

Remember the Future Podcast Season 2

Episode 3: Anticapitalist Media with MeansTV

Featuring:

Nick Hayes: Co-founder of MeansTV

Ebony Gustave: Host

[Music - Hot Springs by Andile Blessing Magwaza and Sizwe Lancelot Mbelu]

Nick: We need to build the infrastructure to accommodate revolution, and like to empower revolution, and I think that is through the labor movement, that is through cooperatives, that is through building media ecosystems that are more reflective of working class people and our values.

Ebony and Marina: Hello and Welcome to Remember the Future, a podcast from Art.coop where we invite you to remember the future by listening to the stories of artists collectivizing to build community and care centered models using practices that are as old as time.

We are your hosts Ebony Gustave and Marina Lopez.

In this season you'll learn from our Remember the Future Fellows, who are embodying what it looks like for musicians, artisans, media producers, and cultural preservationists to cooperatively own their work rooted in solidarity economy principles.

Ebony: In this episode, I speak with Nick Hayes from MeansTV, the first worker-owned anti-capitalist streaming service. They are financed through member subscriptions, free of any advertisements or venture capital. Through cooperativism, MeansTV is building a media platform that reflects and empowers the 99%. We discuss how MeansTV developed from their desire to fill the gap of access to the mainstream media market for anti-capitalist filmmakers, balancing content that is both challenging capitalism and offering solutions, media as a tool for connecting working class people through shared struggle, and the infrastructure that's needed to accommodate revolution.

Welcome, Nick, can you please start by introducing yourself and sharing how MeansTV formed?

Nick: Of course, thanks for having me. My name is Nick Hayes, I go by he/him, and my background is in documentary filmmaking and commercial film production. I got involved in socialist organizing around the age of 18 and at that time, was working in commercial film, and met my now partner, Naomi, who was working in commercial public relations and marketing, and both of us just felt like we were doing something very rotten with our work lives. We wanted to find something that was a better use of our skills and time and more fulfilling.

So we started creating some shoots and some films with the goal of raising awareness around issues of anti-capitalism and intersectionality and various issues related to that and wound up shooting a number of campaign videos during the 2018 election cycle, one of which was for AOC who won her election. We got a lot of press coverage after that experience, and also quickly realized that there was no sustainable way to make money and work with ethical, grassroots candidates. So we pivoted around that time to MeansTV, with the idea of creating a worker owned, long standing media company that could be a home for filmmakers and documentarians and creators and all sorts of people in the sort of film and media economy to have ownership over their work, ownership over its distribution, and put out content that was oriented in this anti capitalist way. So we launched MeansTV in 2019.

We ran a grassroots fundraiser which we financed the content with the proceeds that we had generated from doing some of these commission videos for candidates. Did a number of explainer videos, ran a 10 week fundraiser, we raised around \$200,000 and used that seed money to get the streaming service operating, license our first round of content, finance some original content, and just sort of get things going. So since 2019 we've just continued, and we've added tons of content to MeansTV. In that time, we've produced a number of original shows. We also have a daily news show, Means Morning News, that airs Tuesday through Friday and is also delivered in podcast form. So yeah that's kind of where we're at now. Recently, we've been adding lots of YouTube creators and different folks like that to the platform, we have over 100 members, and it's been a very fulfilling and exciting journey.

Ebony: Yeah, what a gift to have some of that marketing background that can be really extractive, but to bring it into the anti-capitalist space, because I find that there's a gap usually within leftist political communities in terms of being able to market themselves in a way that can reach the masses. So I think that that's an important skill that you all

brought to MeansTV. I'm curious, I know that that was a part of the inspiration for forming a platform of your own, but what about the specific content on the platform was an inspiration for you all. Like, why did you choose to focus on post-capitalist content?

Nick: Yeah, I think that it was a result of some of my own experiences as a freelance filmmaker and producer at that time where I felt like I had a number of interesting projects in development and that I had started production on or various things, and it was very challenging to find anybody that was interested in them. I mean, there's a certain extent of like not everybody's gonna want to buy everything. Like, maybe the idea is just bad, which is totally valid and true. Sometimes things are just not of interest. But it did feel like I kept running up against this wall where anything that was explicitly arguing against capitalism or explicit in terms of its politics was just not of interest to these corporate networks. I imagined if I was encountering that, there was probably many other filmmakers who were experiencing something similar. So I think that was really the original inspiration, was just trying to show that there's so much we can do with this premise of anti-capitalist media.

So many filmmakers and creatives are already aligned with those values of wanting to build a better world free from capitalism in these exploitative markets that exist. I think my experience feeling like an outsider in these more corporate entertainment spaces with these ideas I was bringing them served as the inspiration for a lot of that, and since then, that inspiration has been fueled by working with filmmakers who have experienced the same thing and who have not been able to find a proper distributor for their film, or have not been able to find development money for a project. So as I've sort of stepped into more of this administrative role, producer role on the MeansTV end, and I'm doing less filmmaking day to day, that's really been awesome to have those people be my peers and be able to provide structure and a process for getting their works out or making their works happen.

