The threat of Reaganite war mongering was apparent to many Americans in the early Eighties. Recall this was the time when Reagan solemnly declared over the radio that "the bombing of the Soviet Union will begin in five minutes," a declaration which White House spokesmen later explained was his idea of a joke.

Especially troubling was the Reagan Administration's ability to utilize the electronic media to promote the objectives of the "military industrial complex." Former movie actor Reagan, it will be recalled, fancied himself as "the Great Communicator."

And the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has always devoted considerable resources to improving its public relations image via the mass media. It has been estimated that the DOD had some 64,000 employees working on public relations around the world in 1988, according to the DOD Communications Department. DOD expenditures for advertising, recruiting, etc. were budgeted at more than $2 billion in 1989.

As peace activists throughout the nation sought means to counteract these threats, several peace activists in Ohio took particular steps towards more effective utilization of the mass media, steps which have relevance to the peace movement today. In the beginning, these activists felt they were making many mistakes in their attempts to utilize the media. It occurred to them that their efforts "would be more effective if they had media professionals working with them behind the scenes," according to Ms. Helen Seidman.

Helen was one of the leaders of these activists. She is currently Chair of the Ohio SANE/FREEZE Media Committee, and lives on the outskirts of Cleveland, Ohio. We had the pleasure of interviewing her in October.

During the early Eighties, Helen was working as a field organizer for the Ohio Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign. It will be recalled that this was the period when the Freeze effort had tremendous successes across the nation, to the point that the Reaganites unleashed a formidable "misinformation" campaign against it as well as increasing their global sabre rattling.

Helen began to worry that the Freeze would still be "organizing local peace groups while the bomb fell." It needed "a more efficient way to get the anti-nuclear word out quickly." She continues that "All the parts of the peacemaking program must be interrelated, but we tend to underutilize the media, because its scary."

Helen doesn't believe that media outreach can replace local grass roots work. "They must augment one another, because we can't get along without the personal contact." But, she goes on, we had become "painfully aware that the peace forces weren't going to make it
unless we utilized technology against the media technology" of the DOD and the military industrial complex.

In 1984, the Ohio Media Task Force was formed. This was a small group of media professionals who were dedicated to helping grass roots peace activists utilize the media in a more sophisticated and effective manner. At first the activists turned to the church media staff. The task force expanded over the years. "We have a much broader base of media people now," says Helen. And it has retained its close link with grass roots efforts. "Our effort is a combination of media work and grass roots work," she explains. "It's not pure media work."

In 1987, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, including Ohio Freeze, merged nationally with SANE (the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy), to form SANE/FREEZE, the largest peace organization in the United States. Now the agenda came to be focussed not only on a nuclear weapons freeze, but was extended to include mutual world security through international disarmament treaties as well.

In this state, the focus of SANE/FREEZE was on Ohio's four polluting nuclear weapons facilities, including Piketon, the Mound facility in Miamisburg, RMI near Ashtabula, and the notorious Fernald. Closely related was the issue of converting from the military industrial complex to a peace economy. This is especially significant in "Rust Bowl" areas such as economically devastated Youngstown.

The Media Task Force, therefore, began to focus on these topics. Now called the "Media Project," it began working under the Ohio SANE/FREEZE Education Foundation, based in Columbus. Now in its second year, the project seeks to improve media cover age of peace issues, particularly those focussing on the question of nuclear weapons. The premise is that print and electronic media can help change the course of history, by shaping public opinion.

Helen commented to us that the project initially confronted a myth about the media. This myth holds that "the professionals in the media are biased against peace forces. They are only willing to cover the 'other side'," that is, the military industrial complex. But this account is only partly true, she believes. At the national level, she finds that many media professionals "find it easier to take whatever information is handed to them, rather than to do the deep research on every issue that comes along." She continues "Every day they're fed press releases," and as a result, the national media corps "have become a conduit for the administration, for the Pentagon."

At the national level, even if the media wants to present 'both sides,' they feel they have accomplished this and thereby maintained their 'objectivity' if they present the Democratic Party's response to a statement by the Republican Administration. "But," comments Helen, "that's not the full spectrum of political opinion; that's only a piece of the spectrum." Furthermore, "Insofar as the Republican Administration is moving to the Right, that whole piece of the spectrum may be moving to the Right."
To Helen, this raises serious questions about the relationship between the media and democracy. "Democracy was founded on the assumption that it would work only if there was an informed public." She then queries "Where does the American public get its information today? From the media largely from the TV." American TV does its programming at both the national (network) level CBS, NBC, etc. and at the local station level. "It seems to me," she continues, "that we local activists have media access that the national peace organizations don't have we have access to our local TV reporter." But the local peace forces must know how to access the local media.

