

Socially Engaged Public Access Productions: Making the Road by Walking

By Paula Manley, The Learning Commons
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PAULA MANLEY is an educator, researcher, group facilitator, and consultant to the independent media field. With a background in journalism, media arts administration, and documentary making, she now focuses on catalyzing healthy organizational change and leadership development. Paula holds an M.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies from Marylhurst University, with concentrations in organizational and intercultural communication. She is a co-founder of The Learning Commons, a nonprofit group devoted to nurturing public spaces and community-based leadership. She also serves as Board Chair for Technical Assistance for Community Services (TACS), a management support organization for nonprofit groups in Oregon and Washington.

Introduction

Socially engaged public access television productions take many forms, including town hall dialogues, oral history documentaries, organizing videos, coverage of school board meetings, and critiques of mainstream media. Since its earliest experiments in the 1970s, public access has sought to create a public forum—an electronic commons—in which any community member may participate as a creator, sender and receiver of media messages. With an emphasis on fostering civic engagement and diverse cultural expression, public access television operations in hundreds of communities make low cost training, equipment, production opportunities, and cable channel time accessible to individual citizens, nonprofit groups, schools and governmental organizations.

Seventy percent of U.S. households now subscribe to cable television. According to the Alliance for Community Media, the membership organization serving the public access field, less than 15 percent of cable systems include public access television. The Alliance estimates that there are 1,500 public access operations in the U.S., with approximately 1,000,000 hours of programming produced annually. When public access is included in local cable franchises, it is rarely possible without a sustained community organizing effort. In many communities, including large cities like Seattle and small towns like McMinnville, Oregon, activists have waged multi-year campaigns before finally securing public access resources and/or doing away with cable company control of public access. Even where public access provisions exist, enforcement of local cable franchise requirements is not guaranteed, as the persevering public access coalition in Philadelphia has learned.

The socially engaged media productions made possible through the hard-won, yet fragile, public access resources in hundreds of communities throughout the U.S. demonstrate the potential of grassroots media to inform and invigorate community life outside the commercial paradigm. In this paper, I define key terms and identify four broad categories of socially engaged public access production. I then provide specific examples of productions, their producers, and the contexts in which they were created. Finally, I highlight key issues and implications for socially engaged public access production in the future.

Key terms

The term *public access* has a dual meaning. First, *public access* refers to resources negotiated as a public benefit in local cable franchises for the production and cablecast of noncommercial community television programming; such provisions are considered partial compensation for the private use of public rights-of-way by cable companies. The term *public access* also refers to a

philosophy and set of practices that have evolved in the U.S. since the early 1970s to foster broad community participation in an electronic commons. An alternative term, *PEG*, which stands for public, education and government access, is also common. The term *PEG* was coined in the federal Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984 to delineate public, educational and governmental access programmers as distinct constituencies. My use of the term *public access* is inclusive of the various “publics” involved.

The term *community media organization* refers to an organization that manages public access or PEG resources. Most *community media organizations* are nonprofit organizations operating with federal tax-exempt 501(c)(3) status. In some communities, local governments, schools, or consortium organizations manage some or all of a community’s public access resources. The term *community media* has become prevalent since the mid-1990s, reflecting the trend among public access organizations to integrate multiple media tools within their operations and services (e.g. computer-based video editing, video streaming, computer labs, and radio).

Categories of social engaged media production and producers

Public access television is home to a vast amount of socially engaged media making. Although comprehensive public access programming statistics are not available, some broad categories of socially oriented production have emerged over three decades:

- productions that express the voices and views of marginalized populations
- productions that extend the reach of nonprofit and grassroots groups
- productions that promote involvement in public life, and
- productions that are part of organizing efforts to raise public awareness about issues and/or achieve specific social justice outcomes.