Ebony: Right, and what's so special about MeansTV is that rather than being in the position to have to pitch to a corporation, as a filmmaker, you're actually being invited into a space where other filmmakers are a part of a community, and you all are the ones making the decisions about what type of content is on the platform, rather it being gate kept by people that don't even necessarily make films.

Nick: Yeah, I completely agree, and what I've seen with MeansTV is as we've added filmmakers, they recommend a person that they know, or they bring on a new project, and it just grows exponentially from that. I think that there's a difference between

curation and gatekeeping in that, we do have a high standard that we apply to all the content on the platform. We feel like it needs to meet a certain level, to have somebody be paying for it, to watch it but that needs to be accessible. We need to be looking at anything anybody sends us, we need to be approachable, you can reach any of us on the team directly. You can contact somebody else in the co-op and they'll bring your work up. So yeah, I agree it's so nice to be in community with so many incredible filmmakers and I feel very blessed.

Ebony: Let's get into more of some of the content that you all have on the platform. Maybe you can share a current project that y'all are working on, that you're excited about and want to highlight.

Nick: I think that there's a lot of stuff we've done that I'm very proud of. We started out really wanting to do some original content, and just sort of felt that that was the best way to communicate to audiences what this whole thing was about. That's a very challenging thing to do because it's expensive to make original content, it's hard to market. You're starting kind of from zero.

Things like Papa and Boy, which is an original series that we did with a podcast called Seriously Wrong, that's about like a distenuous relationship between a father and a son in a world that's populated by only fathers and sons in the sort of power dynamic that that would breed, I thought was a really fun and playful take on hierarchy. We've worked with designers and artists like Teenage Stepdad on art instruction shows like Seize the Memes. Then it's also satisfying, just being able to work with friends like Sam Sachs, who was somebody I've known for years, I really loved all of his work and we wanted to find some way to work together. I feel like through Means Morning News, it's really been elevating his voice and giving him this platform that allows for that.

In terms of new stuff we're doing, I think the most exciting, the most audience facing thing we've been doing is bringing on tons of these, what we call independent creators. So YouTube creators, podcasters, people who have video content they're putting out independently, and they occupy a very specific and vulnerable niche in the entertainment landscape because of that independence. Trying to bring value to them and structure so that they have something to fall back on when the YouTube algorithm changes, or when people aren't able to find their content, that has also been really fun and exciting working with them.

Ebony: So you all have such a plethora of content that's available to people. You mentioned this show that's a world with just fathers and sons and also people being able to learn a practical skill, like how to create memes, while being tapped into what's happening in the news on a daily basis. I think that that's really unique to what streaming services generally provide. I also love that it's creating an opening for creators that aren't necessarily traditional filmmakers, but that are on the ground and creating content that is really relevant to what is happening at this time.

Nick: Yeah, it's been really fascinating too seeing how filmmakers in our cooperative are so interested and engaged by what YouTube creators are doing because, and vice versa, so many YouTubers feel like they wish they had these skills in terms of film production, and want to elevate their production quality, or want to do some of these things filmmakers are doing. I think filmmakers feel so impressed with these YouTubers ability to build an audience, to get people to care about their work, to have people excited when something new drops. That's been really interesting, seeing some of the conversations that have come out of those cooperative meetings where YouTube creators are sitting in community with filmmakers. I don't know what that crossover entails or what that looks like in the future, but it's been very interesting watching those conversations unfold.

Ebony: Yeah, I think that that's so beneficial to have these different intersections of types of creators and content, because yeah, there's so much possibility for there to be peer to peer learning and exchange in those spaces. There was an interview I read where you stated that entertainment can be an effective cultural reproduction tool, and so I want you to speak on how you would like your content to challenge or transform the way people think about culture.

Nick: I think the cultural stuff is interesting and I think it's kind of fraught. Andrew Breitbart, I think it was, who's the big like right wing media icon. I believe he said very famously, that politics is downstream from culture, and I don't think that's the case. I think there's a million ways to prove that our culture is informed by social hierarchies, by political hierarchies, and is a reflection of those structures. I think that at the same time, though, we can create media that is utopian and aspirational in terms of what we want out of society.

I don't think that you could point to like culture broadly in the United States and say that's happening, I don't think it is. But I think that within this broader culture that is a reflection of capitalism, that is a reflection of the US as it stands. I think there can be

niches in these little corners where you find interesting thoughtful content that is trying to assert itself and is trying to reach for something greater than just toil and exploitation. So I look at MeansTV as aspirational in that sense, the content we put out. I want it to feel empowering to people. I want people to feel seen and I want them to feel in community with others that are experiencing the depravities of life under capitalism alongside them.

