

Public Access Television: A Radical Critique

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Abstract

Perhaps America's most radical telecommunication policy ever has been public access television (PA-TV). PA-TV gives ordinary citizens direct access to society's most powerful mass medium, television, and provides financial support to make that access effective (about \$2 billion since its inception.). These resources have supported the creation of what democratic theorists call a free speech forum and what radical social theorists call a public sphere. Yet public access TV presents a puzzle: why have its social impacts have been so modest? This article explains PA-TV's impacts in terms of its institutional structures of technology, regulatory framework, organizational form, and professional culture. The conclusion offers recommendations for structural reforms.

Perhaps America's most radical telecommunication policy ever has been public access television (PA-TV). PA-TV extracts resources from cable television companies in support of individuals and groups to produce and distribute video programming to their communities. PA-TV gives ordinary citizens direct access to society's most powerful mass medium, television, and provides financial support to make that access effective: PA-TV's experiment in speaking truth to power has been supported with nearly \$2 billion dollars over 30 years. These resources have supported policy goals that are explicitly political: the creation of what democratic theorists call a free speech forum and what radical social theorists call a public sphere.

Yet public access TV presents a puzzle. *Why have its social impacts have been so modest?* The Washington policy makers who created PA-TV anticipated that it would energize communities, enhance local culture, and stimulate grassroots democracy. The grassroots activists saw it as a tool to puncture the one dimensional consciousness of advanced capitalist society. Yet after thirty years there is little convincing evidence that public access has affected communities in the manner and to the degree that early proponents anticipated. PA-TV's impacts contrast markedly with that of another local medium, talk show radio, to which is attributed a key role in US society's political and social shift to conservatism (Hofstetter et al., 1999). How could policies as promising as public access TV seemingly fall so short?

This article explains PA-TV's seemingly modest impacts in terms of its institutional structure. The outcomes of thirty years of PA-TV need to be understood not so much in terms of the actions of the individuals who operate, oversee, and use the access centers, but in terms of its overarching structures, such as its technology, regulatory framework, organizational form, and professional culture. These institutions have channeled and constrained individuals' action in ways that have hindered PA-TV's ability to achieve its goals.

In what follows, I first recount PA-TV's radical policy goal of creating free speech forums or public spheres in towns and cities throughout the US. Then I identify four outcomes of PA-TV policies: the success of PA-TV centers as community video clubs and their limited effectiveness as a community medium, their limited effectiveness as a forum for political speech, and their lack of adaptation and innovation. Then I analyze the institutions of access TV, including the technology of cable television, the policy mechanism of local franchising, the organizational form typical of access centers, and the prevailing culture of PA-TV professionals. Next I explain outcomes in terms of institutions. I conclude with some recommendations on how to change the institutions of PA-TV in order to better achieve the policy goals.

The conclusion of this study is that PA-TV could still be a powerful force for democracy and social change. Its organizational infrastructure is vast: access centers operate in nearly all communities in the United States and are staffed by paid professionals. Its resources are impressive: centers continue to receive hundreds of millions of dollars per year. However, these organizational and financial resources need to be connected to

more effective technologies and practices. Most of the elements for more vibrant community media seem to be in place, but they still need to be combined better. Overcoming the conservative culture of PA-TV may be the biggest barrier to change. This study seeks to contribute to such an effort.

I. A Radical Vision

Public access television dates back to the 1960s, the period when cable TV was widely adopted in the US. As local entrepreneurs began implementing cable systems, and as local governments began setting conditions for the use of local rights of way, communities began requesting TV channels for public use. Different localities regulated cable systems in different ways, creating a haphazard regulatory regime. Following a 1972 attempt at regulation by the Federal Communications Commission, Congress in 1984 achieved regulatory consistency by passing the Cable Communications Policy Act, which set national parameters for local regulation of cable TV (Meyerson, 1985; Linder, 1999). The 1984 Act formally defined the “public, educational, and government” (PEG) access television mechanism that gave citizens, schools, and local governments access to the cable network. In combination with later legislation, federal regulation authorized local governments to extract channel capacity, money, local data networks, and other resources from cable providers in exchange for use of rights of way.

Public access TV is thus only one element in overall PEG regulation, albeit the most radical and ambitious element. It is because the vision of PA-TV is so ambitious that it merits study. Its history constitutes an experiment in applied radical theory, and that experiment needs to be documented, analyzed, and understood.

This section identifies the original goals of PA-TV policy. These goals provide criteria for evaluating today’s outcomes.

PA-TV is a radical attempt to realize a positive right to political speech. It embodies a concept of free speech that is significant in two ways. First, PA-TV has an explicitly political mission: it was created to promote social change of a type envisioned by democratic theory and radical social theory. Second, it creates a *positive* right to free speech: it goes beyond the First Amendment conception of protected speech to a proactive concept of empowered speech.

There are two conceptions of political speech embedded in PA-TV. One derives from 18th Century liberal (democratic) political theory of the kind that informed the thinking of the Founding Fathers and the proponents of the Bill of Rights in the US Constitution. In this conception free speech is the essence of liberal democracy. (Schauer and Garvey, eds., 1996). Free speech is a prerequisite for political participation in the democratic process, and by making it a constitutional right, i.e. a form of citizen action that a government is unable to regulate, a society facilitates political communication and social change. In liberal political theory, the right to free speech gives rise to a “marketplace of ideas” from which individuals can inform themselves and so achieve self-determination.

