

# Public Access Television: An Institutional Analysis

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In 1984 Congress created public, educational, and governmental (PEG) access cable television. Perhaps the most daring of these three is public access television (PA-TV), which gives local residents skills, resources, and access to their local cable network. With the passage of two decades and with hundreds of PA-TV centers operating throughout the US, one can recognize a PA-TV sector with established rules and practices. PA-TV has experienced a process of institutionalization.

Institutions are the structures that impart an enduring form and character to a society or a sector within it. The institutions that define the PA-TV sector today include not only its regulatory framework but also its organizational forms, its cultural norms, and the operating practices widely used across the country. Any individual participating in PA-TV quickly encounters these institutions, and anyone working in this sector over time is eventually socialized into these long-established "rules of the game." With the passage of time, institutions often fade into the background, and their pervasive effects go unnoticed.

In what follows, I offer an *institutional critique* of PA-TV. Institutional critique illuminates institutions in order to reveal how they condition individual behavior. Such critique can explain much about a sector, because much individual behavior reflects structural constraints and incentives. Such critique is also a prerequisite for strategic innovation, because it can identify opportunities to effect broad structural changes. Institutional critique is also in the tradition of media studies, with perhaps the best known work of this genre being Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*.

In what follows I sequentially analyze institutions that influence the behavior of individuals and that condition the possibilities for future innovation in PA-TV. These institutions are: mission; regulatory framework; industry structure; pressure groups; technology; and professional culture. In each case I identify the institution and analyze its effects.

## Mission

Public access television has at least two broad missions: social change and free speech. Many early advocates saw PA-TV's mission in terms of social change. Early supporters emphasized PA-TV's contribution to democracy. The influential 1971 study by the Sloan Commission on Cable Communications stated, "Politics ... is important. The cable can literally bring that fact home, and in doing so help the entire political process function efficiently and effectively in the public interest."

Others saw PA-TV in terms of a related but less ambitious mission: promoting free speech. The paradigmatic phrase here is the "electronic soap box." In this view, PA-TV's mission is to allow any citizen to speak her or his mind to the community about whatever topic they desire. This mission emphasizes non-discriminatory, first-come, first-served access.

The differences between these two missions are substantial. The social change mission sees PA-TV in terms of its impacts. Communication is a means to a valued end (positive social change in the service of the public interest.) This mission implies that access centers should perform outreach to community groups that will use PA-TV as a tool for social change. The mission also emphasizes audiences, since without an audience, no social change is likely to result. According to this mission, an access center is not itself an agent of change, but it provides valuable tools to groups that do promote change.

The free speech mission sees PA-TV in terms of *speech* rather than *communication*. It is less concerned about impacts and audiences, i.e. the receiver of the speech does not figure as prominently. In this mission, centers train local citizens to produce video, which they later put out on the cable network. Since free speech is an end in itself, an access center can simply provide an electronic soap box for public speech; viewers/listeners are much less emphasized.

These two missions suggest two different criteria for assessing PA-TV. Assessing the social change mission requires identifying instances where PA-TV has changed the lives of people or a community. Assessing the free speech mission requires simply identifying how many individuals and groups produced programming; it does not require further evidence of audience or consequences.

As will be argued below, institutional forces in PA-TV have pushed it consistently toward the free speech/electronic soapbox mission, i.e. to a focus on production with less regard for audience or impact. Evolution toward the free speech mission may disappoint some who saw PA-TV as a powerful tool for social change.

## Regulatory Framework

PA-TV's regulatory framework is another important institution whose influence permeates the sector. PA-TV is regulated both at the federal and local level. The US Cable Acts of 1984 and 1992 define the basic parameters for local regulation. Local governments then define detailed regulation within those parameters. For operating entities (access centers,) the main regulatory authority is the city (or town) council.

