The Public Access Crisis

Public-access television has always had a low-budget, amateur reputation. Yet Rod Laughridge's alternative news program "Newsroom on Access SF" was anything but that. Though San Francisco's public-access station had its share of offbeat shows —- like the risqué DeeDeeTV, hosted by self-described "pop culture diva" Dee Dee Russell — "Newsroom" took itself seriously. Its mission, as described on its website, was to "bring community-based, community reported and produced independent news and interviews from a grassroots viewpoint — unhindered, uncensored and unaltered."

The show, which ran for five years on Channel 29, followed a professional news format with high production values. Anchors reported headlines from behind a studio desk as video streams played in the background. Local news segments on topics like the plight of renters and live reports from homeless shelters were interspersed with commentary by the likes of Mumia Abu-Jamal and Angela Davis, and international news from Al-Jazeera. During its run, "Newsroom" was nominated for an Emmy and won several Western Access Video Excellence (WAVE) awards. "It was a full-blown news show," Laughridge recalls.

Unfortunately, "Newsroom" became a casualty of a ripple effect brought on by the passage of a bill that slashed the public-access operating budget across California. This resulted in a new provider, the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC), which had no prior experience operating public TV, taking over SF's two public-access channels. BAVC closed the production studio where "Newsroom" and other shows were produced and instituted a different model that did away with the traditional three-camera set-up. Laughridge notes that, in the old days, staff members assisted public-access producers with editing. Now "you have to pay for [BAVC's] classes to do that. There's a conflict right there," he says. These changes to the public-access model effectively "killed the idea of community" in community television, Laughridge says.

The loss of an award-winning program like "Newsroom," which provided a viable, community-based alternative to network TV news, symbolizes one of the clearest examples of what has transpired as a result of the public-access crisis. As the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) noted in its 2011 media review, "State and local changes have reduced the funding and, in some cases, the prominence on the cable dial of public, educational and government channels (PEG) at a time when the need for local programming is especially urgent."

The Perils of PEG Centers

The public-access crisis in California was brought about by the 2006 passage of the Digital Infrastructure and Video Competition Act (DIVCA), a bill that was heavily lobbied for by Comcast and AT&T. According to the telecommunications industry, DIVCA was supposed to create jobs, increase competition and serve the public interest. Its actual

effect was the exact opposite — cable companies eliminated jobs and ultimately faced less competition from the defunding of community television stations. As of 2009, similar bills had been passed in 25 states, with similar results.

Since the mid-2000s, more than 100 PEG stations across the country have disappeared; cities like San Francisco and Seattle have cut as much as 85 percent of the PEG operations budget. City funding for public access has been entirely eliminated in Denver and Dallas; at least 45 such stations have closed in California since 2006-12 in Los Angeles, the nation's No. 3 media market, alone. As many as 400 PEG stations in Wisconsin, Florida, Missouri, Iowa, Georgia and Ohio are facing extinction as well.

Moreover, according to a 2010 study by the Benton Foundation, these cuts have disproportionately affected minority communities. Adding insult to injury, AT&T and other cable providers have employed what's known as "channel-slamming": listing all public-access channels on a single channel or making them accessible only in submenus, which makes finding them difficult for viewers.

A bill currently before the House of Representatives called the Community Access Preservation, or CAP, Act, could prevent hundreds of funding-challenged PEG stations nationwide from going belly up. The bill limits channel-slamming and would amend an FCC ruling that PEG support may be used only for facilities and equipment, and not for operating expenses. Even if the CAP Act passes, it "won't solve all of public-access TV's problems," says Media Alliance executive director Tracy Rosenberg. For one thing, the CAP Act falls short of mandating a higher percentage of cable franchise fees — an estimated $10 million to $12 million in SF — for PEG operators. Increasing this revenue, however, could allow PEG stations not only to survive, but to thrive.

An Open-Source Solution?

One possible solution for financially challenged PEG stations is the development of open-source or user-modifiable software — a model currently being developed in Denver, San Francisco and several other cities. In just its second year of operating SF Commons — SF's public-access station — BAVC is already attracting wider attention. In June 2011, the organization was singled out for praise by the FCC, which called SF Commons one of the "most promising templates for the future of public-access centers."

Open source offers built-in internet connectivity and is less financially constraining than the old public-access model, requiring less equipment and less staff. Instead of reels of videotape or DVDs, programs are saved as MPEG files. Editing workstations aren't bulky analog machines but svelte Macintosh computers equipped with Final Cut Pro editing software.