A second relevant stream of political thinking is critical theory, which emphasizes the absence of free speech – and even free thought – in modern society. The foundation of this view can be found in Gramsci’s (1992) concept of hegemony and the Frankfurt School’s concept of false consciousness (Marcuse, 1964; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1988). In this view capitalist society creates a system of domination so complete that citizens comply with its dictates, not because they have to, but because they actively want to. They have been so thoroughly indoctrinated that they have nearly lost the capacity for free thought, and their most personal fears and aspirations are actually the product of public relations firms, advertising campaigns, and governmental spokespeople. More popular writers have characterized this state of false consciousness in various ways: people are “happy slaves” (Huxley, 1934); their support for government policy represents “manufactured consent” (Herman and Chomsky, 1998); they are incarcerated in a “prison of the mind” (*The Matrix*, 1999).

Critical theorists’ solution to false consciousness resembles the liberal theorists’ norm of free speech: a public sphere (Habermas, 1963). A public sphere is a functional space in which citizens can engage in uncoerced, free, and effective communication. Not only is it protected from government regulation, it is also protected from less obvious social forces like economic power, hegemonic discourse, and intimidation of participants. Although a perfect public sphere may be impossible to realize in practice, it remains an ideal to be pursued, and its very possibility provides a standard against which to measure the falseness of most speech in a society. Thus, although the critical theorists’ view of unfreedom is more radical than that of classical liberal theorists, warning us not only of governmental prisons but also mental prisons, the critical theorists’ ultimate prescription is similar: create a public sphere (a free speech forum) in which citizens can communicate freely and effectively without social or political interference.

Critical theory transforms the right to free speech from a “negative” into a “positive” right (Berlin, 1969). Liberal theory says that speech should be protected; this is realized by forbidding some actors (notably the government) from taking some actions (regulating speech.) Critical theory goes well beyond that conception of free speech, claiming that speech must not only be protected, it must be actively supported. This positive right of speech is sometimes called a “right to communicate” (Thomas, 2006).

Liberal theory was explicitly invoked by policy makers in Washington in the early 1970s when they created the regulatory framework for PA-TV. They saw it as a medium to promote diversity in the marketplace of ideas and to empower democracy through grassroots communications: “The existence of an informed and an engaged public is prerequisite to the healthy maintenance of a political democracy” (Sloan, 1971, p.122). Likewise, the social activists who pioneered the early practices of PA-TV were informed by the more radical vision of critical theory and the “three M’s” -- McLuhan, Marcuse, and marijuana (Boyle, 1997). Radical video collectives were explicit in their vision of PA-TV challenging the hegemony of society’s ruling class, and their message was positively received by established policy advisors (Engelmann, 1990, p. 36).

By the 1970s this vision was widely implemented: access centers opened throughout the United States, funded by local video franchises. By 2000 some one thousand centers were operating around the US with a combined annual budget of over \$120 million. Since its inception, PA-TV has been funded with roughly \$2 billion. Television channels throughout the US were set aside for citizen communication. No other public policy in the United States is comparable in terms of this combination of money, technology, and radical ambitions. While it is unsurprising that US policy would be informed by classical liberal theory, it is quite unusual for a multi billion dollar federal program to embody the insights of Herbert Marcuse.

The free speech forum/public sphere realized by PA-TV has a number of key features. Residents of a community receive free or low-cost assistance in producing, editing, and cablecasting their work. They also have access to video equipment and to one or more channels on the local cable network. Access to that channel is on a first-come, non-discriminatory basis. Through training, equipment, and channel access PA-TV gives citizens a voice, and through cable television distribution it gives them an audience. Non-discriminatory access, as well as general First Amendment protections, seek to ensure that the speech carried on PA-TV is not subject to government control. A community can see a variety of viewpoints, and citizens can obtain an alternative to commercial- and government-produced programming. Although to the casual observer PA-TV may seem mundane, it actually is a radical experiment in social empowerment and consciousness expansion.

Liberal theory and critical theory do more than just inform the vision of PA-TV. They also anticipate some of the main risks and barriers to free communication. It is useful to be aware of these dangers to free speech, because some of them are identifiable in the history of PA-TV.

First, liberal theory emphasizes that the greatest enemy of free speech is government. Much free speech will take the form of political dissent and critique, opposing the policies of the governing powers and seeking to expose or even embarrass rulers. Even well-intentioned political leaders are hard pressed not to succumb to the temptation of outlawing critical speech. US history offers an instructive example: one of the first acts of the new U.S. government in 1798 was to pass the Alien and Sedition Acts, which criminalized criticism of the government. The Acts were short-lived, but the episode illustrates the general fact that even government built on principles of free speech can quickly succumb to the interest in suppressing criticism. The lesson is clear: any right to free speech must be able to withstand the opposition of government, for government has an inherent interest in suppressing such speech.

A second feature of the liberal conception of free speech is the importance of connecting speakers to audiences. Governments' interest in controlling speech may manifest itself in the regulation not just of speakers but also of listeners. A contemporary incident illustrates this: in 2003 the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) brought suit against government authorities who constrained speakers to "free speech zones" when demonstrating against political leaders (ACLU, 2003). In this case the government had

not forbidden the speech, but it had effectively silenced it by disconnecting it from its intended audience. The lesson is clear: the marketplace of ideas requires that speakers are connected to listeners. Not only may a government not prevent speech, it also must not interfere with its reception by the intended audience. Speech without an audience is not free speech.

Critical theory also contains some caveats. According to Michels “iron law of oligarchy” (1966) radical social change movements can become conservative as they develop an organizational structure. As movements build a professional staff, that staff can develop interests separate from and even contradictory to the goals of the organization as a whole. The staff’s interest is typically conservative: it seeks to defend its status and perquisites. Organizations created to promote social change can be tamed by their professional staff, which seeks to conserve the status quo and its place in it.