Ebony: Yes, that's also what I love about what you all are putting out, because it's not just challenging capitalism, which is something that I noticed, either people are really challenging capitalism but not giving any solutions, or they're just thinking about solutions. You all are creating a balance of both of them, so that when people start to rethink the culture that is highly informed by capitalism, they can also look to these models of what to create beyond it.

Nick: Yeah and I think it is challenging to make art, I mean it is and it isn't, there's a lot of really fun and entertaining art that is subversive and has some sort of bite to it. I think that it's easy to overdo that and to just make something that is joyless and not fun or entertaining, but that is laden with this really heavy message of whatever political thing. I think that's kind of a tightrope to walk, especially sort of in our niche, and I don't think we always do it perfectly.

I think that there's content we've made that is a little bit heavy handed, perhaps, or content we've made that is unclear what is the connection between this and this political philosophy. I think it's important as people who believe in building a socialist world, a communist world, a world free from hierarchy and capitalism, that we celebrate all of these different elements of the human experience and champion those things. We are a company and a business that relies on subscribers and our audience understanding what we're putting out. That's something we always have to kind of recenter and refocus ourselves to is we are an anti capitalist streaming service. Does this advance our mission?

But certainly individually and as a filmmaker myself, I'm interested in exploring empathy and the human experience and how that connects to a political worldview in which all voices are equal, all experiences are valid, and how we would coexist in that sort of way. You always have to, at MeansTV think about what is the connection here? That's a challenge. I think, just in running any niche streaming service, is trying to make sure you don't step outside of your lane.

Ebony: What are some, some of those values that you all refer back to as you're considering what content to put out?

Nick: I think that our core values are also tied in with the way that we try to come off as an organization, which is righteous anger, a big element of the MeansTV aesthetic. People that are living under deprivation and exploitation are pissed off and we see that anger get directed in all these different ways through mainstream politics, whether it's resentment towards immigrants or resentment towards other races and things like that. I think that as socialist and communist, we have to recognize there is this anger and this simmering resentment about the situation that people are forced to be in, where they're struggling to pay their bills, they're feeling like they're getting screwed all the time, rent is going up. I think that's where we try to center our perspective is within that. Then provide answers and explanations of what that means and how to move through that in a way that isn't turning on your neighbor, in a way that does actually go after these powerful people that you know are keeping you down. So I think that's a big element is this idea of righteous anger and really something that's important to us.

Then I think the other element is socialism and communism, working class politics need to be centered within working class communities and people who are laboring for a living. I think that because of the fracturing of the union movement over the last 40 years, working class politics, like socialism and communism have become the arena of academia and hasn't been over intellectualized, but has become sort of college-ified. I think that keeping things simple and not dumbing them down or acting like people can't understand complex things, but just keeping it rooted in real experiences people are having every day is really important to us. Not having a huge part of our content and stuff feel like it's coming down from this ivory tower of academia telling you about Marxist theory in this way or that way. So that's very important to us as well.

Ebony: Right, I do find that in more leftist spaces that it can be hard to digest this information that can be really highly intellectualized to the people that need to hear it the most. I like this framing of righteous anger, and it's also giving an opportunity to the people that maybe generally don't have a voice in mass media to share their experience and to have this opportunity for the viewers to feel this shared experience. As working class people, we are really all rooted in this idea of righteous anger, and I'm sure some of your stories are also told by the people that have the lived experience. So it's not just this outsider coming but that it's really true to who they are, identity wise.

Nick: I think as the left, one of the things we have most working for us is the ability to be authentic and communicate that authenticity. I think that's historically been such a strength on the left, and the way we do that is by acknowledging that righteous anger that people have, acknowledging and validating those feelings and pointing them in this

direction, towards economics, towards society broadly, towards building something different. As opposed to what the right does, which is validate those feelings and point them to people who are poorer than them, people who are in their words leeching off the government through subsidized programs, through immigrants. Or what the Democrats do, which is just totally ignore it, provide no validation, and act like everything's peachy. So yeah, I think it's very important. Again, working class people are very smart, we don't need to dumb this shit down for people on a broad scale. I didn't go to college, I struggle with academic settings and I can grasp this stuff.

