

Public access television: television within reach

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Abstract

The concept of local television in the United States differs from the concept in Europe. In the United States television is generally local, in such a way that television networks have an affiliation model that combines network programming and the local programming of the affiliated stations. The idea of community television is based more on participation rather than proximity. The key to this type of television lies in models like the so-called public access channels. This paper primarily deals with this television model: its concept, origins and prospects for the future.

Key words

US television system, local television, community television, public access, public television and participatory TV.

Resum

El concepte de televisió local als Estats Units difereix de l'europeu. Als Estats Units, la televisió ordinària és local, ja que les cadenes de televisió tenen un model d'afiliació on es combina la programació en cadena i la programació local de les estacions afiliades. La idea de televisió comunitària rau més en la participació que no pas en la proximitat. La clau, doncs, d'aquest tipus de televisió es troba en models com ara els anomenats canals d'accés públic. Aquest article tracta principalment d'aquest últim model televisiu: el seu concepte, l'origen i les perspectives de futur.

Paraules clau

Sistema televisiu als Estats Units, televisió local, televisió comunitària, accés públic, televisió pública i televisió participativa.

Terrestrial television in the USA: local network stations

Local television in the USA does not have the same meaning as it does in Europe. In fact, the entire television structure in North America is based around thousands of local stations that are affiliated with networks in one way or other, depending on whether we're talking about commercial or non-commercial stations. However, it would be wrong to think that no debate exists on the localisation and centralisation of television programming in the United States. On the contrary, debate has existed within the television system practically since its inception (Head *et al.* 1998, Engelman 1996).

In the case of commercial television, the system is based on large networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX and WB to name but a few of the most important English-speaking ones), which own only a few stations but which, in the majority of cases, are able to take out affiliation contracts with stations around the country and own the licences. These local stations combine network programming and local programming in agreement with the membership contract they have arrived at.

Local channels primarily offer information programmes –local in nature– which often feed national networks with news sto-

ries from different places around the country. The relationship is symbiotic: local stations can access programmes that their budgets would otherwise find difficult to afford, while the networks can aspire to realise their commercial dream: achieving the widest audience possible.

The fact that there's an Association of Local Television Stations could be misleading, but this is an association that, despite declaring an ambition to be independent, has ended up becoming affiliated with the large networks. This is something which, in practice, makes them rather similar to other stations that are essentially local, although their affiliation with the channel leaves them little opportunity to produce their own programming.

However, the affiliation model is not perfect. The success of cable systems, the economic downturn and the cost of adapting to digitalisation, amongst others influences, have revealed large cracks in the model that could even start to threaten the future of weaker local stations or smaller markets. These have suffered a decline in audience ratings since 2008 and have had to make major cuts. The networks, which already started investing in cable systems from the 1980s, are seriously looking at the possibility of exclusively broadcasting on cable (*The*

Wall Street Journal 2009). Moreover, many of the affiliation licences will be renewed as from 2011 and they will more than likely be negatively affected by the whole situation. However, there are still some guarantees that this will not happen, such as the strength of some stations, the fact that channels will also own some of the larger stations and because there's political pressure for sports leagues to be broadcast on terrestrial television. On the other hand, this dual network-local scheme helps to exploit the local advertising market, which contributes notably to these channels' profits.

Therefore, at the moment we can conclude that the American commercial terrestrial television market is, as we said, the sum of its local markets, which vary in size but can exceed 10 million inhabitants.

In the case of non-commercial television in the United States, we find a highly interrelated system, although with significant differences. The non-commercial channel Public Broadcasting System (PBS) started operating in 1970 as a national institution after the promulgation in 1967 of the Public Broadcasting Act, which marked the transition from a purely educational medium to a system of public television, and of a medium supported by private funding to a non-commercial television network with federal funding (Engelman 1996).

In practice, this is about a chain of individual, local broadcasters that provide the channel with programmes and, at the same time, use the programming from PBS's office that centralises purchases (either produced by the stations that form part of the channel or foreign or independent, syndicated productions) and programming decisions. The main public television license owners are states and municipalities, universities, public schools and community foundations.

Tensions at the channel's core (apart from those many and varied ones originating from political powers) have arisen precisely from the contradiction between the need to create their own identity as a channel and the desire of local stations to protect their own identity. Although the Public Broadcasting Act expected "a strong component of local and regional programming to provide the opportunity and the means for local choice to be exercised upon the programs made available from central programming sources" (CCET 1967, 33 cited in Head *et al.* 1998, 197), it has actually been very difficult to control the centralisation of programming.