In summary, public access TV is interesting for its ambitious theoretical aspirations. It seeks to create a free speech forum and to liberate people from an allegedly oppressive technological society by creating a public sphere for authentic communication. And it creates a positive speech right, proactively supporting speech with financial resources and technological capabilities. PA-TV is an experiment in applied radicalism.

Has the experiment succeeded? Did this bold attempt at social transformation achieve its goals? The next section examines the outcomes of the policies.

II. Outcomes of PA-TV

PA-TV’s goals were radical, but its subsequent achievements were less so. True, the goals were lofty – nothing less than the revitalization of American democracy and the overcoming of capitalist false consciousness – so to fall short of such ambitions is hardly surprising. However, when evaluated against even less ambitious goals, it seems that PA-TV’s achievements have been more modest than might be expected. This section examines four major outcomes of America’s experiment in PA-TV: the successful creation of community video clubs and the enduring challenge of creating a community medium, of hosting political speech, and of innovating.

The most notable outcome of PA-TV policies has been the creation throughout the US of what are best called “community video clubs” (Chatham, 2005). Although often calling themselves “community media centers,” most access channel operators are better conceived as community video clubs serving local residents interested in video production. For these producers video production is an end in itself; they are committed to making TV. And access centers serve them quite well. Video equipment and training are available at little or no cost, and programs are distributed on the cable network. The access center is often a community meeting place as well for such video enthusiasts. The national Alliance for Community Media claims that US centers produce 20,000 hours of new programming per week, a number that exceeds the new programming of all broadcast networks combined (ACM, 2006). Even if that figure were a gross exaggeration, the production of video is clearly one of PA-TV’s strengths.

The other outcomes identified here are outcomes that have *not* occurred. A second outcome is that PA-TV does not seem to have been very effective as a community medium. Despite the widespread rhetoric that equates PA-TV with community media, PA-TV is not very effective as a tool for the “direct engagement of people with people” (Sloan, 1971, p. 123). The problem here is viewing. The videos produced in centers are largely inaccessible to viewers, who often have no effective way to know what is being shown on the access channel. Random sampling (i.e. “channel surfing”) is the main way of accessing the programming, but this is not an effective guide. For the video enthusiast, this may not be a problem; a love of video production can be satisfied, even if the broadcast time is unpredictable. But for the viewer, the randomness of the programming reduces PA-TV to a curiosity rather than an important source of community communication (Rosenberg, 2005).

Two tools for facilitating television viewing are not widely used in PA-TV. First, regular weekly scheduling of a show makes programming predictable. However, that requires a quantity of production that many citizens cannot produce. Second, a program guide can help viewers. However, few stations seem to do more than post on their web page a schedule of shows.

PA-TV’s relationship to the community is different than other media, such as radio or print journalism. PA-TV features amateur producers, so its technical quality is usually medium to low and its scheduling is somewhat irregular. Most community radio and print journalism offer professional production (e.g. few garage bands on the radio) and maintain a regular schedule (e.g. the newspaper comes out every Thursday.)

Thus PA-TV has promoted *expression* more than *communication*. It serves video enthusiasts who wish to express themselves more than local citizens who wish to communicate to other citizens. This is not to say that access centers are *never* effective, only that in most cases they are not.

A third outcome of PA-TV is that it seems not to have been an influential forum for political speech. Unlike what policy makers initially anticipated, PA-TV has not been important for local elections, for setting local political agendas, for discussing public affairs, or for mobilizing social movements. It has not been the subversive tool for speaking truth to power that the early activists anticipated. PA-TV did not achieve its core goal of facilitating political speech.

There are some instances where PA-TV approaches the radical vision of the critical theorists. The Free Speech Television (FSTV) network distributes social and political programming to access centers around the US, and this programming certainly does speak truth to power. However, most stations give FSTV a low priority on their programming schedule, because it is not produced in the community. Stations’ commitment to locally-produced content leads them to de-emphasize such imported programming. Radical political speech, even when available, is often not distributed. More common is religious programming, which accounts for as much as 40% of all

production (ACM, 2006) (and which occupies an important place in critical theory for its power to induce acquiescence by the general population.)

The final outcome of PA-is that it seems to be institutionally conservative. It seems to be adverse to innovation. Although access centers cannot have remained unaware of their limited connection to viewers, few adaptations have occurred over the years – despite numerous opportunities for innovation.

For examples, twenty years into the Internet revolution, few centers seem to have used the Internet to connect with their community. Access centers have not embraced the digital media that have revolutionized community communications. While many centers have web pages (often purchased rather than produced in-house) and do use computer-based video editing, their use of Email and Internet distribution of video is quite limited to date. Despite a national debate over the “digital divide” (referring to the fact that many citizens do not have access to digital communication technology) access centers have not been very active in this area.

For some readers the only important outcome may be the first: PA-TV policies have been successful in creating community video clubs. Many readers – including people who have made their career in the sector – may be unaware that creating video clubs was not the goal of the policies. The goal was to facilitate political communication and social change. It is only when judged against the original policy goals, with their vision of radical communication, that PA-TV falls short. The video clubs are often lively community centers, but they are not all that was intended.

At this point, a word on methodology is in order. The outcomes mentioned here are perceived outcomes, and there exist methodological barriers to documenting them. One barrier to documentation is that it is difficult to measure small audiences of broadcast media. Even an effective community radio station could have difficulty measuring audience size, and the measurement problems are more challenging for small community audiences. Furthermore, the researcher must define what it means to “view” a channel: watching a few moments of access programming while channel surfing is probably not a satisfactory definition of viewing. Another is that it is hard to operationalize and measure “political speech.” Candidate time is one appropriate measure, but the radical vision of public access anticipated grassroots activists as much as elected officials.