Yet open source isn't a perfect solution. In the short-term, moving to an open-source model for public access may actually widen the gap affecting underserved and less technologically literate demographics. "Seniors, disabled, low-income adults," Rosenberg charges, "[are] being left off the train."

Adapting open source to a public-access medium also limits the potential of users to acquire skills needed for some television jobs and puts more emphasis on offsite production, which in turn reduces the level of interaction between programmers. "They want you to edit at home," Laughridge says. "There's the digital divide right there: Not everyone has a computer or camera."

Virtual Community vs. Actual Community

Laughridge is one of several veteran public-access programmers who complain about displacement under BAVC.

Ellison Horne, a former president of The San Francisco Community Television Corporation (SFCTC)'s board of directors, says BAVC made an "aggressive move toward a virtual studio as opposed to what we had before, which was a community media center." This resulted, he says, in a lack of community engagement.

Since BAVC's takeover of Channel 29, "a very different culture has emerged" in San Francisco public access, says documentary filmmaker Kevin Epps, who began his career in public access. That culture is more conservative, tech-savvy, youth-oriented and, in Horne's words, "elitist."

Steve Zeltzer, a labor activist and public-access producer, charges the BAVC takeover has resulted in "the privatization of public access."

Ken Johnson, who worked for a stint as a producer-director at local station KQED after getting his start on Channel 29, credits public-access TV with helping him stay off the streets and out of jail. Johnson says he often rounded up street people as volunteers to help him produce his show on veterans' issues. But volunteers are no longer welcome under BAVC's operatorship.

Instead of a community-supportive environment, Johnson says, "They have this robotic thing when you do it like that, you lose something."

BAVC staff are quick to characterize the problems with public-access programmers as simply a case of the old guard being resistant to change. "You had a lot of producers used to doing the same routine for X amount of years," says Andy Kawanami, SF Commons' community manager. He concedes the transition to open source wasn't completely smooth, but says things "have settled down quite a bit" since.

Former BAVC executive director Ken Ikeda has been quoted as saying, "We've learned the hard way what innovation in isolation can cost an organization." And Jen Gilomen, BAVC's director of public Media Strategies, admits "we've lost some people" in the transition. However, she says, the economic reality means "the whole model had to change."

Making Open Source Work for Everybody

A considerable learning curve is involved in adapting open source to public-access television, says Tony Shawcross, Executive Director of Denver Open Media (DOM). After taking over Denver's PEG channel in 2005, DOM underwent a period of trial-and-error, discovering what worked and what didn't. In 2008, DOM received a $400,000 Knight Foundation grant which allowed it to revise its model to make it more community- and user-friendly.

"We had to go through that process in order to learn what it took to make the tools work for others," he says. Overall, Shawcross says DOM isn't reaching as wide a constituency as its predecessor, but, he adds, "You can't just talk about diversity and our model without also talking about money. Dollar-for-dollar, I'd say DOM is doing better in reaching disadvantaged communities, but we'd be doing much better if we had $500,000 annually to invest in serving the communities who are most in need."

BAVC, Shawcross says, is "one of the few success stories in public access." However, he says, BAVC "are very focused on their own needs, and the development work they're doing in open source is not focused on benefitting the rest of the community as much as it would if that were a true priority for them."

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Currently, BAVC has no initiatives "specific to diversity," says Gilomen. Yet BAVC has made forays into community outreach via the Neighborhood News Network (n3), three partnership pilot programs with nonprofit centers utilizing these centers' media production facilities. Ultimately, the FCC notes, n3 "will link PEG channels to 15 community sites throughout the city, using an existing fiber network." After airing on SF Commons, these programs will be accessible to viewers as one of BAVC's online channels.

Although they've made for good PR copy on BAVC's website, the three n3 programs have thus far resulted in a total of just 77 minutes of actual on-air programming. "We need more money to expand these programs," Gilomen says, which she hopes "will seed news bureaus."

