In addition to self-justification and counter-attacks, the networks made minor concessions to the protesters. ABC and some of its local affiliates provided a limited amount of airtime for discussion of *Amerika*. Most notable perhaps was a spe-

cial edition of ABC News *Viewpoint* hosted by Ted Koppel. Its battery of panelists included several media executives, and elite critics of the program—but none of the grassroots groups that had made *Amerika* an issue in the first place. Jeff Cohen, however, was able to speak from the floor, and increase FAIR's national visibility.

A less obvious minor concession consisted of certain script revisions prior to the film's final editing, and an on-air disclaimer concerning the fictional nature of the organizations depicted. On the other hand, the opposition did not win counterbalancing entertainment programming, such as already-available anti-nuclearist documentaries. Nor did ABC provide extended discussion shows comparable to those that had followed *The Day After*.

The unexpected nature of the protests contributed to the ad hoc nature of ABC's response: they fell outside the network's increasingly institutionalized mechanisms for converting potentially disruptive pressure from established interest groups into manageable and even useful feedback (Montgomery 1989). Consequently, as air-time approached and the protests continued, the network adopted a fourth tactic: incorporating the controversy into the program's pre-publicity, and using it to build the potential audience.

Reaction from members of the potential audience for *Amerika* to the protest campaign was mixed. Spectators at Toronto and Nebraska filming locations were indifferent or hostile to the protests and the ethical issues, but we have already noted a wave of support from elsewhere. Moreover, beyond its more tangible achievements, the protests changed the film's whole communicative context, and therefore its probable political impact. One study found that the protest campaign may well have established widely-held perceptions that *Amerika* was an anti-Communist Cold War morality tale, encouraging those who shared its perceived politics to watch it, and filtering out from the potential audience those who did not (Kim, Gustainis and Shoar-Ghaffar 1988). Unfortunately, the researchers did not measure respondents' perceptions of the film itself, but it is reasonable to conclude that viewers of all political stripes were made aware that it was controversial, open to question.

Moreover, the protests clearly encouraged people skeptical of the film's politics to channel private frustration and anger into public energy. The controversy provided a virtually unprecedented opportunity for progressive-minded critics to gain access to the mainstream media's huge audiences, in order to discuss (in however refracted a way) the politics, power and responsibilities of those media themselves in the nuclear age. At least briefly, such questions were prominent in the media's agenda. Moreover, the protests initiated by citizens' groups created a synergy, a movement with ripple effects in unlikely places—including the cast of the film itself.

The campaign forged new links between a number of individuals and groups concerned with different aspects of the *Amerika* phenomenon. FAIR's Jeff Cohen (1987, A11) expressed hope that "the program may prove to be a turning point in the history of media treatment of the Cold War". The campaign served notice to established media that reactionary lobbyists like AIM were no longer the only actors capable of delivering "flak".

Most crucially, the protest campaign suggested the potential for a new kind of

political alignment, between critical social movements concerned with peace and social justice, and a project of challenging media structure and content.

The *Amerika* Campaign as Incipient Media Democratization?

Of course, the campaign should not be romanticized or mythologized. The number of protesters was very small when weighed against the millions of viewers of the program, many of whom undoubtedly supported or at least failed to critically assess the film's premises. Few of the protesters aimed explicitly for a sweeping democratization of media structure or content; rather, the campaign's derived its momentum by piggy-backing on the existing resources (especially mailing lists and other communications networks) of peace groups who saw *Amerika* as a threat to their primary political agenda. The various groups involved were not entirely unified in purpose and methods—how broadly the campaign should be focussed, whether or not to call for a boycott or even censorship, whether to work to change the media content available to viewers (and if so, in what ways), or whether to encourage would-be viewers to drop out of the audience altogether. Although the campaign succeeded brilliantly in provoking a brief national debate on media values and ethics, it had no notable long-term impact on TV programming. Even some critics sympathetic to the protest's goals dismissed it as a flash-in-the-pan, an aberration, and/or a misguided over-reaction to, and over-estimation of, *Amerika's* potential political impact and its deviance from regular media programming (e.g. Bacchus 1987).

Yet *Amerika* was, if not an anomaly, then a particularly extreme example of some of the worst biases of mainstream American television -- the networks' vulnerability to conservative political pressure, their uncritical ratification of US nationalism, their repeated demonizing of enemies and their portrayal of the US as innocent victim of hostile foreigners. Because it sharply problematized ABC's sense of balance and responsibility at a sensitive time in US/Soviet relations, *Amerika* was a deserving focal point of protest.