Another methodological barrier is cost. There are so many access centers in the US that measuring even quantifiable data, such as ascertaining whether a center offers an email newsletter/program guide (that is updated regularly,) or measuring the hours of programming offered (and how much is original rather than repeated) is a formidable challenge. It is feasible, but it is expensive, and this analysis is not based on such a survey.

In light of these barriers, this study employs two strategies of research. First, the study employs deductive reasoning, identifying institutional characteristics of PA-TV that render certain outcomes likely or unlikely. This is really hypothesis-formation rather

than observation; the reader (or a later field researcher) will have to judge whether the hypothesis has merit. Second, the study uses anecdotal evidence. Individual incidents are useful for illustrating a phenomenon, even if are an insufficient basis for generalized conclusions. These methodological challenges and their solution are common to media studies, since their origin is in the phenomena under consideration.

In summary, four outcomes can be perceived in PA-TV today. The first is admirable: PA-TV has created community video clubs around the nation, where citizens can pursue their love of video and television. The other outcomes are perceived non-events. PA-TV seems to be limited in its ability to connect citizens with one another. It does not seem to host much political speech. And it seems to be institutionally conservative, resisting opportunities for innovation and adaptation. Table 1 summarizes these outcomes.

Table 1: Outcomes of PA-TV Policies

Community Video Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● PA-TV is effective in supporting local citizens who want to make video
Not a Community Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Local citizens and groups seem to not use PA-TV as a medium to communicate to others ● Local citizens cannot easily watch PA-TV to learn about their community
Not a Political Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Local citizens and groups do not use PA-TV to challenge the power structure ● Lots of religious programming
Not Innovative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● PA-TV centers seem to not seize opportunities of new technology or to remedy known issues like barriers to viewer access.

III. The Institutions of PA-TV

Having identified three four perceived outcomes of PA-TV policy, I now focus on explanatory factors. Why has PA-TV had the outcomes it has had? I argue that those outcomes manifest the influence of institutions. To understand PA-TV, it is imperative to understand its institutions. This section identifies the institutions, and the next section relates them to the outcomes described above.

Institutions are the enduring structures that channel individual actions in some directions and block individual actions from others. Although most people may entertain the illusion that their choices are made freely, such free choices are often influenced by institutions. Sometimes institutional effects are so great as to negate the effectiveness of individual action altogether.

In this section I present four institutions that structure PA-TV. These are: cable television technology, regulatory framework, organizational design, and the professional culture of the sector. These institutions exercise such an enormous influence that they have thwarted individuals' well-intentioned efforts to realize the radical goals of PA-TV. Institutional structures have caused PA-TV to fall short of its policy goals.

The first of these, the technology of cable television, has had perhaps the most powerful influence. There are two technologies in cable TV: video technology (for production) and cable technology (for distribution.) Both video and cable powerfully shape outcomes.

Video technology possesses extraordinary communicative power. More than the printed page, still photography, or radio, video offers a convincing representation of reality. For this reason, some political activists argue that it is especially well-suited for political speech (Harding, 2001). However, video is also very difficult to produce. Exploiting its power requires expertise in scripting, shooting, directing, and editing. One can compare video to a violin: there is perhaps no instrument more capable of expressing emotion, but there is also no instrument more difficult to master. Even when made available for free, video technology is extremely costly (in terms of time and skill development.) As argued in the next section, these characteristics of video explain some of the outcomes identified above.

Cable distribution also has a number of characteristics that affect PA-TV. Most importantly, cable TV operates in real time. The real time characteristic imposes the need for "appointment viewing": viewers can only watch a program when it is available, and if a viewer misses a show, it is gone. To accommodate real time distribution, television demands fixed length programming and regular schedules. A typical TV show is 30 or 60 minutes long and is scheduled at the same time each week. Regular scheduling requires substantial amounts of video production; to fit into a weekly schedule, 30 minutes of video programming must be produced each week. Given the high cost of video production, producing a regularly scheduled video programming is

very costly indeed. Without such an effort, however, citizens may not be able to make the viewing appointment.

Another feature of cable distribution is that it is highly centralized. A TV channel is controlled at a single console, and all programming on that channel is managed at that console. Even if control is not exercised by the console operator, the architecture of cable television makes it technically feasible to do it. As such, the controllers may be implicated by the programming that goes over their channel. If they want to control it, they have the means, and if they don't want to control it, they may still be perceived as being responsible.

Cable does have one very good feature for a community medium: it is a "push" technology, i.e. it brings all its programming into people's homes, whether they want it or not. This makes it possible for viewers to discover a channel by mistake while channel surfing. This feature allows viewers to discover PA-TV and may account for much of the viewing that occurs.

The second institution of PA-TV is its regulatory framework. As noted above, the main federal regulation is the 1984 Cable Communications Policy Act, which establishes broad national guidelines but leaves the detailed regulation to local government (city, town, or sometimes state.) Local governments' main regulatory tool is the franchise, a contract between the government and the cable television operator authorizing construction and operation of a cable system over public rights of way (streets and sidewalks.) In exchange for access to rights of way, the cable operator pays franchise fees to local government and fulfills a host of other conditions. Franchises often run ten years and are then renegotiated.

With respect to PA-TV three features of the regulatory framework are most important. First, the regulatory framework gives the local government life-or-death control over an access center. The government decides whether or not there will be an access center, the amount of resources it will receive, and what entity will operate the center. Typically, governments do choose to have a center: since a center is "free", a government can provide a public service without raising taxes. Governments also set centers' budgets. Although details vary between localities, a center's budget may be specified in the franchise or may be allocated annually by a city council. Governments also typically select the center operator, frequently contracting out operations to a specially-created non-profit organization. Periodically, the government reviews that contract and decides whether to retain or replace the organization. Within the subcontractor the government may appoint board members, in some cases controlling a majority of seats (e.g. the mayor and city council of Atlanta control over half the board seats.) The net result of all these mechanisms is that PA-TV is closely controlled by local government. Some have even argued that a PA-TV subcontractor should be recognized as a government entity (and so be subject to open records requirements of public agencies) (*Jerzowitz v. People TV*, 2003).