In general, however, non-commercial television in the United States broadcasts more local than commercial programmes, although it often obtains programmes from the same distributors as commercial stations. As Head *et al.* states, "local production is often one of the first things to go when budgets are cut (Head *et al.* 1998, 205). The economic crisis and low audience ratings for public television are of little help in this respect and, as is the case with public television, normally the programmes that escape centralisation are local and regional news.

"Local" in cable and public access television

Cable television in the United States originated in the 1960s and 1970s. During the 1980s, terrestrial TV broadcasters were as important as the networks and generated as much income (*The Wall Street Journal* 1999) as cable television, although they were seen as "the little sister". This situation changed at the beginning of the 1990s and the number of cable subscribers has continued to grow, alongside the interest of large producers to deliver their products to cable networks as a priority.

Generally, these systems offer a package of thematic channels and premium originals and also include most broadcast stations, whose signal covers their franchise area, and some cable companies are even committed to producing local news content. In the case of cable, the franchise system also means that the system is based on local subscriptions; it's not by chance that the origin of the current cable television system in the United States can be found in the community cable systems of Community Antenna Television (CATV) which, during the 1950s and 1960s, grew from 70 to more than 800. In fact, cable television came into being because there were no economic incentives and no obligation for the networks to serve small communities (Rennie 2006, p. 52).

Ultimately, and regarding the concept of "local", what is most interesting in relation to cable networks is what's known as "public access television". In the aforementioned context, this was defined as a television system in which the concept of local is far from the media of community identity and proximity that constitute this concept in Europe. In the case of North America, the concept of community television relies mainly on the idea of participation.

The concept of participation is used to cover a wide range of practices that involve audience participation in televised broadcasts or in communication devices generated around broadcasts. There is another conception of participation which refers to the participation of citizens in controlling and advisory bodies for television or even in its managing bodies.

Another form of public participation in television, albeit symbolically in spite of the desire to see it as a form of public participation, is the use of citizens as raw material for programmes. Chronologically, the genre of the game show was probably one of the earliest to use the participation of ordinary citizens as "material" to produce its content, followed by candid camera programmes and, in the 1980s, the different types of infoshow, particularly reality shows.

One must add audience intervention to this form of participation, either live or using electronic devices at their fingertips provided by the programme (text message, internet, telephone), or the forms of television participation aimed at getting people interested in public affairs, encouraging direct involvement in asking questions to different politicians. Amongst the most recent forms of participation, it's worth mentioning the interactive possibilities of digital systems, such as cross-media

strategies, which have come out of the alliance between television, mobiles and the internet and which have substantially widened the range of participation promoted by the media.

This polysemy of the concept also affects scientific approaches and, from communication studies, the concept can be approached in various ways; on the one hand, it can be studied from the perspective of participatory television, where the emphasis is placed on the characteristics of the broadcasts and on the usage of participation as an element in the programme; and it can also be studied from the perspective of television as a dynamic agent of public participation or even from the point of view of the social use of the medium. This last approach has been called social media and concerns society's more or less organised access to the media, with civil society taking the initiative and becoming involved, as per the concept described by Habermas as a "public sphere". The public sphere is related to the idea of public understood as a social construct that, as such, requires social spaces to exist, debate, and act in the public's interest, without whose existence one cannot talk of a true democracy (Aufderheide 2000). Television and the media in general are potential platforms to encourage this process and can promote the necessary communications to construct the public sphere (Aufderheide 2000).

These theoretical concepts took hold in North American society, especially between the 1960s and 1970s, and have led to a social movement that demands television be used without professional mediation, such as through journalists, directors or producers, which is possible thanks to technology: "the introduction of cable television and portable video technology provided the means to make television a more open medium – more decentralized, more diverse, and more accessible to ordinary citizens" (Engelman 1996, p. 220).

This discourse refers us to a whole series of media that gets together around the concept of community media, whose major player has been radio in the electronic era (Rennie 2006; Howley 2005 and 2010; Fuller 2007, amongst others). Therefore, Howley (2005:16) states that "community media initiatives are one of the more effective strategies in the global struggle to democratize communication and ensure local autonomy in the wake of rampant media privatization and consolidation".

Moreover, in the United States, demands for media access and part of the philosophy on public access channels come from the venerable North American notion of free speech which is based, more or less, on a strict interpretation of the First Amendment of the US Constitution (Higgins 2007).

This social movement that demands access to television is concentrated at the Alternate Media Center at the University of New York, created by film and documentary-maker George Stoney, who participated in the "Challenge for Change" project in Canada, undoubtedly the clearest precedent of public access channels in the United States. Many interests and groups come together at the Alternate Media Center, with mixed and similar aspirations, including anti-war activists,

defenders of the First Amendment or activist groups of alternative or radical video, amongst others.