Foremost among the producers of socially engaged public access productions are individuals involved in nonprofit or grassroots groups who are already organized around particular social concerns, and community media organizations whose missions include facilitating civic communication. Staff members in community media organizations often have special roles identifying key community needs and issues (through formal or informal methods), and facilitating productions that engage the community in these issues. Co-productions are common, for example involving cooperation with nonprofit, educational and government partners. Other socially oriented productions spring from the efforts of media collectives that frequently make use of public access resources for developing videos that promote critical consciousness and/or support organizing campaigns. Grassroots documentary makers also rely on public access.

The roles of paid staff and volunteers in the creation of public access productions cannot be over-emphasized. Cable franchise resources, such as franchise fees and direct payments from cable operators, often provide crucial support for the public access staff required to train community members and facilitate productions. Many productions also rely on the efforts of paid staff from nonprofit and public sector organizations. However, few public access productions would be possible without substantial contributions of volunteer time. Production volunteers have many motivations including a sense of satisfaction from contributing to the technical aspects of media production, an affinity with a particular program content area (e.g. a social issue or topic of interest), or the enjoyment that comes from working with others toward a common goal.

Examples of social engaged media production and producers

What follows are examples that typify socially engaged public access television productions and producers, organized into broad categories. My intent is to be illustrative rather than definitive, recognizing that there are innumerable variations in social media-making occurring within the diverse public access operations nationwide. Also, public access productions are often closely

intertwined with community outreach and training practices, as reflected in many of the examples summarized here.

Expressing the voices and views of marginalized communities

From its earliest days, public access television has sought to foster self-confidence and voice, putting the tools of television directly into the hands of people and encouraging them to speak for themselves. At the heart of the public access philosophy is a concern with self-representation, especially among groups that have historically been misrepresented in the dominant media and underrepresented in the societal power equation. Oral history documentaries, productions made by people with disabilities, and youth productions, are among the public access productions that express the voices and views of marginalized communities.

For example, a husband-wife team in Chicago saw a void in the African-American history curriculum in the public schools and set out to create a documentary that would present a more detailed and complex picture. With training and production equipment from Chicago Access Network Television, the duo traced the route of the Great Migration in reverse, traveling from Chicago to New Orleans and back, combing library archives and interviewing historians along the way. Since its initial cablecast on CAN-TV in 2000, *The African American History Millennium Series* has been made available to educators for use in their classrooms. *Songs of Sojourn: Japanese Americans in Oregon* is another oral history series developed with public access resources. Produced by a member of the Oregon Japanese American Legacy Center, who was trained at Portland Cable Access, the series integrated photographs and documentary film footage with moving interviews of individuals who were interned during World War II and veterans whose families were in internment camps.

Individuals with disabilities are actively involved in developing public access productions in many communities. *Access Mid-Michigan* is a monthly talk show, produced through the facilities of Midland Community Television, which has been seen on central Michigan public access channels for the past five years. The show's host, producer, and much of its crew, are associated with the Center for Independent Living, a nonprofit organization that serves youth and adults with disabilities. The *Access Mid-Michigan* series seeks to combat stereotyping about disabilities within the general public, and to provide useful information to those with disabilities. Through interviews with individuals involved in diverse professional and social pursuits—such as inventors, artists, doctors, and elected officials—the series counters the “helpless” and one-dimensional portrayals of people with disabilities that are typical in the mainstream media.

The 1990s saw an explosion of public access productions produced by and for youth throughout the U.S. In Davis, California the *Davis Video Project* engaged multicultural youth in an exploration of art, ethnicity and community. With support from Davis Community Television and a small Arts Commission grant, youth aged 16 to 22 took part in video production training, created their own productions, and orchestrated screenings of their work in neighborhood settings as well as on the public access channel. The youth productions, which included powerful personal stories about racism, sexual orientation, and body image, sparked robust community conversations, and increased public awareness of local issues and cultures. An evaluation of the project's youth participants found enhanced skills in many areas including group decision-making, critical analysis of media messages, public speaking, and community organizing.