It should be noted, however, that government does not directly control content on the access channel. The channel has the legal status of a free speech forum, so government is forbidden from exercising editorial control. Government controls whether such a forum will exist, but it does not control what it will carry.

Even when government control does close a center, it can impose very high costs. A center's managing director may expend a large proportion of his or her time simply managing the relationship with government overseers. Regular communication, good relationships, and effective lobbying may all be necessary to ensure continued funding. Such activities reduce a manager's time for productive work in support of the center.

A second general characteristic of the regulatory framework is its structuring of interest groups. One can recognize two broad classes of interest groups supporting PA-TV: free speech advocates and self-preservation advocates. The free speech advocates consist of groups like the American Civil Liberties Union, the Free Press, the American Library Association, and others. To the extent that they are interested in PA-TV, they are likely to see it as a means to achieve free speech and to be an effective alternative to the centralized, corporate-controlled commercial media. These advocates tend to be represented in Washington, DC but much less in city and town councils around the country.

The second class of interest group, self-preservation advocates, is found largely at the local level and consists of staff and users of access centers. Certainly these groups also support free speech, but they also have a powerful economic interest in preserving PA-TV funding. Staff's jobs depend on it. This economic interest can translate into a desire not to antagonize government officials, an interest which is almost exactly contrary to the original policy goal of promoting criticism of government and challenges to power. It is these local interest groups that predominate, however, because the regulatory framework locates decision-making at the local level.

Ultimately, the localness of regulation shifts PA-TV advocacy to a goal of budgetary survival. PA-TV's more conservative, self-preservationist supporters end up being its main constituency.

After technology and the regulatory framework, the third major institution of PA-TV is its organizational form. There is great variation between localities in how they implement access centers, but one common organizational form is the non-profit private corporation operating as a government subcontractor. Its organizational form consists of four levels: the board of directors, the staff, the membership, and the viewing public. The board oversees the center and can hire or fire the director. The staff often consists of full-time salaried employees, of whom the director is usually the most important. The members are mostly local residents who produce video programming. Finally, outside the station and often with no formal role, are television viewers.

The staff is the most important group in the organization. Although the communication envisioned by PA-TV is between "speakers" (video producers) and "listeners" (viewers

in the community,) the organizational form gives a pre-eminent role to these intermediaries (the staff.) They work full time at the center, they control the resources, and they interact with the other groups; to a large degree, they *are* the access center. Tellingly, the national association for PA-TV, Alliance for Community Media, is overwhelmingly an association of staff. It is perhaps ironic that an institution created to promote direct communication is so heavily mediated by a professional staff.

Some characteristics of the staff merit attention. First, they must respond to and balance a large number of different demands, demands that can be sometimes voiced with extreme urgency. They daily confront government officials, local producers, the occasional viewer, and local suppliers and technologists. Many of the institutional forces identified here are felt in an immediate way by the station staff, and they are at risk for being blamed for institutional effects over which they have little control. (For that reason, some PA-TV staff might recognize in this institutional analysis a welcome account of why their jobs are so challenging!)

Second, staff can indirectly influence programming. Although the access channel is formally protected from content controls, there are opportunities for influence. For example, staff may decide where to direct their center's outreach efforts, soliciting programming from one group or another. In this way, they can influence programming.

Third, as noted above, the staff's livelihood depends on the continued funding of the station. It is the sole player with an economic interest in PA-TV.

Finally, as paid employees, staff may be unaware or indifferent to PA-TV's mission. For them an access center may simply be a job. Like the vast majority of most job holders, they may or may not know or care about the history and vision that led to its creation. Staff executes standard operating routines and ensures that city officials and video producers stay happy. Should an outsider tell them that their center is falling short of some radical vision, few staff would have the available time to pursue such abstract notions.

The second major group in a station's organization consists of the members/producers. Like staff, producers spend considerable time in a center. They have a regular presence and, as a result, their interests are effectively represented. They typically love video or seek skills training for career development. The most typical producer is an aspiring tele-evangelist religious producer.

The least influential group in the typical PA-TV organization may be the viewer. Viewers can be invisible at access centers. Few stations have operating bodies to represent viewers' needs, and staff rarely encounter viewers (whereas noisy exchanges with producers are the norm.) Nor do viewers play a financial role: unlike community radio, which depends on viewer contributions, PA-TV funding has no connection to viewers. As a result, PA-TV centers can become divorced from audience: staff hear little from viewers, they may not know who their viewers are, and they rarely have to

contend with the demands of viewers. Compared to the demanding presence of producers, viewers can be invisible.

Finally, members of the board of directors are important for their internal control over budgets and personnel. However, for the purposes of this analysis the board of directors is most interesting as an intermediary between political overseers and the station, a topic covered earlier.

PA-TV's macro-level organizational structure is also important. PA-TV as a sector is organizationally fragmented: there are over 1,000 independent centers in the US. Between centers there are few coordination mechanisms. The sector is organized according to the governance structure of rights of way rather than according to any inherent economies of scale. Nationally, there is one association to coordinate thousands of centers, and it is relatively small. Despite joining thousands of stations that receive hundreds of millions of dollars of funding, the Alliance for Community Media has a staff of only one to three individuals. As a sector PA-TV is extremely fragmented and uncoordinated.

