

PUBLIC ACCESS TELEVISION

Douglas Kellner

(<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/>)

Public access television has been one of the most interesting and controversial developments in the intersection between media and democracy within the past several decades. Beginning in the 1970s, cable systems began to offer access channels to the public, so that groups and individuals could make programs for other individuals in their own communities. Access systems began to proliferate and access programming has been cablecast regularly in such places as New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, Madison, Urbana, Austin, and perhaps as many as 4,000 other towns or regions (Linder 1999).

When cable television began to be widely introduced in the early 1970s, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) mandated in 1972 that “beginning in 1972, new cable systems [and after 1977, all cable systems] in the 100 largest television markets be required to provide channels for government, for educational purposes, and most importantly, for public access.” This mandate suggested that cable systems should make available three public access channels to be used for state and local government, education, and community public access use, which collectively came to be referred as PEG access.

“Public access” was construed to mean that the cable company should make available equipment and air time so that literally anybody could make noncommercial use of the access channel, and say and do anything they wished on a first-come, first-served basis, subject only to obscenity and libel laws. The result was an entirely different sort of programming, reflecting the interests of groups and individuals usually excluded from mainstream television.

The rationale for public access television was that, as mandated by the Federal Communications Act of 1934, the airwaves belong to the people, that in a democratic society it is useful to multiply public participation in political discussion, and that mainstream television severely limited the range of views and opinion. Public access television, then, would open television to the public, it would make possible community participation, and thus would be in the public interest of strengthening democracy.

Creating an access system required, in many cases, setting up a local organization to manage the access channels, though in other systems the cable company itself managed the access center. In the beginning, however, few, if any, cable systems made as many as three channels available, but some systems began offering one or two access channels in the early to mid-1970s. The availability of access channels depended, for the most part, on the political clout of local governments and committed, and often unpaid, local groups to convince the cable companies, almost all privately owned, to make available an access channel. A 1979 Supreme Court decision, however, struck down the 1972 FCC ruling on the grounds that the FCC had no authority to mandate access, an authority which supposedly belongs to the U.S. Congress alone. Nonetheless, cable was expanding so rapidly and becoming such a high-growth competitive industry that by the 1980s city governments considering cable systems were besieged by companies making lucrative offers (20 to 80 channel cable systems) and were able to demand access

channels and financial support for public access systems as part of their contract negotiations.

Consequently, public access grew significantly during the 1980s and 1990s and the Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984 and the Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992 provided language that allowed local governments to require public access cable channels as part of their negotiated agreements (Linder 1999).

Not surprisingly, public access television has been controversial from the beginning. Early disputes revolved around explicit sexuality and obscenity, particularly in New York City where public access schedules with programs like “Ugly George” and “Midnight Blue” drew attention and provoked criticism. Focus then turned to controversial political content when extremist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nation began distributing programs nationally. Many groups like the American Atheists, labor groups, and a diverse number of political groups began producing programs for syndication, and debates emerged over whether access systems should show programming that was not actually produced in the community where it was originally cablecast.

Despite the controversy, public access television has thrived in many parts of the U.S. A few systems charge money for use of facilities, or charge a fee for use of airtime, but due to competitive bidding among cable systems in the 1980s and 1990s for the most lucrative franchises, many cable systems offer free use of equipment, personnel, and airtime, and occasionally even provide free videotapes. In these situations, literally anyone can make use of public access facilities without technical expertise, television experience, or financial resources.

Many public access systems also offer a range of conceptual and technical training programs designed to instruct groups or individuals who wish to make their own programs from conception through final editing. As video equipment costs have rapidly declined it has even become possible for some groups to purchase their own equipment.

In the 1990s, following the trends of talk radio, many talk television access shows emerged. Individuals fielded calls from members of the community, and discussed current political problems, or, in some cases, personal problems. In many ways, this “conversational” mode exemplified the community focus and personal orientation of access television, again moving away from mainstream TV designed to reach the largest possible audiences, while creating a host of highly idiosyncratic conversations..

But various actions moving toward greater media deregulation in the 1990s and into the new millennium threaten the continued survival of access, as do the Internet and other new communications technologies. In a highly competitive environment, cable systems may very well close down access systems if there is insufficient government pressure to keep them open, though competitive market pressures might promote the survival of popular access channels. And while the Internet, and other emerging delivery systems could render obsolete the relatively low-tech access systems, these same forms of communication may even multiply access television, enabling literally any group or individual to make their television programs and distribute them over the Internet. Whether a more democratic communications system emerges or dissolves is up to citizens who are interested in communicating with other citizens and nourishing instruments of democratic communication such as public access TV. Present trends

toward concentration of media ownership, commercialization, and tabloidization of news and information threaten the integrity of the public sphere and the possibilities for democratic communication. If U.S. democracy is to survive and thrive citizens need to use all instruments of democratic communication such as community radio, public access television, and now the Internet. —Douglas Kellner

FURTHER READING

Alvarez, Sally M. *Reclaiming the Public Sphere: A Study of Public Access Television Programming by the U.S. Labor Movement* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1995).

Frederiksen, H. Allan. *Community Access Video*. Menlo Park, California: Nowells, 1972.

Fuller, Linda K. *Community Television in the United States*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994.

Kellner, Douglas. *Television and the Crisis of Democracy*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990.

Linder, Laura R. Public Access Television. America's Electronic Soapbox. Westport, Connecticut, 1999.

Phillips, Mary Alice Mayer. *CATV: A History of Community Antenna Television*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1972.

Ryan, Charlotte. *Prime-Time Activism*. Boston: South End Press, 1991.