With a single-camera studio set-up, n3's no-frills production values lag behind the standard set by "Newsroom." At times, the content resembles infomercials for BAVC's community partner organizations. In the Mission District's n3 pilot episode, anchor Naya Buric, a BAVC intern, repeatedly stumbles over her words, at one point misidentifying n3 as "neighborhood network news." When asked what difference n3 will make to the community, guest Jean Morris touts the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts' programming, yet fails to mention any issues of substance affecting the neighborhood, such as gentrification and gang violence. The Bayview-Hunters Point pilot show, meanwhile, features members of the Boys and Girls Club, aged 9-12, covering the

club's own Junior Giants program. The South of Market pilot fares a little better, with segments on redevelopment, a fire at a single-room occupancy hotel and the availability of bathrooms for SF's homeless population. It remains to be seen whether n3 programs can fill the role "Newsroom" used to play, much less consistently cover topics of serious concern to neighborhood residents. Willie Ratcliffe, publisher of independent African-American newspaper SF BayView, recognizes the n3 program in Bayview-Hunters Point as a positive development for a handful of young people. However, he says, "I don't see where it's gonna do too much" to address the "burning issue [of] economic survival," nor the police brutality, health issues and environmental concerns Bayview residents face daily. In his view, the smiling African-American faces pictured on BAVC's website are "just being used, really," he says.

The Hope of Digital Integration

Two years after launching SF Commons, the station is still very much a work in progress. The lack of a consistent program schedule, some producers say, makes it difficult to build a regular audience. But Gilomen says this concern will be addressed in the coming months as BAVC rolls out a new set of web-based tools allowing producers to self-schedule their programs and archive content online. Besides eliminating the need for physical DVDs, this makes it possible for public-access stations in other markets to air SF Commons' content.

However, the true test of BAVC's public-access stewardship is yet to come. SF Commons features prominently in a SF Department of Technology (SFDOT) broadband inclusion initiative, which, if successful, could form the 21st century model for public access in America.

In addition to the operating budget of $170,000 for two PEG channels from SFDOT, BAVC is also the recipient of $2 million in technology grants specifically tied to broadband initiatives aimed at increasing digital literacy. But while the potential for using digitally integrated public-access and broadband services to close the digital divide exists on paper, these services haven't been implemented in a concrete, tangible way — with measurable results — yet.

SFDOT policy analyst Brian Roberts uses buzzwords like "digital inclusion" and "affordable access" in describing the city's B-TOP program, which envisions the creation of a "public broadband space" (PBS) incorporating public access as one of its components. The idea of a PBS is "having access to training and technology people couldn't afford in their homes," Roberts explains. But, he says, "we're not sure where that's going to go."

The B-TOP program relies on federal grants and matching funds for its S10 million budget. So far it's created a handful of new bureaucratic positions, doled out tens of thousands of dollars to BAVC for equipment purchases, started a digital media skills training course at City College of San Francisco and held several community outreach events. Yet it's had little to no impact on improving access in SF's most technologically

underserved neighborhoods, which is what it's supposed to do. According to SFDOT's most recent report on sustainable broadband adoption, the program is only 1 percent complete at this time. SFDOT has failed to meet its baseline goals for new subscribers receiving discounted broadband service; currently there are "zero" households and "zero" businesses participating, which it blames on "implementation delays."

In other words, despite the FCC's flowery praise for BAVC and SFDOT's collaborative efforts, the vision of a fiber-optic network broadcasting hyperlocalized content over public-access airwaves isn't crystal clear.

An Upside Down Model?

While SFDOT and BAVC wait for the sustainable broadband initiative to take shape, a cadre of veteran video producers are attempting to fashion their own template for public access's immediate future.

Instead of relying on technology grants based around not-quite-there-yet initiatives, this model would pool the existing resources of several cities in Contra Costa County, each of whom receive PEG funding from cable operators, to create a countywide community media center. Instead of just under $200,000 in operating expenses, the center's budget could be closer to $2 million, enough to run a top-notch PEG center with high-quality production values. This center would be run not by outside operators, but by the producers themselves, fulfilling one of the FCC's recommendations for high-performing PEGS: "the ceding of editorial control to producers."

Could a super-PEG center serving the needs of an entire county, rather than an aggregation of smaller PEGS tied to specific cities, be a way to ensure the future of public access while preserving its vibrant culture?

Sam Gold, the man behind the effort, thinks so. He's assembled a team consisting of several former SF public-access producers and is actively pursuing getting the necessary approval from various city councils. He calls the effort "an upside down model," since he's invested $40,000 of his own money into equipment. In his mind, they key question is to whether the center can be established on public space, which would alleviate the biggest operating cost, that of renting a facility. If successful, Gold's model could be replicated in other markets, offering a third option to the public-access crisis besides ceasing operations or acquiescing to the imperfections of open source. "Wonder if we can get the old 'Newsroom' crew back together?" Gold ponders during a lunch with Laughridge and several other public-access veterans. Laughridge just looks at him and smiles.