In 2000, Manhattan Neighborhood Network seized on the burgeoning youth media movement with the launch of the Youth Channel, an ambitious training and programming initiative that seeks to create alternatives to mass media for young people, and eventually make youth-produced programming widely available throughout the U.S. According to its mission statement, the Youth Channel seeks to “empower youth to believe they are capable of creating change within their communities and the world.” Youth productions developed through MNN, and YC affiliated

community media organizations in Seattle, Atlanta, Denver and Grand Rapids, are compiled by MNN and distributed for cablecast on public access channels in participating cities. YC programming is also available nationwide via the DISH Network. Along with issue-based talk shows, recent youth productions include a documentary about the game of tag, a dramatic production of *Romeo and Juliet* set in the South Bronx, an anti-violence PSA called *Be the Bigger Person*, and documentation of the current social unrest in Argentina. As the number of YC affiliates grows, so will the amount of youth-produced programming. In addition to television distribution, YC emphasizes community-based screenings and interactive discussions to promote self-esteem, social and political consciousness, teamwork and decision-making skills among youth producers.

MNN provides general operating support to the Youth Channel out of the cable franchise funding it receives. Project funds have been provided by the Open Society Institute, New York State Council on the Arts, and National Endowment for the Arts, and YC plans to seek additional support from private foundations and corporate funders. The community media organizations that are YC affiliates receive a small amount of grant funding from MNN. They also contribute staff time and, in some cases, raise funds locally.

Extending the reach of nonprofit organizations and grassroots groups

Although community media organizations have historically recognized the importance of involving nonprofit and grassroots organizations in public access television, the predominant “do it yourself” production model has proven unworkable for many such groups. In the mid-1980s, Chicago Access Network Television became a leader in the community media field for its efforts to address the time and resource limitations that prevented nonprofits from making use of public access television. Today more than 2,500 of Chicago’s 8,000 nonprofit organizations have used CAN-TV for purposes including volunteer recruitment, advocacy, public education, community organizing, and direct service. Through active outreach, CAN-TV works to involve groups that reflect the city’s diversity in terms of demographics, issues, and geography. CAN-TV assists them in clarifying their communication goals and identifying the production opportunities that will best address their needs. The range of options available to nonprofits through CAN-TV includes coverage of community events, customized media production training, and opportunities to create live call-in programming.

The most visible forum for programming produced by nonprofit groups is Chicago’s Hotline 21 Channel. Each year, CAN-TV trains more than 200 representatives of nonprofit groups in its hotline studio to develop live call-in programming for the channel. With built-in lights and cameras, the special studio can be operated with the push of a button and does not require a crew. A strike by Chicago Public School custodians recently provided the impetus for a marathon edition of a hotline program, *SEIU Says*, hosted by the Service Employees International Union. Demanding the reinstatement of wages and benefits lost when custodians’ jobs were privatized, the union was able to take its case directly to the public, and respond to viewer comments and questions. Other examples of hotline programming include *AIDS Call-In Live*, in which eight AIDS agencies rotate through twice weekly timeslots to answer questions and make referrals about HIV/AIDS, and *Chicago Legal Aid for Incarcerated Mothers (CLAIM)*, which advocates for prison reform, and raises public awareness about the impact of women’s incarceration on families and communities.

In Palo Alto, California, the innovative *Community Journal* is another example of a public access series that is extending the reach of nonprofit organizations. With the goal of moving beyond studio talking head productions, The Mid Peninsula Community Media Center has so far trained representatives of 45 different community groups in the art of crafting a compelling story. The training focuses not on hands-on technical production, but on script writing, presentation skills, selecting visuals, and integrating audio excerpts. Groups such as the Community Breast Health Project, the Junior League and the Clara-Mateo Homeless Alliance are then paired with a videographer/editor to produce six short segments over the course of a year. A new half-hour edition

of *Community Journal*, featuring stories from six organizations, is produced each month. In an initial evaluation of the project, all participants reported improvement in their communication skills, while nearly all reported getting unsolicited feedback from people who had viewed the program on the public access channel. Some groups have integrated *Community Journal* segments within their websites, while others have used them for volunteer recruitment and advocacy before the City Council.

