

"It's one thing to critique mass media and rail against their abuses, it's quite another to create viable alternatives."

DeeDee Halleck

## **Community Media in a Digital Age:**

### **A Conversation with DeeDee Halleck**



Antoine Haywood

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# Community Media in a Digital Age: A Conversation with DeeDee Halleck

by Antoine Haywood

In July 2007, I attended my second [Alliance for Community Media](#) (ACM) national conference. While many community access television practitioners at this convening were fretting implications of, then, newly enacted [statewide video franchise statutes](#), all I wanted to do was talk shop about youth media. Fortunately, somewhere in the weeds of jittery talk about shifting cable franchise fee structures, I managed to cross paths with a kindred spirit who turned out to be pioneer media activist DeeDee Halleck.

With her gentle side-to-side gait, red-rimmed glasses nested atop her signature salt and pepper plume of hair, and one hand molded around her trusty camcorder, she asked, "Hey, do you mind if I record an interview with you?" She was excited to find out I was there representing a budding crop of young media activists at Atlanta's public access television station, People TV. Brimming with innocent enthusiasm and admiration, I obliged her request.

Fast forward twelve years to 2019, and I again found myself sitting beside DeeDee. This time, I'm a Ph.D. student who researches community media, and we're seated on a centered riser inside [Slought's](#) West Philadelphia community art space. There was no anxious chatter about cable franchise fees; instead, our conversation reflected on our practitioner experiences and attempted to make sense of community media's relevance in a world obsessed with digital platform communication.

Halleck's media activism career spans across five decades. Her pioneering achievements, such as founding [Paper Tiger Television](#), co-founding [Deep Dish TV](#) satellite network, and authoring seminal texts such as [Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media](#), have inspired generations. Before these achievements, Halleck's beginnings were much like my own. Our commitment to the promise of participatory democratic media making was sparked by the magic of putting cameras into young people's hands and focusing our sights on realizing impossible possibilities through community media.



Antoine Haywood and DeeDee Halleck at Slought community art space in West Philadelphia, 2019.

*Antoine Haywood is a Ph.D. student and MIC research fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. His research focuses on understanding the contemporary relevance of public, educational, and government access media. Before Annenberg, Antoine spent 15 years managing community engagement initiatives at nonprofit media organizations such as People TV and PhillyCAM.*



DeeDee Halleck working with students at Otisville School for Boys, New York, c.1968 – 1972.

The following edited excerpts come from the conversation DeeDee and I had at Slought on October 1, 2019. To hear the complete audio recording, visit [https://slought.org/resources/community\\_media\\_in\\_a\\_digital\\_age](https://slought.org/resources/community_media_in_a_digital_age).

Also, visit <http://deedeehalleck.com/> to browse an interactive timeline of Halleck's life.

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**Antoine Haywood:** What are some of the forms of community media that exist and that continue to exist and what are the things that makes it unique? Are there essential qualities that you found through all of your work that are inherent and important for us to think about when it comes to community media?



DeeDee Halleck. Photo by Juan Pazos.

**DeeDee Halleck:** Well, you reminded me of one that when we were trying to get... There was a channel in New York City for Public-access [television], but there was no center. No place where people could come together and there was a commercial studio where we actually had to rent it and that's why the early Paper Tiger shows we would put the budget because everybody had to dig into their pockets and take out their change and that's how we paid the studio because there wasn't a Public-access.

There wasn't the infrastructure and so we fought for that and what we called it was, what was it? New York Citizen's Committee for Responsible Media. I thought that was an interesting... I think we probably spent two nights talking about what the title of our group should be, but that was I think George's suggestion that we call it responsible.

So, one of the reasons I brought Clemencia's book is that she talks a lot about what phrase to use and she talks about citizen's media, participatory media, independent media, alternative media, community media, non-commercial media and they kind of... Maybe they're all a little bit different, but they all have aspects of what we mean when we do what we do. I think when I first met you, you were at Atlanta.

At Atlanta and so there's also avant-garde, a lot of people think well community media is what's going to be in the future, like it's more, it can be more experimental and kind of avant-garde. So, it's a lot of different things and actually I was talking with somebody at Columbia. Do you know that the word oral history comes from Columbia University, from Teacher's College and they now have a collection of what they call... They have decided to call it time-based media.