City councils employ various mechanisms to regulate access television. First, they negotiate the local cable franchise, which determines whether there will be public access, its level of funding, and other parameters. Second, they often sub-contract out the operation of an access center to a private corporation, selecting the entity to perform the

public access functions. Third, a city council can influence the internal corporate governance of a center by appointing directors to its board.

These three control mechanisms -- franchise, sub-contract, and corporate governance -- give a local government considerable control over its access centers. A local government can revise a franchise to eliminate public access altogether; it can revise a subcontract to replace the access center operator; finally, via a center's board of directors, it can reshuffle staff or set priorities and procedures. PA-TV is noteworthy for the degree of government control over its operations.

Such control may render centers less aggressive in pursuing their social change mission. Although access centers are not advocacy organizations, they provide tools for citizens advocates to challenge local government and powerful local entities (e.g. real estate developers.) Should a center pursue this mission vigorously, however, it could attract a backlash. A government under attack from access-empowered activists has many ways to defend itself. For example, Hawaii's Maui Community TV (Akaku) was effectively used by citizens opposing real estate development -- until the government appointed numerous Chamber of Commerce officials to the station's board. That board then fired the station's manager. The full story is complex, but the key point is that mechanisms for government control have real teeth.

Pragmatic station managers may simply accommodate themselves to such pressures. Stations might prioritize non-controversial producers, e.g. they might more actively solicit programming from school sports programs than from trash collectors on strike or from opponents of real estate development. In terms of budget priorities, stations might hire managers on the basis of their political savvy in dealing with a city council rather than their expertise in video production, even though video expertise is more essential for mission.

In summary, PA-TV's regulatory mechanisms give local governments influence over their centers via franchises, contracts, and corporate governance. This can render centers less assertive in pursuing a social change mission.

### 3. Industry Structure

Industry structure refers to the scale and organization of all entities in a sector. PA-TV's industry structure is fragmented. The sector consists of a large number of small centers -- approximately 400 across the US. This structure reflects the political structure of US society: any community with a cable franchise can have an access center.

This industry structure leads to fragmented funding. Total US funding for PA-TV is impressive: in 2001 access centers received \$120 million. Total public support over the last decade is between one and two *billion* dollars. With so many stations, however, most individual stations' funding was quite small. In 2001 over half of US centers had budgets under \$200,000, capable of supporting only a few staff members and a small facility.

Such fragmentation has numerous consequences. First, it causes diseconomies of scale. Centers are often too small to be as effective as they would like. Their funding is small, so they have difficulty affording equipment, staff, and facilities. Their producer community is small, so they may not have enough producers to utilize the channel capacity. Their subscriber base is small, so they may only serve a small audience.

Industry structure also affects the sector's capacity for innovation. With so many centers strapped for funding, they cannot invest in learning about new technology. Opportunities offered by new media may not be seized, since stations are hard-pressed to fulfill their core mission.

One solution to fragmentation is association, and the PA-TV sector does have a national association, the Alliance for Community Media (ACM). However, the ACM also lacks resources, because its individual member centers lack the resources to support it. Strapped for resources, it too focuses mostly on its core mission of holding an annual conference and defending the sector from hostile policy initiatives in Washington, DC. It supports little research other than an annual survey. The lack of a strong national association means that there are few ways to overcome fragmentation.

In summary, PA-TV's fragmented industry structure means that a \$120 million sector is composed of many cash-strapped entities. They lack resources to do more than focus on their immediate core mission, and they cannot easily invest in experimentation. This may contribute to the sector's slow adoption of new media technology. Although there are noteworthy exceptions, PA-TV is not a sector characterized by innovation.

#### 4. Pressure Groups

Any organization is shaped by external groups that apply pressure to it. As discussed above, local government officials are the most influential external force on an access center. But managers face two other external groups: video producers and television viewers. These two groups have very different degrees of influence on centers.