Nevertheless, the critics who saw the program as more typical than aberrant have a point. Indeed, it is partly because *Amerika* shared so much with the programming that continues to dominate the media today that the protest against it has enduring significance. To be sure, there has arguably been no similar large-scale protest campaign against a single television product since *Amerika*. That is partly because with the relative decline of the then-hegemonic networks (ABC, NBC, CBS), the proliferation of channels, the internationalization of television co-productions, as well as the Internet's challenge to the dominance of television itself, no single program could dominate today's mediascape in the same way. But that does not mean that the protest campaign was an aberration. Rather, it was both a precursor and a springboard, for waves of media activism that came to the fore in the 1990s and since.

At least implicitly, the campaign challenged the governing logics of the major media, including their dominance over audience leisure time and over the (re)production and circulation of public meanings, in at least five ways. Most obvi-

ously, the protesters brought into question the content of media. They offered a progressive critique that challenged hegemonic assumptions embedded in the media's apparently neutral entertainment. Moreover, they clearly posited the need for programming to meet the cultural and political interests of a constituency which could not readily be defined in terms of advertisers' demographics—namely, the broad and socially diverse coalition of people seeking international peace through disarmament. Their conception of media responsibility was radically at odds with the networks' purpose of telling "entertaining" stories to attract profitable audiences and advertisers.

In Canada, there was an additional and paradoxical dimension to the campaign's demand that broadcasters serve cultural purposes beyond those of commercial logic. On the one hand, it may well have taken American media and American peace groups to put the issue on Canada's public agenda. On the other hand, the whole saga pointed to the need for autonomy from excessive American influence on Canadian cultural production and expression. Even with the advent of Canada-US "free trade" in the 1980s, Canadian governmental policy continued to proclaim that government intervention in the broadcasting and film industries was needed to support Canada's "cultural sovereignty"; but the reality, as the roles of the OFDC and CTV in the *Amerika* affair suggest, was often at odds with this formal commitment. However, if media democratization implies that audiences have an opportunity to participate in expressing and producing socially effective meanings, the wholesale colonization of leisure time by programming imported from a foreign country is hardly compatible with a democratic media system. Nor is it compatible with self-determination for Canada's cultural workers, as their apparent fear of blacklisting by Hollywood producers' shows.

A second counter-hegemonic dimension of the campaign was its disruption of the one-way flow of messages from dominant media to their relatively passive audiences. The campaign challenged this asymmetrical relationship in several ways. It developed a communications network of its own, bypassing the major media in favor of pre-Internet grassroots tools like the newsletter, camera, tape recorder, photocopier and telephone. Even though proposals that people simply refuse to watch the program were not prominent in the campaign, it did seem to succeed (as noted above) in "filtering out" some of the potential audience. As an early example of culture jamming, the tactic of satirical "couch potato" parties took a different tack: watch the program, but in the process, change the relationship between medium, message and viewer.

Certainly ABC's and CTV's own response to the controversy indicated awareness that their own domination over media content and audiences was being challenged. Their admonitions to protesters to first watch the program, the attempt to capitalize on the controversy to build the audience, and the rhetorical accusation of "censorship" were defensive responses to that challenge. Moreover, the campaign clearly helped many potential viewers overcome their sense of frustration, outrage, isolation and powerlessness. A small core of activists was able to place the question of media responsibility in the nuclear age on the public agenda partly because they tapped deep currents in popular culture, including fear of nuclear war and frustration with one-sided media power.

Third, the campaign implied a rejection of established legitimations of the media, and the need for a new model or public philosophy of communication. That ideological challenge may not be evident at first sight. After all, in so far as it called for "balance" in television programming, the campaign was using the system's own language. As part of the media's "regime of objectivity," the concept of balance is readily understood and accepted by audiences; connoting equality and reasonableness, it is a tool both useful and principled, in contesting the media's concentration of society's "symbolic power" (Couldry 2003, 39). At the same time, on its own, "balance" is a limited kind of demand. It is reactive rather than proactive, its implementation rather dependent on the goodwill and self-interest of broadcasters themselves. Moreover, even when broadcasters do present "both sides" of an issue, such balance typically favors conventional views over those that are less familiar to audiences, reduces complex issues to a simplistic for/against format, and allows elite voices and media professionals to define the limits of debate (Hackett and Zhao 1998).