So that's a whole other description, but looking back and I think one of the amazing things that the work of community media makers has done, we don't even think of this usually when we're doing it is we're making history and we are preserving not just the people and the ideas, but also the whole way of doing it.

The culture, the aesthetics of it so that when people look back at like in the early 70s, some of the earliest public access was in Redding, Pennsylvania, you're seeing... It's so much more authentic than what was going on, on NBC, CBS. There was not even any CNN at that time when it first started, but maybe that's authenticity.

**AH:** What were some things or qualities that made it authentic?

**DH:** Well, it's not corporate. It's not made to sell something. It's media that is made to help and enable people to express themselves, to voice their passions, their concerns, their craziness sometimes. Anybody who's been in public access knows that, but it's not pre-packaged.

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It's sort of like a home cooked meal, it's so different from what you get from even Fresh Direct. It's like it is what comes from the handprint like a handmade mug from when your daughter starts doing ceramics you will see that will be your favorite coffee cup, I guarantee you. And why do you want that one as opposed to one that's made in China in a factory with a zillion other cups just like it. It bears the print of your daughter or your friend or whoever and the same thing for Public-access. It's who we are somehow.

**AH:** What inspired you to become involved and doing this authentic form of documenting history, educating people, liberating people through this communal process?

**DH:** Well, when I was a teenager in Chattanooga, Tennessee I wanted to get some cash to have in my pocket and I looked around for jobs and I saw there was a film studio called Continental Productions and when I was 13, I started working there as an animator actually and it was they were making pork sausage commercials.

Pork Sausage commercials and the animator actually was named Hal Walker and he was the founder of Felix the Cat actually. What was he doing in Chattanooga? Well, he was a union organizer working for... And who had then worked for Disney after he did Felix the Cat and he's in the animation books actually.

I didn't know at that time who he was, but he would do the drawings and I would copy them onto acetate. He would do drawings on paper and he would do, you know how animation works, your hand is up here and then it goes down here and you have to do 14 different drawings just to have it go down.

So, I started out as an in-betweener. So he would do the top and the bottom and then I graduated to be an in-betweener because he finally trusted me to even do the in-betweener and I was thinking it was like animation is so at that time you work on a cell that has sprockets and there's no art to it.

I mean there is art obviously because there's a lot of great animators, but there was something confined about it and also it was very hard for people to do and I felt like media early on, I said well why can't we just draw it? Why do we have to work in this very rigid format and-

**AH:** Would you say was it mechanical?

**DH:** Well, it's a mechanical thing to actually to be able to make something that looks free and easy and you have to be very precise and be able to make the in-between's look easy, look the same and I rebelled against that kind of stricture, I guess, and then I saw Norman McLaren who was a great Canadian animator and I saw his films through the library and the public library in Chattanooga would have film screenings of experimental films.

That's one of the great traditions of libraries that a lot of them had really good... A wide variety of art films and documentaries and I was very curious about film and so I would go to the screenings, and I became really... I found that you could actually... One of Norman McLaren's films is you draw on the films, it's making films without a camera and to me that was liberating.

And so, I quit school, I only went to college for two years and then I went to New York City, I got married and I worked at a kind of afterschool and I thought wow, I showed the kids films. That was one of my jobs was on Friday nights we would show films, and to kids on Friday afternoons and so I would check out films for myself, which were these experimental films and films for the kids and the kids wanted to see the experimental films. They didn't care about all those children films.

And, so when they saw Norman McLaren actually drawing on film they said, I want to do that. So, I brought in some leader, just blank film and they drew on the film. So, they made their own and actually the excitement and

the passion of the kids really. I said, wow, everyone should be able to make films and why does it have to be just these companies like I had worked in, in Tennessee.

And, so that was my... I was only when I moved to New York I was 18 and I've been trying to help people make films ever since.

**AH:** So that was your moment?

**DH:** Yeah.

**AH:** That was that transformative moment?

**DH:** Yeah.

**AH:** Yeah, mine was similar where I was at a rec center in Atlanta and I was dead set to go to New York and I had this moment of, which was super clear of like I had these adult students that came into the media lab that I was operating and they were like, we want to make... We want to do slideshows and I want to scan my yearbook photos and it was just the most important thing for them to do at that moment and it was to get that education.

And I was like this is what it's about in terms of making it accessible and I think the collaboration, right. In working with people, as you say it's not so much about directing, right. It's more so about togetherness, right, and caring. It's a caring... We care together through this process would you say doing community media and making it work?

