

TV or Not TV?

Independents crash the airwaves

Until last June, only commercial networks and government-subsidized television could legally broadcast programs in France.

After a hard-fought campaign mixing guerrilla tactics and conventional lobbying, public-access *téles libres* may now apply for broadcasting licenses to show their alternative programs. But the battle is not over yet.



"An Urgent Action Audiovisual NGO," says this promotional shot.

Public-access television fought one of its most symbolic battles on October 2, 1999 outside the Rex Theater in the 2nd arrondissement of Paris. Inside, the French TV establishment had gathered for the *Sept d'Or* ceremony, the equivalent of the Grammy Awards for excellence in TV production. Outside, a few members of the Coördination Permanente des Médias Libres (CPML, Permanent Coordination of Free Media) climbed up on the roof and illegally set up their transmitters to broadcast their own programs and images. The activists were arrested and detained for a few hours in a nearby police station. But they had made their point. "We want to tell the stories that the commercial media don't tell and show the work that commercial TV will not show," explains Rym Morgan, a founding member of the CPML.

Before the privatization of TF1 in the 1980s, all three

French channels were government controlled. Now TF1 is privately-owned by the Bouygues conglomerate. France 2 (national) and France 3 (regional) survive on advertising, as TF1 does, but also receive a part of their budget from the government. The funds come from what is called the *redevance audiovisuelle*, a yearly tax of about \$100 levied on everyone who owns a TV in France. Onto this highly regulated and restricted scene burst the *téles libres*, also called *téles associatives* or *téles citoyennes*, unlicensed and illegal but determined to air documentaries and news with strong social and political messages. Under the dictates of the government regulatory body, the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (CSA), independent TV associations had no right to broadcast on unused frequencies—so media activists didn't wait for permission.

"With our pirate transmitters, we used the same techniques that enabled free radios to get official recognition in the early '80s. We also lobbied the deputies and senators to explain what

Our goal is to produce the kind of TV that brings people together, not the kind that turns them into vegetables.

—Richard Sovied, founder of *Télé Bocal*.

we do," says Rym Morgan. The CPML came to life in May of 1999 in reaction to a proposed law on broadcast media which continued to refuse public-access TV associations the right to be granted licenses. Activists from different alternative media (newspapers, radios, Internet and TV) decided to work together to defend the future of public-access TV in France.

Morgan says a new law, passed in June, "is a victory, because it finally gives us the right to apply for licenses on broadcast TV, cable and satellite. But we failed [to win] the subsidies that would allow noncommercial TV to survive." The government claims that subsidizing the independents is not financially feasible; the associations charge that the government frowns on their message challenging the political

and social order, and is being hypocritical in granting them the right, but not the means, to exist. In retaliation, the CPML has called for a boycott of the *redevance audiovisuelle* until its members are granted a share of the pie.

"Public access" is not exactly the right term to describe the French brand of subversive social commentary that is the *raison d'être* of these underground associations. Most of them function with only a handful of dedicated members, often professionals who make a living working for commercial TV. One such case is Xavier Selva of *Sans Canal Fixe* (Channel-less) in Tours. Selva produces 40-second news pieces for two national TV networks. "In commercial TV, we cover the images over with our own commentary. At Sans Ca-

nal Fixe, we let the images and the taped sound speak for themselves." In a documentary called "20 Seconds of Biking," *Sans Canal Fixe* eloquently demonstrated the fact that watching the Tour de France in the countryside really amounts to sitting through an hour of the advertising caravan before the bikers race by in 20 seconds. Definitely not a point that commercial media cared to make.

Ondes Sans Frontières (Airwaves Without Border, based in the eastern part of Paris, is the only association in France that can be called "public access" in the American sense of the term. OSF opens its (pirated) airwaves to anyone who sends in a program or comes in to tape a live show. "[Contributors] cover all kinds of topics, from unemployment to the situation in Palestine," says Corinne Domergue, a member of OSF. "We teach people how to use audiovisual tools, and they are really hungry for this kind of outlet."

Until the new law was passed, there were two ways for these programs to reach audiences. Associations would simply set up their transmitters and broadcast a program (sometimes with a temporary authorization but most often illegally), or they would invite viewers to come see their programs in bars and other public places.

Primi Tivi in Marseille chose the first method. "We've done four shows in two years. Before a scheduled broadcast, we put up signs and we call a press conference locally," says

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Some Web sites

ZALEA TV: www.aleatv.org

Coördination Permanente des Médias Libres: www.medialibre.org

Télé Bocal: www.telebocal.com

TeleWeb: www.teleweb.org

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