Contrary to the Canadian case, in the United States these demands for public access television end up being linked to private industry – cable television in this case – even though the earliest predecessors of public access television occurred in different local public television stations, such as WGBH in Boston, with its own programme *Catch 44*.

Consequently, in the United States, the pressure for access has crystallised into a kind of programming controlled by the public in general or by public institutions, instead of the cable operator, taking shape through an order from the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) in 1972 requiring the cable operators of the 100 largest markets to provide up to three channels for educational, local government and public use, as well as guaranteeing free access to any individual or group demanding this, for a minimum period of five minutes. A year before, in July 1971, the public access channel for the neighbourhood community in Manhattan (MNN) started its broadcasts, which was the first successful experience after the failed experiment of Dale City, in Virginia.²

Later, in 1976, this entitlement applied to all cable systems with more than 3,500 subscribers, and also required cable suppliers not to intervene in the content, given that the PEG stations (public, education and government – the abbreviation by which these types of stations are known) are ruled by the principle of free speech on a first-come, first-served basis. This philosophy, which aims to eliminate discrimination and guarantee equal access so that no groups are favoured over others, is based on the strictest interpretation of the First Amendment and, at the same time, has led to numerous debates, particularly within stations, about the limits that can be placed on free speech, taking into account that this includes ideas that are not necessarily democratic. This debate has yet to be resolved and, even though it has been the main philosophy in the development of access channels, the same Alliance for Community Media has brought this debate to the pages of its *Community Media Review* and it has been analysed by many theoreticians (Rennie 2006 or Higgins 1999, 2007).

This kind of participation is very active and notable in size. Most broadcasters of this kind form part of the aforementioned Alliance for Community Media, a national organisation that represents more than 3,000 PEG. According to statistics from the Alliance, these centres produce 20,000 hours of new programmes each week, serving more than 250,000 social organisations each year, with the collaboration of 1,200,000 volunteers.

Cable suppliers must provide the necessary production infrastructures so that social groups and/or individuals claiming their right of access can produce their own content. They must also give them minimum training in production in case they do not have this skill. In 1984, the Cable Franchise Policy and Communications Act reaffirmed the limitation on cable operators to intervene in the content of these channels, as well as,

and no less importantly, exempting them from any liability regarding the content.

There are many types of access channels linked to education centres, local governments or community and religious groups. The programming on these channels is highly varied and the fact that they were created by “radicals” means they have traditionally been used for debates by social activists who are very critical of the system. This is the case, for example, with the legendary Paper Tiger TV on MNN which, since the 1980s, has been highly critical of the mass media with a deliberately rebellious appearance, or also *Deep Dish* or *Gulf Crisis*, both from MNN. However, not all public access channels have been used for political, democratic or alternative debates: many are dominated by religious or spiritual groups (Rennie 2006).

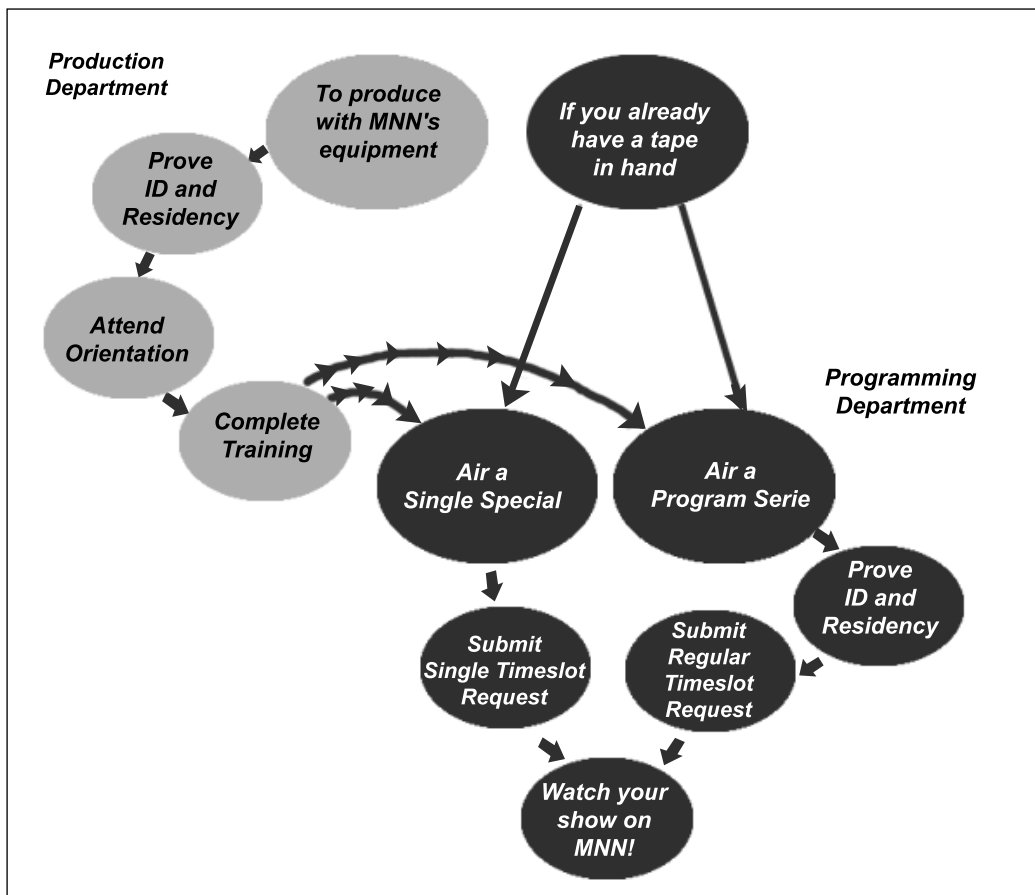
In organisational terms, community access or public access centres are typically found in many areas, where all sorts of associations and individual citizens can request training and resources to take advantage of their access entitlement and, therefore, to exercise their right to free speech.