**DH:** Yeah, you know I was... After that I worked at a reform school, it was called reform and now it would be like a juvenile prison, for those... I always felt it was like a gulag, it was like I really felt very oppressed there and felt that the kids very oppressed, but I got a grant for doing filmmaking.

And it was part of what this school, this institution was up in the Catskills actually and they had in the mornings there was education and in the afternoons there was vocational and I was part of vocational although I only taught halftime there. So, I only taught in the afternoons and my purpose was almost always to get the kids away from that place.

And, so when we would film they filmed outside, they filmed in the town near there and I could get the state car and there was an insignia on the state car and one time we were driving, we were going off grounds and the guys say, "DeeDee stop right now." I said, "What?" He said, "You'll see," and they had made a sign for the car and it said Otisville Film Club and they put it over the state insignia with gaffer tape and they taped that on.

So, we would... And we had to remember when we came back to take it off again, but I said that really is what it is (and there's Clemencia). It really was a club and I felt that they worked together. I never gave lectures or anything. It was like an open studio where people came in and they could either listen to music, there was a record player, 33, 45s and there was a TV.

They could watch TV if they wanted to, whatever channel they wanted and then there was filmmaking and they could read books. I had a lot of books there like biographies of artists. One guy was reading, I have a picture of him reading a book about Rembrandt, a kid from the Bronx.

**AH:** Yeah, what kind of changes did you observe, like going through that entire process and not just actually the media making process, but the whole entire experience?



*Children Make Movies at Lillian Wald Settlement Houses, New York City, c.1961.*

**DH:** Well, I've been trying to get hold of some of those guys I worked with. I worked there for four years and now this was from '68 to '72. They are in their late sixties now and some of them probably aren't around. I mean the recidivism from these schools was very high. So, they would go back, I did run into one when I was visiting a prison years later and he was there and he was, oh that was the best time of my life.

So, it was I don't think you can change people's lives, but it was opening something and making them more curious, maybe they would do more reading. I don't think you know maybe some of them might have gotten a job working on a film set, but it wasn't like you can't have a miracle change in people's lives.

That's why I think Public-access is so important because it sets up a kind of a base and have a space where people know about it and can build up a sustained interest and I think these kids were only at Otisville for maximum 18 weeks, no 18 months.

**AH:** 18 months, yeah?

**DH:** 18 months, yeah. So, it's not like you can do that much in 18 months, but I think... I hope to think... I mean one of my students who wasn't one of the guys at Otisville, but who I met through the guys because they wanted to go find girls in Middletown and Florabelle Hunter who is going to be tonight at the community media center. She made a film called, *Hey There Lonely Girl*, and she said... You should ask her how it changed her life.

**AH:** The other way, I guess, I should have put it is the effects in terms of just what that experience meant, if you could even tell?

**DH:** Well, I think probably the most important thing in terms of the institution was that the films became very popular around the town. People would... Like I took kids to go to the Kiwanis Club, they presented films at the Kiwanis Club. They went to the churches, they went to libraries.

I couldn't even remember all the ones that I ran across, I am going through all my papers now and there is this list of all the places at different conferences and I always took the guys who made the films there. This was 16mm, it wasn't video, it wasn't easy, it was hard. So, and they felt very accomplished when they finished it.

The real problem was getting the right songs to the right scenes. So, they would bring in their 45s, the films have really great music. I don't know if you've seen-

**AH:** Yeah, I remember seeing, yeah.

**DH:** Yeah, "Get on the Good Foot."

**AH:** Yeah, James Brown. Let's transition and talk about you actually mentioned building and I want to talk about building trust in doing this work and truth telling through the process of doing community media work or media engagement work.

## NOT A PAPER TIGER: DEEDEE HALLECK

June 3-5 • Filmmaker in person!



**ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES**  
32 Second Ave. (@2nd St), NYC • [anthologyfilmarchives.org](http://anthologyfilmarchives.org)

For more than 50 years now, media activist DeeDee Halleck has been fighting the good fight by making films and videos, writing, teaching, and co-founding organizations including Paper Tiger Television and the Deep Dish Satellite Network, the first grassroots community television network. Here at Anthology we celebrated the accomplishments of Paper Tiger Television – a non-profit, volunteer video collective that Halleck helped to create in 1981 – with a screening series ten years ago, but this is our first series solely devoted to the work Halleck has made on her own.