Nevertheless, in resorting to political pressure, in using publicity to define *Amerika* as problematic, and in expanding the scope of the controversy to attract allies, the campaign implicitly rejected a key ideological legitimation of commercial broadcasting – consumer sovereignty. The campaign was premised on rejecting the idea that media consumers' isolated, individual decision to watch a particular program or not, was a sufficient mechanism of media accountability. Although protesters were prepared to turn the ideology of consumer sovereignty against the networks, the campaign also made claims upon television as a *public* resource, one deserving of public scrutiny and debate. In that vein, a Los Angeles writer whose articles helped spark the original protests, ultimately concluded that the campaign was too narrowly focussed, since what was at stake was the power of monopolistic private networks over media workers, audiences, and the public airwaves: "The disease, then, is not *Amerika*, but rather the very structure of our mass electronic media" (Cooper 1987).

By demanding counter-balancing programming and a right of reply on air, the protesters also challenged the interpretation of "freedom of the press" as a property right of media owners. Indeed, implicitly they were challenging the adequacy of "freedom of expression" as a foundation for democratic communication, prefiguring instead the "right to communicate" as a universal human right. Having been buried in the wake of the politically ill-fated New World Information and Communication Order debate in the UN in the early 1980s, the concept of communication rights has re-emerged in recent years. Civil society organizations intervening in international media governance forums, such as the World Summit on the Information Society, are framing their proposals in terms that both include and transcend individual freedom of opinion and expression. Communication rights also entail the ability of individuals and groups to be heard and understood, to learn and respond, and to share in the production and benefits of social knowledge, and the determination of political outcomes (White 1995; CRIS Campaign 2005). In demanding access to the public forum, and inclusion in public discourse, the *Amerika* campaign represented an important step towards this more expansive concept of democratic communication.

Fourth, the *Amerika* campaign highlighted the contradictions between the logic of dominant media, and the political and communication needs of progressive social movements. Given such influences as ownership, commercial logic, technological biases, occupational routines and other factors, media discourse will often be at odds with the values of social movements. That contradiction can be particularly acute for peace movements. Using Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) "hierarchy of influences" model, that contradiction can be demonstrated analytically, by considering influences on media content at every "level" – media workers, media routines, media's corporate/organizational imperatives, extra-media institutions, and ideology/culture. For instance, within journalism, the routines of "objectivity" generate overdependence on official sources, the representation of conflict as two-sided zero-sum contests, and an emphasis on events (like battles) rather than context and processes (like peacebuilding) (Lynch and McGoldrick 2005, 203-12). These characteristics were hardly favorable for the many anti-*Amerika* groups seeking to promote better international relations and disarmament, in opposition to their own state's policies. At the level of the governing logics and structural connections of media institutions, obstacles to peace discourse include the ownership of broadcast media by conglomerates (like General Electric) with "defence" industry holdings; the increasing right-wing drift of media in the wake of the Reagan administration's deregulation and abandonment of the "Fairness Doctrine" in broadcasting; the technological bias of television towards visual spectacles of war; and the commercial imperative of attracting demographically profitable audiences whose attention can be sold to advertisers, via the easy route of ethnocentric, Manichean, dramatic narratives that reinforce rather than challenge conventional wisdom and established prejudices (cf. Hackett 2007). Peace-promoting programming may be unattractive to major corporate advertisers not only on political grounds, but because it may be difficult to match with market-defined audience segments, or with the fast-paced consumption-oriented messages of television advertising. Crucially, social movements' struggle for a just world peace requires a reinvigorated public sphere -- for collective discussion and action against institutional inertia and entrenched vested interests. Arguably, though, the very structure as well as content of dominant media favor privatized consumption rather than widespread participation in civic discourse.

Thus, there is an affinity between the project of media democratization, and the goals and the communication needs and activities of movements themselves. According to one scholar of popular communication, movements can be seen as "a communication pattern which emerges 'outside' and in opposition to the existing institutional, hierarchical (non-democratic) structure of communications." Given their own need to strengthen membership loyalty, movements "tend to introduce and legitimate an alternative pattern of communication," even "a radically different normative theory of communication and a new culture of public communication," based on horizontal dialogue, and the reciprocal right to obtain and impart "communication inputs" and to participate in collective decision-making (White 1995, 93).