Most community media organizations now employ strategies to involve nonprofits and grassroots groups in public access. Methods range from producing simple interview programs to providing training in multi-faceted strategic media utilization. For example, this year Denver Community Television is creating a campaign, “*Your Message Here...*” in cooperation with the Colorado Association of Nonprofit Organizations. Among the organizations taking part are A Su Salud (To Your Health), United Way, and the MLK Day Celebration Committee. In addition to working with these groups on event coverage and studio interviews for cablecast on public access television, DCTV will train group members to use digital cameras and laptop computers to create customized presentations for funders, boards of directors, policy makers, and potential partners.

Promoting involvement in public life

At the core of the public access mission is the ideal of an electronic commons that strengthens the fabric of community life. A key function of the community media organizations that steward public access resources is to bring private individuals into public life through production opportunities that engage them in the give and take of creating public knowledge.

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Denver was one of many communities that made use of public access television to bring people together as part of the healing process. In partnership with the Conflict Center, Denver Community Television convened a series of two-hour facilitated town hall productions, *Healing The Terror*. Denver’s racial and ideological diversity generated a multiplicity of viewpoints on questions such as, why did the terrorist attacks occur? and what kind of policies should the U.S. have toward Arab countries? Through creating a forum for dialogue on such divisive topics, involving studio participants and viewers who called in, DCTV sought to increase understanding and reduce the potential for violent confrontations.

In Burlington, Vermont, Chittendon Community Television is drawing attention to the erosion of civil liberties in the wake of the Bush Administration’s “war on terror.” In partnership with two neighboring community media organizations and a cadre of volunteers, CCTV is planning a media campaign to encourage the protection of civil liberties. The campaign will launch in February with a live production that incorporates field interviews, a studio panel, and viewer calls. CCTV’s website, which will stream segments or the video production, will also serve as a hub pointing to additional civil liberties resources.

Perhaps the most fundamental means by which public access productions promote involvement in public life is through connecting citizens with candidates and with their government. At election time, when commercial media outlets and public broadcasting stations concentrate on major state and national races, public access productions encourage critical thinking and enable voters to hear from candidates running for local offices—often in considerable depth. In addition to producing an extensive *Video Voters Guide* series of candidate interviews in cooperation with the League of Women Voters, Tualatin Valley Community Access has taught workshops and sponsored productions that encourage critical analysis of campaign ads. In Grand Rapids, Michigan the Community Media Center’s *Tele-Democracy Project* promotes citizen participation in the electoral process through hosting candidate forums, producing voter information PSAs, and posting election information and research on its website.

In hundreds of communities throughout the U.S., school board and city council meeting coverage is routinely cablecast. In some communities, legislative proceedings are also available via

the public access channels. In Salem, Oregon, Capital Community Television organized the production and distribution of videotaped updates from legislators during the last legislative session. Nearly 40 legislators took part in *Legislative Reports* on location at the state capital. An expanded effort is planned for 2003. Although the cumulative effect of making local government meeting coverage and legislative programming broadly accessible to the public is difficult to gauge, it can be argued that government is demystified through such exposure—reducing the distance between citizens and the decision-making that shapes their lives.

Agitating and organizing for social change

In the past decade, awareness of public access television has steadily increased among activist groups working for social change and/or challenging the tenets of capitalism. In 1991, Deep Dish TV's ground-breaking work coordinating and distributing programming nationwide in opposition to the Gulf War put public access on the activist map as a vehicle for challenging militarism and corporate media hegemony. Today community organizers, artists, and collectives are among those making use of public access in their efforts to raise critical consciousness and create a more just world.

For People or for Profit? is an organizing video about the impact of electricity deregulation made by The Fair and Clean Energy Coalition. Not only was the video cablecast on public access channels throughout Oregon, it was also used by the Coalition's Speakers Bureau as part of a campaign to inform and involve small businesses and neighborhood, civic and church groups in energy issues. The Coalition, which represents nearly 100 organizations ranging from the Citizens Utility Board to the Oregon Food Bank, was created to advocate for public policies that protect consumers, protect the environment, and ensure universal access to affordable electric service. Early in the campaign, eight Coalition members were trained in field production by Tualatin Valley Community Access. With TVCA staff support, they developed their vision, created a script, and produced the video, making use of public access production gear. According to the Coalition's organizing director, the group's goal with the video was not simply to provide information, it was also to spark widespread discussion about a public issue of major importance.