Over the course of her career she has helped plant new technologies, namely home video, cable television, and online and satellite broadcasting, firmly in the hands of social movements and activists, and inspired generations of alternative media advocates and researchers. For Halleck, electronic media represents a powerful means to include participatory democracy, both through product and process, and she has been relentless in her pursuit to improve access to media production and reception.

Halleck will be here in person for all three programs.

### PROGRAM 1: WORKING WITH CHILDREN

DeeDee Halleck  
CHILDREN MAKE MOVIES  
OTISVILLE SCHOOL FOR BOYS FILMS:  
Jose Rodriguez  
GET ON THE GOOD FOOT  
Vano & Sparr  
THE BLOODY CRIME CRUSHER  
Milton Letty Diaz  
THE BEGINNING OF MY END  
Abraham Carlona HARR  
Charles Smith & Kenneth Brown  
A MADMAN'S WORLD  
Flora Hunter & Cindy D  
HEY THERE LONELY GIRL  
Total running time: ca. 75 min.  
•Sat, June 3 at 7:30.

### PROGRAM 2: 16MM PORTRAITS

MURAL ON OUR STREET  
MR. STORY Co-directed by Anita Thacher  
JARASLAWA  
BROOK BAPTISM Photographed by Richard Sierra, DeeDee Halleck, and Babette Mangotte.  
Total running time: ca. 100 min.  
•Sun, June 4 at 7:30.

### PROGRAM 3

WAITING FOR THE INVASION: U.S. CITIZENS IN NICARAGUA  
THE GRINGO IN MARIANLAND  
Total running time: ca. 95 min.  
•Mon, June 5 at 7:30.

**ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES**

*Not A Paper Tiger: DeeDee Halleck* film screening event at Anthology Film Archives, New York City, June 3 – 5, 2017.



Paper Tiger Television opening animation.

What does that look like in your experience in terms of how have people been able to and then you can also talk about maybe how this ties into your work with Deep Dish and *Paper Tiger* and the media movement, how do these communal media making process for people to be able to build trust and tell truths?

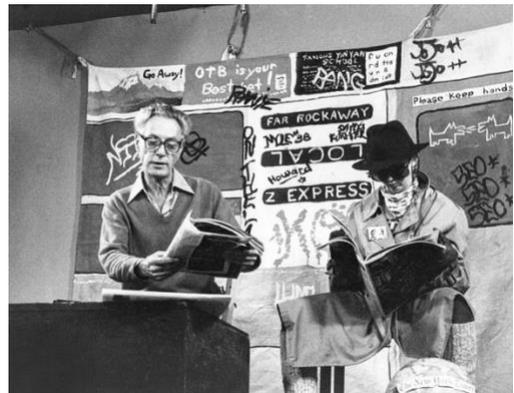
**DH:** Well, *Paper Tiger* started as a kind of critique of the mainstream media and I think that can be one of the functions of Public-access is to actually... To really look hard at what's going on with the mainstream.

We started out with *The New York Times*, which people said what's wrong with *The New York Times*, I depend on it? We said, well there are certain issues about *The New York Times* that if you look at who's on the board of directors. And Herb Schiller was a communication's scholar who I had read his material and I was teaching at Hunter College in New York City, part of CUNY and Herb came as a guest lecturer and he was... Our classrooms were near each other and I kept hearing all this laughter and I thought what? Afterwards I said, "Herb, what were you doing? What was?" He said, "Oh, I was just reading *The New York Times*."

I think before John Oliver and before John Stewart, Herb Schiller had this sardonic kind of humor with which to look at mainstream media. I think you have to look at it with humor, but also great insight and I think that is an important part of doing anything in media is you have to be able to process it.

**AH:** So yes, was Herb on the show and read *The Times*?

**DH:** So, I thought he could just do one show. He said, "Well, you need six shows to do it." So, we did six shows and we got a group of people together to do it and then it seemed like a good format to have. A lot of top problems with Public-access is that people have their image of what media is, is so fixated on mainstream media.



"Herb Schiller Reads the News," 1981. Photo by Vicki Gholsen courtesy of DeeDee Halleck.

So, when they will do a Public-access show and it doesn't look like CBS or NBC they feel disappointed or if they even like if they ask their friends to watch it and they forget to watch it and then they'll do one show. You can't do that.