At the local level, Helen believes that 70 to 80 percent of the media professionals, like the same percentage of the American public, agrees with the Freeze forces on these peace issues. Many times the media professionals can't work publicly on behalf of peace issues since this could be used to call their 'objectivity' into question. But they can work behind the scenes, giving professional advice on media matters.

As Helen puts it, many media personalities see this "mentoring role" as part of their professional obligations, teaching media skills to the non-profit sector. She observes "People just love to tell you what you're doing wrong; they love to tell you how to do it right." She quoted one media personality who said to her that "groups like yours should turn to us all the time, and groups on the 'other side' should turn to us all the time, too." In any case, mentoring is a more effective use of the media professional's time than "licking envelopes."

The Media Project works through the efforts of local peace activists who establish links between informational resources on the national level and media on the local level, in order to expand the coverage of peace-related issues in their localities. These grass roots activists are rarely media professionals themselves; hence they are advised by media professionals in each locality who volunteer their time as media mentors to the activists' efforts.

Thus there are several components of local media work, according to the Media Project. These are (a) the experts on issues of disarmament, usually nationally recognized figures who write Op-Ed pieces or appear on TV talk shows, (b) the local media professionals who, as Helen puts it, "hold your hand and encourage you, and teach you when you don't know how to do it right." They provide media mentoring to (c) the local grass roots activists. Finally, there is (d) a local coordinator who brings all the components together. If the coordination is successful, the mythical belief that the media are biased against the peace movement is dispelled: the local media, in fact, are clearly willing to cover the peace forces.

There are two steps to effective media work which Helen has come to stress in the peace movement. The first is Find a Media Mentor. The second is Get to know this person well. She believes that if the peace activist is able to take the situation of the media professional, to really find out what their needs are, to develop a one-one relationship with him or her, then answers to all the technical problems confronted in media work will follow.
There are two further points. The first is the importance of "Continuity," and the second is the significance of "Credibility." It is important that there be continuity of the local peace activist who interacts with the media, so that a one-one relationship can develop, so that the media professionals come to have confidence in this contact and thereby in the local peace forces. This continuity is not always easy to achieve, due to the volunteer nature of peace activism, but it is an aspect of media work which must receive our serious attention.

In order to be credible, one must have researched a topic thoroughly. If it requires a technical background, one must have it. One must not say anything which later turns out to be not true, because a reporter will feel that he or she was a fool to have quoted it, and now his or her own reputation is in jeopardy.

What about the accomplishments of the Media Project? During its first year, the Media Project fulfilled all its programmatic goals, including the following objectives. It conducted a series of media workshops in the major cities around Ohio. These workshops were designed to develop local capacities for media work, as well as to introduce local activists the workshop participants to local media professionals the workshop leaders.

The Media Project conducted a series of briefings by nationally recognized experts on disarmament and economic conversion for editorial boards of major newspapers throughout the state. This resulted in several editorials favorable to peace and disarmament topics.

It established a Letter Editor Network, which circulates copies of letters to the editor throughout the state, so that prospective letter writers can be both informed and inspired by letter writing efforts elsewhere.

The Media Project placed a number of Op-Ed pieces in major newspapers across Ohio, placed TV films in major cable TV markets across the state, and arranged speakers for a number of TV and radio talk shows.

These objectives were not narrowly defined. As Helen stresses, "We intend to serve all the peace organizations in Ohio, not just the SANE/FREEZE affiliates."

It is some measure of its success that the Media Project has been and continues to be supported both by philanthropic foundations and be individual donors. Perhaps needless to say, it receives no government funding.

Helen summed up the philosophy of the Media Project for us. "That's the 'New England Town Meeting' of today that's the way that we can make democracy work." In fact, she believes that the model of democratic process which lies at the heart of the Media Project has even broader relevance in today's world. "Any movement which is trying to inform the public as a whole, trying to have an impact on legislation, really trying to effect
change, will have to do the same sort of thing." This is because, Helen holds, "Its really only by means of the people that you can get access to the local media outlets." She concludes by contrasting the peace forces with those of the `other side': "Our strength is the people, their strength is their money they're using their strength, we've got to use ours."