An activist theater group, El Centro Su Teatro, frequently works through Denver Community Television to develop social justice programming that blends education, commentary, humor, and the arts. The group recently produced video coverage of a play, *No Hablo English Only*, which was developed in response to the English Only Campaign in Colorado (The campaign was not successful). The production crew was made up of DCTV-trained volunteers who were assisted by a staff member in utilizing a high-end production truck on location. Members of El Centro Su Teatro have also taken part in DCTV's *Denver Live* interview series to advocate against repressive immigration policies.

The Paper Tiger TV Collective in New York City, established more than 20 years ago, develops productions, conducts community screenings, and conducts trainings to raise awareness about the impact of the communications industry. A recent Paper Tiger production, *Fenced Out*, was cablecast on public access channels and screened as part of an organizing effort to save the Christopher Street Piers, one of the few hang out spots in New York City for youth of color and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and trans-sexual youth. The documentary begins with the youth being literally fenced out of the piers as redevelopment efforts take shape. A larger story unfolds as they come to see their struggle to save the piers in light the history of the piers within the gay liberation movement of the 1960s.

A video collective in Portland, Oregon, Flying Focus, produces a weekly half-hour series, *The Flying Focus Video Bus*, which addresses topics ranging from police brutality to critiques of mainstream media. The group routinely videotapes speakers such as *Noam Chomsky on the Media & Democracy*, *Barbara Ehrenreich on War and Society*, and *Howard Zinn on Reclaiming the People's*

History. In addition to cablecasting its productions on public access television, the collective distributes tapes by mail from a catalogue of more than 300 titles, and operates a lending library at community locations. For Flying Focus, which operates on an annual budget of \$5,000, public access equipment and channel time are essential resources.

Issues and Implications

Public access has its best moments in the accidental and intentional processes through which people of many ages, beliefs and social backgrounds come to voice, learn about themselves and their communities, gain confidence in collective action, and become active participants in the media culture. Through the twin lenses of “production values” and audience share, public access television is often viewed as a failure. But in the participation it has engendered through innumerable noble experiments and community collaborations, public access gives social media makers much to build on in the emerging digital era.

Looking to the future, key issues impacting public access, and socially engaged public access productions, include:

- The national public access field lacks comprehensive data about the current size and scope of public access operations and programming. Systematic methods for identifying, sharing, and critically reflecting on promising practices are also lacking.
- The prevalent model of public access service delivery, in which a community media organization contracts with local government to provide public access, discourages innovation and challenging programming content.
- Pressure to “fill channels” makes it difficult for community media organizations and other public access producers to pursue complex, long-term projects such as labor-intensive documentaries.
- Many community media organizations continue to focus only on quantitative evaluation measures (number of trainees, number of programming hours, etc.), which do not convey the social impact or value of public access productions.
- Mainstream media portrayals of public access as a haven for the goofy and the irrelevant continue to fuel popular understanding.
- Maintaining public access as a public forum available for all voices has never been easy and may become more difficult as civil liberties are increasingly under attack.
- Cable franchising, which has provided the public policy basis and primary funding mechanism for public access, faces a tenuous future. With technological convergence, new delivery systems, and a hyper-deregulatory telecommunications policy environment, further erosion of local control over public rights-of-way is probable.
- The widespread state funding crisis will put increased pressure on local cable franchise fees, threatening the elimination of this traditional public access funding source in many communities.
- The majority of community media organizations have not aggressively pursued diversified funding from sources such as earned income, grants, and donations.
- National public policy efforts to protect public access are reactive and focus on short-term concerns. Although immediate problems require immediate attention, there is also an urgent need to envision public access in the “post-cable” world, engage the field in dialogue about possible futures, propose public policy frameworks and strategies, and build support.

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