So, we decided to do a series and we did six programs and we also leafleted. We leafleted *The New York Times* building because we felt that the most important audience were people who were actually the printers who worked at The Times and also the editors and the writers. So, if you go at two o'clock in the afternoon, the editors are going home and the printers are coming in. There was a particular time of day where we could get both.

The blue collar workers and the people with cooler blazers or whatever, but the idea was that it seemed like a format a lot of people started to do public access and if you have someone who can talk and who feels comfortable then you can work with them. And it's more like television is something very different than making a film and there's the live-ness of it. We were doing live programming. I'm going to do a live programming on Friday.

**AH:** Yeah, Friday at PhillyCAM, yes, seven o'clock.

**DH:** Yes. So, and I think I love doing live programming and we would just work together to try to improvise it and really push the format. I mean I think people are so imbued with what television should look like and it doesn't have to be like that.

We could use hand painted sets, we use instead of actually it was a necessity because we couldn't afford the Chyron which is how people did the titles. So, we had people hand paint titles and it was cheaper because that was when we were working in the commercial, in the studio we had go pay for it.



*Live Culture* production of "Paper Tiger Takeover" at PhillyCAM, 2019.

Every camera was \$16 and a color camera was 35. So, it all added up and if you use Chyron it's different and actually we didn't even have headphones with a speaker. So, we had to leave the cues on set. So, we were really... But it actually became a new kind of look on TV and so we were trying to push the aesthetics at the same time.

**AH:** Yeah. Yeah, I guess then that was what I was asking.

**DH:** And the Public-access community was very open to that because wow, they could show their constituents like look it doesn't, you know relax, there's the Public-access look you know and you don't always have to have a plant in a-

**AH:** The ficus! The ferns as Zach Galifianakis has it.

**DH:** So, we were trying to push what Public-access could do.

**AH:** Yeah, but there's this still that longstanding critique of it looks like Public-access or it looks like--there's this normative critique of community media broadly, be it radio or a zine--it's like it's who wants to watch that? Who wants to consume that because if it's not polished can we trust that type because of who are these people? They aren't experts, they are just people on the street. What do you say to those notions?

**DH:** Well, I think you have to... Somehow you have to be providing them with authentic information and also kind of build the kind of trust as you said. I thought that was a good point. It's like that's an important aspect.



PhillyCAM Executive Director, Gretjen Clausing, and DeeDee Halleck discuss public access media on *Live Culture*, 2019.

**AH:** In terms of, I want to focus on just the relevance of community media and then just hear your thoughts on in a digital age where people have, where they can create, they can stream from this phone, where people can... You know I took a video of Ava [my daughter] at the turntables last night. We were picking out records and stuff and I didn't upload it, but it's like I can make that a "show" on YouTube.

One another in addition to the critique about of the access of this amateurish of unpolished look. There's also this, I've heard this so many times in doing policy work locally and even nationally of just why do we need community media spaces when people can go around and they can make media on their own?

Why do we need a PhillyCAM? Why do we need Scribe? What's the value? What's the importance of G-Town Radio? Why do we need all of these things still in 2019 when you can make a podcast in your living room like we were talking about earlier? So why do I need to go down to WPEB? What are your thoughts there?

**DH:** Actually, one of the most popular things at Brooklyn Public-access is the podcast show. So, people need those lessons, they want to feel comfortable with it and they want to exchange with other people to hear how.

It's a process of learning and I think that even though you have your handy telephone with you all the time, there are some tricks you could learn to edit it and actually that was interesting what you said about the people wanted their high school yearbooks.

**AH:** Yeah, Mr. Benny came in and I can't even describe the look on his face when I told him, yes you can scan this yearbook photo and put it together and make a slideshow with the music from 1968 or whatever it was and he had to walk out the room and collect himself and come back in. He said I can do this.

**DH:** Well, it's the NBC or CBS is not going to be doing that or even Hulu or Netflix or whatever. So how can we preserve? To me Public-access is such an interesting experiment in actually taxing corporations in a way that enables them to form... To support community activity and what the cable companies right now are racing to try to eliminate that and we have to really fight that.

**AH:** They've been pushing on that though for 30 years ever since the beginning, right?

**DH:** Right, but now they have this ammunition that like forget it. You have your cellphone, you have your podcast or whatever, why do you need Public-access? We want to be trained in those areas and we want to work with other people and I think we have to really stress that it's not enough to be alone in your basement. I think that was why I think the big corporations love the image of the lone guitar player playing in his basement. What was his name?