The final institution of public access television is its professional culture. As with any sector of society, people in similar occupations develop shared understandings, assumptions, and values. With their dominant position in the organizational hierarchy, the staff set the direction of most access centers.

As with many organizations, the culture of PA-TV reflects the period of its creation. PA-TV was born in the 1960s and 1970s, when oppositional culture was strong in the US. That is clearly visible even today: a vital part of the legitimating language ("discourse") used in the sector is the critique of the commercialism and concentration of the mainstream media. Although there seems to be little self-critique in the sector, there is frequent critique of mainstream media. Born as a telecommunications policy for radical social change, PA-TV's self-image has continued to be radical.

Despite its free speech rhetoric, PA-TV grew out of the field of communications not rights. PA-TV is a service provision sector, and the people in the sector are experts in video production and television. Free speech is not as much a core value of this profession as is creative expression. For example, unlike the ACLU, there are few lawyers in the sector, even though constitutional law lies at the heart of free speech culture.

PA-TV partakes of the culture of television. That technology is centralized and hierarchical, with commercial television dominated by highly integrated and centralized firms. Access centers also exhibit some centralization and hierarchy: all programs go out on a single channel operated by a single controller, and producers operate in an organization that is operated by professional staff working under the direction of a station manager and a board of directors. Even an oppositional television culture is a culture of television, and so it still manifests control and hierarchy, albeit often in a paternalistic and benevolent form.

The culture of PA-TV may also be affected by generational factors. The leadership of the sector consists largely of individuals who were video pioneers in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, they are in their 50s and 60s. Significantly, professionals of this age may be in a disadvantageous situation for radical change in their own institution. As video and television experience digitization and convergence, this generation may be ill-prepared to adapt. Professional re-tooling, learning new skills, or “re-inventing” their careers or their organizations may not be feasible for them. When PA-TV was created the portable camcorder was the revolutionary technology of the day, and their commitment to such technology may only change slowly.

A final cultural aspect of PA-TV is its ideology of localism. In the professional community, PA-TV is often legitimated as a community medium offering an alternative to global media corporations. As implemented in a center’s procedures, localism gives lower priority to video from outside a community. Such “imported” programming is deemed less valuable than locally-produced video, regardless of topic or technical quality.

In summary, four institutions structure PA-TV. PA-TV benefits from the power of cable TV, but it also suffers under the high cost of video production, the inconvenience of real-time distribution/appointment viewing, and the centralization of the cable network. PA-TV’s regulatory framework renders it highly dependent on local government, and it favors the self-preservation agendas of local groups over the political speech agendas of national groups. PA-TV’s organization structure gives staff and producers a predominant role, while muting viewers’ voice. The macro structure of the sector is fragmented. Finally, the culture of the sector reflects its ideological commitment to 1970s radicalism, the late career stage of many staff, the importance of television culture, and the celebration of localism.

Table 2: Institutions of PA-TV

Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video is expensive and difficult to use • Cable distribution is real-time and requires appointment viewing • Cable has a central control point
Regulatory Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government controls funding • Local interests emphasize preservation of status quo rather than free speech
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hierarchy with staff in control • Producers are represented • Viewers are not represented
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professed ideology of radicalism • Founded in video producer community, not free speech • Generational effects (leaders are in their 50s and 60s) • Commitment to localism

IV. Explanation

The material so far has emphasized interpretation. In the difficult-to-understand world of PA-TV, specific outcomes and specific institutions have been identified. This section moves from the identification of phenomena to the identification of causal relationships. The four *outcomes* identified of Section II are explained in terms of the four *institutions* of Section III. Table 3 (below) summarizes the causal relationship between institutions and outcomes.

Table 3: Institutional Causes of Outcomes

Institution ►	<u>Technology</u>	<u>Regulation</u>	<u>Organization</u>	<u>Culture</u>
Outcome ▼				
Community Video Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens who love video technology are well-served. Video is an end in itself. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The funding mechanism works well. Free training and equipment enables citizens to pursue their love of video 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video producers have a strong voice in the organization, allowing their needs to be heard. • The PA-TV facilities also serve as a social center for video enthusiasts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The video culture of PA-TV values video production.
Not a Community Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video is a difficult tool to use. • Local audiences are tiny to begin with, and the requirement of appointment viewing reduces them to nearly nothing • Video bulletin boards are crude. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding is divorced from viewership, so viewer dissatisfaction does not cause financial withholding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewers not represented in the organization. Their needs are not heard. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The absence of viewers in the PA-TV community is not noticed; emphasis is on production.
Not a Political Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to reliably reach an audience renders it unattractive as a political tool. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government controls the funding. • Local regulation gives representation to local interests, which often emphasize the preservation of PA-TV rather than challenging the power structure. • Free speech advocates are not well represented at local level, so the free speech mission receives less support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The staff's salary and well-being can be adversely affected by controversial speech. Staff can subtly discourage controversial shows. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The roots of the PA-TV community is in in video, not in free speech, so staff managers may not prioritize political speech. • The ideology of localism discourages the "importation" of videos that might introduce new ideas into the community.
Not Innovative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill set for TV is very different than that for Internet. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding is technology-specific • Resources channeled to political management not technical innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fragmentation of overall sector • Conservatism of staff • Viewers not represented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age of staff • Professed radical ideology insulates staff from charges of conservatism.

Community Video Club

PA-TV has been successful in creating community video clubs, and the explanation for this lies in the institutions. Simply put, the institutions work. First, the technology is, by definition, a good match: PA-TV promotes video technology, and therefore people who love video production are well-served. The second institution, regulation, also supports the video club model. Regulations provide public funding to support producers, empowering them to make the TV that they love. Third, the organizational form works well. Producers have a physical location in which to congregate, and they have easy access to the staff. Their interests are well represented in decision making processes; staff at most centers have experienced the ire of producers whose needs are not being met. Finally, the culture of PA-TV puts great value on video production, which is consistent with the video club's focus on producers.