A citizen, group or association that wants to access MNN’s broadcasting content has to follow this specific route to use the

network. If they have no access to production equipment and/or the knowledge to do so, they have to contact the Production Department to request production equipment, where they must also provide identification and proof of residency in Manhattan; additionally they must attend orientation sessions and training courses. Once they have gained these skills, they will be able to develop their project and, once finished, will follow the same process as those who already have the means and knowledge and a product to offer.

At this point they can approach the Programming Department to request a single time slot if they only have a one-off programme, or a regular time slot if they are making a series. And the programme that will be broadcast will comply with the following mission: “*Manhattan Neighborhood Network* is responsible for administering the *Public Access* cable television services in Manhattan. Our purpose is to ensure the ability of Manhattan residents to exercise their First Amendment rights through the medium of cable television and to create opportunities for mutual communication, education, artistic expression and other non-commercial uses of video facilities on an open, uncensored and equitable basis. In providing services, we seek

Figure 1. Circuit for exercising the right to access a public access television network: the case of the Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN)



Source: The Manhattan Neighborhood Network, <<http://www.mnn.org/es/producers/getashow>>.

to involve the diverse racial, ethnic and geographic communities of Manhattan in the electronic communication of their varied interests, needs, concerns and identities" (The Manhattan Neighborhood Network, <<http://www.mnn.org/es/about>>).

This solid reality of public access television in the United States is not without its threats. Cable suppliers have always tried to save the largest number of channels and invest as little as possible in public access centres, but legislation has been relentless in its defence of this right. However, new difficulties are now arising out of deregulation, which has led to concentration among operators and the emergence of the triple player.

Some of these conglomerates, in choosing IPTV, have wanted to be freed from their duties as cable suppliers and, when they haven't been able to do this, have looked for imaginative solutions. This is the case of AT&T, which wants to comply with its obligation to provide public access channels with the U-vers system which, in essence, entails a loss in quality and the shifting of these channels from the range of 20 to 99, where all public access channels are squashed in and where, to access one in particular, you have to search using an application until, finally, the desired channel opens. All this takes nearly two minutes.

Public access stations and the Alliance for Community Media are fighting a great battle to preserve the right to keep this ideal of public participation alive: "In order for democracy to flourish, people must be active participants in their government, educated to think critically and free to express themselves. The mission of the Alliance for Community Media is to advance democratic ideals by ensuring that people have access to electronic media and by promoting effective communication through community uses of media" (The Alliance for Community Media, <<http://www.alliancecm.org/node/34>>).

Despite this, the United States' public access television through cable is unique in the world in terms of achieving community media, as it implies "the institutionalization of a process that provides people with the opportunity to create video programs and air them on local cable television channels – an oasis of "free speech" and "free ideas" in a commercialized, corporate global media desert" (Higgins 2007, p. 185).

Notes

- 1 The Research Group in Image, Sound and Synthesis (GRISS) is a research group established at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, set up in 1980 and recognised by the Catalan government (Grup 2009SGR1013) that belongs to the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising I <<http://www.griss.org>>.
- 2 For a more detailed review of the historical development of public access in the United States, see Engelman 1996.

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