**AH:** Oh, Wayne and Garth.

**DH:** *Wayne's World*, it was like that they kept saying it's like Public-access is like *Wayne's World*. No, Public-access is amazing in terms of the different organizations need to be able to work with their constituents and to speak to their constituents and the different... One of my favorite shows, Elliot Margolis, I don't know if you remember him?

He was doing Public-access in Palo Alto and he used to have the people who did music lessons because they didn't have a... They had to pay, the music teachers had to rent a space and they didn't have the funds for that. So, he offered his studio if they would let them also video tape him and they were thrilled to be video-taped.

So, he always had little three-year-olds doing their, up the hill we go, and I remember watching an entire show of it and it was so fresh. I mean it's where... So instead, of course, the parents were able to see their kids, but also it was sharing these kids with the community in a really very straightforward non-exploitative way.

It wasn't like the Miss America, Junior America or whatever they do and I thought this is some of the best kids programming ever. It's like there are ways and it also made the parents appreciate and support the Public-access.

**AH:** Yeah. Yeah, I was talking to a group of students just earlier last week about just community media and then specifically Public-access and one of the students very succinctly put it, I was asking them about the distinction between this type of engagement and public television, but he was just saying this is more humane.

He was like there's like humanity here and I'm not saying that there's not humanity there, but it's in a very unique way of it's really about people coming together and just being together with one another. That being said being together, we are here together and I want to shift and open it up. So, to allow you all to ask any questions so-

**DH:** Or make a comment.

**AH:** Or make any comments, that too. I know there's a lot of people who like to share thoughts in the room and there is a... Passing the mic around. Anyone? I do have more questions, but I just want to, yeah.

**Audience Member:** Thanks, Aaron. Thanks so much for sharing your thoughts and for moderating the conversation, Antoine. I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit more about what do you hope happens for community media in the next, I don't know, generation?

**DH:** Well, I see a lot of two of my grandchildren and they all of a sudden have become very involved with GarageBand and there is something so seductive about these screens and I worry about that because I think we don't want to become too... You know they should go outside and play actually.

And how to... I think it's an issue about how to... You know as a grandparent, I become this kind of ogre who takes their iPad away if they spend two hours on GarageBand. So, what do you think? I feel like on one hand that it struck me about GarageBand is they don't even need other people. They can make five different voices and mix it all together.

**AH:** Yeah, it beats bringing an instrument to-

**DH:** Why be in a band you know? I originally thought, oh GarageBand is so creative for them, then I thought, no, what we really need is to get the kids to get to practice their instruments and play with other people rather than depend on this machine to do it.

**AH:** Yeah, as a musician I totally argue against that. I love GarageBand and I encouraged and I've worked with youth who are doing the youth media work, I was definitely yeah get out and make a beat because somehow that's the connecting point for some kids is, I can make a beat.

And not really into doing the camera just yet or being on camera, but there is something unique and this ties to my feelings about community media is this, again, it's the in-person, it's the contact.

So, when you jam together you go places that you can only go because we're feeding, we're vibing off of each other as human beings and you go to this place where it's like I couldn't... Because when you are on that machine it's just you, right. And then you're interacting with a machine or you're whatever pre-programmed in, but when my buddy, Ant, plugs up and starts doing that comes from Ant and nobody else can replicate that.

So yeah, it's this cross fertilization that happens, it's another little term that Sara Zia used. I was talking to her earlier this week and she was talking about it's in spaces like PhillyCAM and Scribe there is this constant cross fertilization that happens.

**DH:** Yeah.

**AH:** So, yeah. Yeah.

**DH:** We have a lot of work to do.

**AH:** We do. We do and on that note one of the quotes from your book that I actually put up on the website is that you said, "it's one thing to critique mass media and rail against their abuses, it's quite another to create viable alternatives." So, that speaks to the work that we have to do altogether. So, having said that please join me in thanking DeeDee.

**Special thanks to our program partners: Scribe Video Center, PhillyCAM, and Slought.**



(left to right) Deborah Rudman, Antoine Haywood, DeeDee Halleck, Clemencia Rodriguez at Slought, 2019.



DeeDee Halleck with PhillyCAM staff and members after *Live Culture* production of "Paper Tiger Takeover," 2019.