Overall, our message as socialists and communists is pretty simple and straightforward, and it's important to stay focused on that we want to reorganize society so that the workers control the production and distribution of commodities, as opposed to the owners and the capitalists being in control of production and distribution, we don't need to over complicate it. That's a constant critique of the left is well, what do you want, you're so critical of this or that. It's very straightforward, applying like a Marxist framework to things. It's exactly what I said. So it's just something we try to keep top of mind, and provide that whole spectrum. I think the content on MeansTV, there's content there to meet you wherever you're at. If you are a young person who is just beginning to realize that all of these issues are interconnected, that to solve climate change, we have to eliminate profit and to eliminate profit, we have to have worker power. As you're starting to understand that, which I think a lot of people do in their early 20s and stuff, I think we have stuff to meet them where they're at, and then we also have stuff for as they move through that to learn more about different things, or to take a break and find reprieve in entertainment that isn't seeking to demoralize you or talk down to you. So that's something we really try to orient ourselves around is meeting people where they're at.

Ebony: So important, because we all are at different stages of consciousness and awareness to these things as we talk about the future that we want to create through some of these principles that you all put out through MeansTV and that you were just sharing. What are some practices that you would like to invite listeners into for remembering the future.

Nick: One thing that creators on our platform have touched on a lot in their content that I find very hopeful is this idea of revolutionary optimism and applying logic and dialectical materialism to our present situation, and not allowing our judgment to be, clouded or not see things the way they are. We can't look at the situation we're in in the United States and be like the revolution's around the corner, like it's going to happen next month or in six months, like, that's not realistic. That's not applying dialectical

materialism to our present situation. But I do also think that through applying those things and through looking at things objectively to the extent we can there's a lot of things to be hopeful about, there's a lot of things to be optimistic about.

I think people are coming to these realizations every day. People we're seeing across this country taking control over their workplaces, fighting for unions. We're seeing a resurgence in the labor movement. I think we have some of the most exciting and passionate leaders in the labor movement that are rising up, that are doing incredible work. I think there's a lot to be hopeful for, and I think the cooperative economy plays a role in that. I think people wanting to not participate in the hyper exploitative traditional economy, but also not want to own some small business and be a small business tyrant and have employees and be telling everybody what to do. I think that that speaks to people's desire to work and live more collaboratively.

We're going to need all of that, we need to build the infrastructure to accommodate revolution, and to empower revolution. I think that is through the labor movement, that is through cooperatives, that is through building media ecosystems that are more reflective of working class people and our values. So in that sense, that's how I think about the future. The goal in MeansTV has always been to create a long standing institution and something that when I'm old and maybe I retire, or I just am not with it anymore, or whatever, other people are taking the mantle and running with it, and this continues to be an organization that supports anti-capitalist filmmakers and creators and people who are on sort of the outside of the traditional media economy. So that's how I think about the future. Is trying to build structures and institutions that can support future generations' work and their organizing and things like that.

Ebony: Yes, y'all are definitely creating a template. Because before you, I don't think there was a cooperative streaming service. So the fact that people can see this as a model of what can be is just planting the seed. There's so many other things that need to happen in tandem and in every industry, and that it's not just about burning shit down and the revolution, but what will we build once that happens?

Nick: Yeah and I think accepting change, embracing change. There's been all sorts of models we can look to in the past for revolutionary and cooperative magazines and newspapers and publications, but those things, just by way of technology, became less and less relevant, less and less viable as a way to make money. Not to say there's not a lot of thriving left wing like print publications now. I think just introducing this idea of streaming felt like stepping into a new arena for the left and for the cooperative

movement. I imagine as technology continues to progress, there will be whole new means of distribution and ways of reaching people that we'll also have to expand into and streaming won't be this cutting edge thing in the near future. Just continuing to be realistic and make things that are accessible to people that address different forms of distribution and production, I think is totally critical to the cooperative movement.

Ebony: Yeah and when I think about remembering the future, it is connected to those past examples too. Like, what can we learn from those cooperative models that may not be as relevant to the change that we need right now, but something in their structure could inform what we need in this current moment. Thank you so much for this interview and for the work that y'all are doing.

Nick: If anybody ever wants to discuss this stuff with me, I'll always open to that, they can email me, I'm more than happy to chat about this stuff, because I'm by no means an expert, and I'm always interested in what other people are thinking about things. But yeah, thank you so much for having me.

[Music - Hot Springs by Andile Blessing Magwaza and Sizwe Lancelot Mbelu]

Marina: Thank you so much for joining us today. Special thanks to the Remember the Future Fellows for sharing their stories with us and for their ongoing commitment to an artist liberation movement. Remember the Future is edited by Anthony Rodriguez with visual design by Emma Werowinski and theme music by Andile Blessing Magwaza and Sizwe Lancelot Mbelu.

The show's executive producers are Ebony Gustave and me, Marina Lopez. Additional thanks to our colleagues at Art.coop, Sruti Suryanarayanan and Nati Linares.

You can hear more episodes of Remember the Future anywhere you get your podcasts. If you enjoyed what you heard, we invite you to rate, subscribe and review! Find us on Instagram and twitter @_artcoop

You can also help sustain this podcast by visiting our website Art.coop and clicking on donate to make a donation.