As noted earlier, if the goal of PA-TV policy had been to create a community center to support citizens with a hobby of video production, then the policies would be a great success. It is only when judged against the more ambitious goals of the original policy that PA-TV falls short.

Not a Community Medium

The distinction between a video club and a community medium is subtle but important. The crucial feature of a community medium is that it enables *communication*, i.e. it links a "speaker" and a "listener" (or a producer and a viewer, in the case of television.) In contrast, a video club only emphasizes "speaking," serving the producer but not the viewer. A video club values video as an end in itself without assessing its utility as a *means* of communication. Although PA-TV succeeds as a video club, that does not translate into success as a community medium.

The biggest institutional cause of this is the technology. Communities need appropriate technology, and video and cable are not the most appropriate technologies for communication between amateur speakers and local listeners. Giving citizens access to video, even at no monetary cost, gives them access to a very difficult-to-use technology. Local citizens typically have few skills and little time. Video classes, even when free, are time-consuming, and making a video can involve tasks like scouting sites, recruiting participants, staging scenes, and writing dialogue. Many (most?) citizens cannot afford the investment. Video is ill-suited for the casual community speaker.

Amateur producers can reduce costs by using fewer of video's powerful features. A great deal of PA-TV production uses the "talking heads" format. This is cheaper, but it is also less interesting. An even more extreme reduction is the video bulletin board. Bulletin boards simply display a few lines of text on the screen for a brief period of time. This is extremely accessible to citizens, who can simply submit written text to staff, but it is a very crude technology of almost no visual interest. Ease of production comes at a very high cost in terms of viewer interest, and even then it still requires appointment viewing.

On the distribution side, cable technology creates additional barriers. The requirement for appointment viewing greatly inhibits viewer access to programs. A program may be on the channel and then be gone, and viewers can easily miss the appointment. Furthermore, with program slots assigned on a first-come basis, there is no guarantee of a prime time slot. The result is that very few “listeners” can hear the “speech.” The use of regular scheduling to render programming predictable is often not feasible. Few programmers may be able to produce a 30-minute video every week. So overall programming may be fragmented and unpredictable. Viewers can do little more than randomly tune in to the channel. PA-TV ends up being more a novelty than a community medium.

With PA-TV inaccessible to viewers, one might expect pressure for change from the community. However, PA-TV’s regulatory and organizational structures include almost no feedback mechanisms for viewers. The regulatory framework renders funding independent from viewers: unlike commercial television (whose business model depends on mass audiences) or community radio (whose funding depends on listener contributions,) PA-TV gets its funding regardless of whether it has an audience or not.

Similarly, the organizational model typically does not give representation to the viewer. Few complaints from viewers make it back to station staff: unlike video producers, who participate daily, viewers may rarely enter a center. The lack of communication to the community manifests itself in silence. For example, the single most obvious step to serve the community could be a program guide, yet the center staff may hear few requests for program guides. Even if viewers’ needs were somehow divined by the staff, they still might well lose out to the needs of better represented constituencies like producers or the staff themselves.

Together these factors render community communication very difficult. Imagine a local resident who wants to communicate about, say, his flower garden. As a “speaker” the citizen might face the prospect of investing days or weeks learning to use video technology, planning a video, recording the raw footage, editing it, and submitting it at the access center. A single show could take days or weeks. Furthermore, the citizen might be required to produce not just one video but an entire series in order to comply with the regular-scheduling requirement of appointment television. Yet few community members might see it. The video’s randomly-assigned cablecast time might be a time when few citizens watch TV. With no program guide, local residents might never know when it is on. Overall, the costs to the “speaker” could be very high and the accessibility to the “listener” would be very low.

Not a Political Forum

As argued so far, PA-TV successfully serves video enthusiasts but is less useful for those who want to communicate with their fellow citizens. The original policy makers, however, had a higher goal in mind. They intended that PA-TV make possible a particular kind of communication: political speech.

The technological features that prevent PA-TV from being effective as a community medium also make it unattractive as a political tool. If activists or political candidates cannot reach the community, they may have little interest in using PA-TV.

Even if activists were to use it, however, some features inhibit PA-TV from effectively hosting critical speech. Most obviously, the regulatory framework puts centers under direct government control. Some centers depend on an annual budget appropriation, and all depend on franchise contracts for their survival. Were a center to emerge as an effective forum for government critics, the government could probably shut it down or sack the management. True, centers have legal protections under the First Amendment, but they are nonetheless vulnerable to pressures from above.

Speakers are also vulnerable to pressures from staff. Staff's have an interest in assuring the survival of their centers (and thereby preserving their own jobs.) They also have some means to influence content. At minimum, they can channel outreach to less controversial groups in the community – say school children rather than advocates for the homeless.

Cultural factors play a role, too. PA-TV professionals have their roots in video more than free speech. While they regularly describe a channel as a free speech forum, they are not themselves experts in free speech. To someone from the free speech culture, the lack of an audience might invalidate the rhetorical claims about free speech.

In summary, were a channel to be a powerful voice against the government, government would have the power to silence it, and staff would have an interest in eliminating controversy. This is not so say that there is never controversy or that staff always shy away from political speech, but the influence of overarching structures does create barriers.

Not Innovative

PA-TV centers seem noteworthy for their conservatism, i.e. they are averse to change. Stations' operational models seem relatively unchanged over thirty years. Two seemingly areas of innovation are notably missing. First, stations have not obviously attempted to make themselves accessible to viewers. Second, stations seem to have not embraced the Internet, despite its proven value as a community medium.