Most access centers experience strong pressure from producers and weak pressure from viewers. Centers generally function quite well as training organizations for highly committed residents. Producers are the one group with close and effective ties to the stations, and it is not uncommon to see them providing noisy feedback to station staff and directors. As a result the stations serve these groups well, offering classes and making equipment available.

In contrast, viewers can be invisible at a center. The typical access center lacks mechanisms for user feedback, so viewers' needs, interests, or experiences may remain unknown. With centers strapped for resources, managers can often do little more than address the most pressing problems, which tend to be the problems of producers. Viewers can suffer neglect.

When assessed against PA-TV's two missions, viewer neglect is a problem for the social change mission. The social change mission sees viewers as the recipients of the medium's powerful message. PA-TV's second mission, free speech, is producer-oriented. It is fulfilled even if only producers are served. Given the difficulty in involving viewers in station activities, many stations may simply shift to the free speech mission.

## 5. Technology

Many PA-TV centers talk use the general term “media” more than the more specific term “video” or “television”. Despite such rhetoric, however, the sector is deeply connected to video and cable television technology.

Video is not always well-suited to be a community media. First, video is expensive to produce. Even with free access to equipment, production is very costly in terms of time. This affects content and format: producers manage high cost by lowering production quality. The vast majority of local programming features a simple talk show or talking head format. The power of a moving picture medium is often lost.

Second, television operates in real-time: programming is on at a particular time, and then it is gone. Viewers must adapt their schedule to match the TV schedule. This greatly reduces audiences. With many potential viewers unable to adapt their schedules, the actual audience is greatly reduced. Since PA-TV already starts with a small potential audience (local viewers interested in local production,) this attrition may reduce audiences to quite low levels.

Finally, television programming requires a program guide. Without it, targeted viewing of programming is nearly impossible; viewers can only “channel surf.” Yet access centers lack funds and have complex program schedules, so they often do not produce reliable program guides. Nonetheless, the hard fact remains that without a program guide, few local residents can find programs. The potential audience is further reduced.

In summary, the characteristics of video technology mean that PA-TV can have difficulty reaching an audience. Producers are few, and viewers can be rare.

(This study focuses on PA-TV as it exists today. A subsequent analysis will look at the utility of Internet-based communications for community media. Two points can be made here, however. First, the Internet’s greatest advantage is that it is not anchored in real-time, so it can reach even tiny local audiences that tune in at their convenience. Second, the Internet’s greatest disadvantage – that it is a poor platform for video – is not so great a disadvantage, because local producers are rarely able exploit the full power of video. Many access centers are experimenting with new technology, and the most successful emerging models need to be understood and diffused throughout the sector.)

## 6. Professional Culture

Culture is notoriously difficult to study and document, but it merits some speculative comments here. The PA-TV sector was created in the 1970s and 1980s, when many people working in it entered their career. The sector attracted a generation of politically progressive activists, who are now in their 40s and 50s. With few similar job opportunities outside of the sector, it appears that the sector has not seen much “new blood” over the years. In particular, there seem to be few opportunities for younger people to work their way up in the sector.

This may have contributed to technological conservatism. The middle-aged managers have relatively little experience with digital technology. Younger people with expertise in the new technology are not in positions of authority where they could promote innovation.

For this reason, the PA-TV sector is best understood in terms of “television” rather than “media.” New digital media are often outside the expertise and experience of

a center. The leaders of the PA-TV sector may even see new media as a threat to their prevailing television-based culture.

### Conclusions

Progress into the future requires that one first understand the present. This institutional critique can hopefully empower member of the PA-TV community to better understand the forces currently acting on them. The institutions identified here have powerful effects. They lessen PA-TV's capacity to effect social change, and they inhibit the adoption of new community media. While an institutional critique can generate discomfort in that it focuses on what works less well in the sector, it can also empower leaders to make changes to improve current practices.

This brief analysis is intended to inform some additional studies, including:

- Analysis of how digital media can be best applied in communities
- Best practices in existing centers
- Change strategies to enable PA-TV to better seize opportunities.