While such a view of social movements may be somewhat romanticized, it usefully suggests why they are a natural component of a coalition for media democrati-

zation. Indeed, Hackett and Carroll (2006, 2-10) argue that since the 1980s, the terrain of political struggle for movements has been rendered increasingly difficult by a growing “democratic deficit” in the dominant media, one parallel to the hegemony of neoliberalism. They identify eight aspects of that deficit: the failure to constitute a democratic public sphere; the centralization of political, civic and symbolic power inherent in the political economy of media industries; the homogenization of publicly articulated discourses, notwithstanding the proliferation of channels; the failure to build community at local, national and global levels; the transformation of the public commons of knowledge into a private enclosure of corporate-controlled commodities; the secretive and elitist process of communication policy-making; and the erosion of privacy and free expression rights.

Since the 1980s, that democratic deficit has arguably become a shared grievance for a variety of progressive movements. The *Amerika* campaign certainly did not take on that full agenda, but it marked a moment of transition. During the previous two decades, the 1960s and 1970s, there had been a modest surge of media activism. Alternative newspapers flourished, expressing the alienation of the middle-class youth “counterculture”. Within the formal political system, media reform advocacy emerged from and alongside other movements of the civil rights era: “Minorities, women, children’s advocates, seniors, organized labor, education advocates, and gays and lesbians, in coalition and separately, identified mass media policy as a site of struggle for equity and access” (Aufderheide 1999, 18-19). But such activism did not amount to a mass-based movement directly challenging the corporate media system itself, and its achievements were modest. The liberal media reformers “marginally extended the gains of civil rights and related social movements” and institutionalized some of their cultural and social norms, but made little headway in transforming the economic and regulatory framework of media (Mueller et al. 2004, 47, 64). The waning of the Sixties’ movements and subsequent conservative hegemony left Washington-based reformers with little leverage within the system (Hackett and Carroll 2006, 94). For their part, more radical grassroots activists of the era were often naively confident in the emancipatory potential of “hand held media” (Halleck 2002), and in the openness of existing media to social change movements—civil rights, environmentalism, student protest. Only in retrospect did the destructive dynamics of movement dependence on mass media become evident (Gitlin 1980).

The *Amerika* campaign then, was arguably part of a broader learning process, fostering a growing awareness of fundamental contradiction between movements and media. The campaign underscored the importance of movement energies in giving traction to media activism. At the same time – and this is my final point – the campaign was a practical springboard for a later wave of media democratization. In particular, it gave concrete impetus to the emergence of an organization, FAIR, that focussed on media as a terrain of struggle in its own right, not specifically tied to any other movement. Starting as essentially a one-man plus volunteer operation, FAIR was able to parlay its pivotal role in the *Amerika* campaign, particularly in attracting mainstream media attention, into an ongoing and nationally recognized monitoring and advocacy organization. In that sense, Jeff Cohen described *Amerika* as a “godsend” for a group “talking about conservative media bias

and Cold War media hysteria.” FAIR became arguably the leading progressive advocate for change in media content and structure at the national level, at least until the short-lived Cultural Environment Movement in the 1990s, and the more successful Free Press media reform network in this decade. Through its critical analyses of dominant news media, and its outreach and tactical advice to a growing network of media activists, FAIR helped to nourish the wide range of democratic media activism (DMA) that has flourished since the 1990s. DMA now encompasses a variety of local, national and increasingly transnational groups in all its sectors – some oriented to the lifeworld of civil society, others to the dominant political and media system; some centred on the media field as such (the production and distribution of texts, the provision of access to the means of public communication), others centred on the media’s “environment” (audience reception, state communication policies) (Hackett and Carroll 2006, 54-64).

As a case study, *Amerika* addresses an important debate about that upsurge of DMA: Is it best understood as an adjunct of other movements, perhaps as a “movement nexus” (Hackett and Carroll 2006, 199)–or rather, as “a distinctive independent identity” (Napoli 2007, 51)? *Amerika* provides support for both interpretations. On the one hand, the campaign could not have occurred without the networks and volunteers of existing groups with other primary goals, notably the peace movement. FAIR’s Jeff Cohen functioned more as a catalyst and nexus, organizing meetings with representatives of major national peace groups, rather than as the leader of an existing media democracy movement. On the other hand, it is notable that the instigators of the campaign were more likely to be cultural workers than peace activists as such. In Toronto, most local peace groups ignored the film at first, or had little idea what to do about it; initiative and leadership came from professionals in media occupations, people with concerns about media ethics and effects.

Whether media democratization can constitute an identity equivalent in strength to that of other contemporary social movements remains an open question. The objective of this article has been to recall the pivotal role of a now-obscure campaign against a television program, in enabling us to place that question on the agenda.

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