Various features inhibit innovation. First among them is the lack of pressure for change. With funding divorced from performance and with viewers unable to provide feedback to stations, there are few dissatisfied voices to promote change. Problems are unheard and unaddressed. Then there is the sector's radical rhetoric and fear of external enemies. Calls for improvements can be rebutted with the claim that any change could weaken PA-TV in its relentless combat with corporate media.

Then there is the strong commitment to video as an end in itself. The professional culture is video-centric, and the video club model reinforces a center's commitment to that technology. Importantly, the regulatory framework is also video-centric. The entire PA-TV model is built on cable TV and its franchise, and were a center to invest heavily in

other technologies, it might be accused of inappropriate use of franchise-derived funds. (However, such factors cannot explain the total neglect of the Internet.) Generational factors militate against change, too, by creating disincentives for staff. Aging managers might prefer to pass up the opportunities of new technology rather than lose their positions to younger, more tech-savvy staff.

A third set of factors is a lack of resources. With the PA-TV sector so fragmented, most centers lack the surplus resources needed to pay for experimentation and innovation. The national association is small and starved for resources, so it cannot host experiments of benefit to all member centers. Even when one center innovates, there is little capacity to diffuse a successful innovation. Each small center exists in relative isolation. The regulatory model also drives centers to invest in political managers rather than technological innovators. Political management consumes resources that could otherwise be used for innovation.

V. Recommendations

Institutions channel and constrain individual action, but institutions are not immutable. Once their influences are recognized, it may be possible to change them in order to correct for problems. This section suggests some possible changes that could improve PA-TV's ability to meet its original policy goals. These recommendations are only sketched here; more in-depth analysis is work for the future.

Creating a Culture of Innovation

Perhaps the greatest challenge will be to change the PA-TV sector into one where change is not resisted. Currently, local centers don't innovate largely because they lack incentives and they don't know how. At the national level, culture plays a bit role: it seems that the national leadership is especially affected by generational resistance to change and an historic commitment to video technology.

One useful change would be create an alternative national association. This could be an informal network rather than a formal association, and it need not compete with the existing association. However, it could try to articulate a positive vision of change and of new technology. It could also serve as a home for individual innovators and reformers. This may already be happening: the recently created "PEGspace.org" initiative is a national focal point for technological innovation in PA-TV.

New Technology

Video and cable technology create many of the barriers to PA-TV. It would be appropriate to change this technology, but numerous barriers exist. What change is possible here?

First, the emergence of video-on-demand (VOD) is of enormous significance to PA-TV. The requirement of appointment viewing is nearly fatal to community communication, but now cable TV is escaping this constraint. Access centers should move aggressively to gain VOD capability. Interestingly, some cable companies are trying to push access centers onto VOD (in order to obtain the regular channel.) In such circumstances, access

centers might be able to negotiate favorable VOD agreements, perhaps agreeing initially “beta test” VOD without giving up their regular channel.

Second, simple applications of new technology should be identified. As PA-TV begins using the Internet, it can take baby steps. Two applications seem especially promising. One is email newsletters to communities. This would help make viewers aware of what programming is on the channel. Another easy innovation is to put video up on the web, either as trailers for their cable offerings or as entire programs. This would allow citizens to sample some of the programming from a center. Access centers could have done this ten years ago, but it is not too late to do it today.

Third, PA-TV needs to develop the capacity to diffuse innovations. If one center develops a useful tool or technique, it should be possible to facilitate its diffusion to other centers. The Email newsletter and video trailers website would be good candidates for wide diffusion. A diffusion capacity might involve some short-term exchanges of personnel.

For the most advanced centers, new Internet-based capabilities could be explored. This is the focus of PEGspace.org initiative, which is developing content management systems. Most centers will need to learn to walk before they can run, but the technology leaders in the sector can plunge into new opportunities.

Reviewing Franchises

The great strength of PA-TV is its funding source. Cable franchises provide abundant funding, but that funding supports centers that are not very effective. It would be good to retain the funding but redirect it to a better model of community media. This requires legal skills to modify franchises.

The greatest promise lies in writing franchises to de-categorize cable-derived funds. Those funds could support greater Internet activities. Under current franchises, it seems that some Internet activities are possible. The goal would be to gain maximum flexibility.

Franchises could also be modified to reduce government control. Eliminating government discretionary control over access center budgets, perhaps by fixing the amount of funding to be provided each year, would make centers more independent of their local government and allow them to be more critical.

There currently exists the opportunity to change all franchises in the US. In 2006 the Congress considered legislation to shift franchises to the national level. While the proposed legislation had particular features that could hurt PA-TV, opportunities may yet open for constructive changes to franchising. The recommendations here could be advocated at the federal level.

A shift to national franchises could also bring more support to PA-TV in general. Towns and cities vary greatly in their representation of free speech advocates, but such advocates do exist reliably at the national level.

Focus on Training

With every passing year, consumer devices become more powerful media tools. Cell phones are now also video cameras, and every personal computer now has free video editing capabilities (whether the owner realizes it or not.) Free websites host video.

The challenge that people still face is skill development. People need training. Powerful new tools exist, but citizens need to learn how to use them. This is a big opportunity for access centers. PA-TV centers need to develop a new understanding of their role in the community, so that they can provide assistance in overcoming today's challenges and seizing today's opportunities.

In conclusion, PA-TV policies have contributed much to communities but have not lived up to their radical goals. The analysis here seeks to identify institutional factors that have hindered PA-TV's effectiveness. Once identified, it becomes possible to change those institutions. The changes recommended here could ripple through the sector, empowering staff, producers, and viewers to achieve much more with the funding and organizational structures that now exist.

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