
Making It Happen Now

Hans K. Klein

Various studies have concluded that news and public affairs programming in the U.S. exhibit biases that derive from the mass media's institutional structures. According to authors such as Ben Bagdikian, Edward Herman, and Noam Chomsky, media content is influenced by institutional factors such as the media's private ownership, its dependency on advertisers, and the industry's concentration. These authors claim that changes in media content depend on changes in media institutions. Such structural modifications would require fundamental changes in the media's organization and ownership.

But Herman and Chomsky have also alluded to a different, and decidedly more modest, program of change. Alternative media institutions exist, most notably community radio and television in cities and towns throughout the U.S., and they could provide more independent programming than they currently do. Herman and Chomsky make this point when they say that: "Local nonprofit radio and television stations ... provide an opportunity for direct media access that has been underutilized in the United States." This suggests that by reducing underutilization, that is, by making more effective use of existing alternative media institutions, greater programming diversity is possible. Although this would produce much less than a wholesale restructuring of media institutions, a greater use of alternative media could promote more independent programming.

In particular, we should consider the possible use of community media to provide independent news and public affairs. The resources for richer alternative media already exist: radio and television channels have been reserved for non-commercial use in communities throughout the U.S., a variety of non-commercial programming sources exist, and program distribution networks are in place. Yet these elements often fail to combine, leaving the alternative media with unrealized potential.

The reasons for this are largely institutional. Just as structure influences content in the mainstream media, so the institutional structure of community media creates barriers and pressures that block the development of a richer alternative media. These barriers can be surmounted, however. The missing ingredient is knowledge and initiative at the community level to recognize the available opportunities. The case studies that follow suggest the relative ease with which one person—a "community media activist"—collaborated with media organizations in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Atlanta, Georgia, to increase significantly their independent news and public affairs programming. The lessons learned from these experiences can apply to communities throughout the U.S.—and possibly even abroad.

Institutional analyses reveal how media structure affects programming content. Most have focused on the mainstream media—commercial radio, television, and print as well as national public radio and television. Institutional influences, however, are not limited to these media, and can also be observed in community radio and television.

The post-World War II roots of community radio lie in the Pacifica Foundation's creation by pacifist Lewis K. Hill in 1946. The commercial approach to radio broadcasting had triumphed in the 1930s but with the emergence of FM radio after World War II a new opportunity for alternative institutions arose. Hill pioneered an organizational and financial model for radio that would insulate its programming from the business and government influences evident in commercial radio. That institutional form was the non-profit radio station funded by listeners. Pacifica used listener contributions to finance stations first in California and then in other U.S. cities, including New York, Houston, and Washington, DC.

Insulated from market dependence, Pacifica could air controversial programming. Over the years it provided early coverage of the civil rights movement, opposition to the Vietnam War, analyses of labor issues, and more. Such programming at times generated a backlash, in the form of Congressional investigations in the early 1960s by the House Un-American Activities Committee (for "subversion") and the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (for "communist infiltration"). But the financial autonomy of the radio stations denied outsiders the use of financial control mechanisms, such as the withdrawal of advertising or the application of pressure to corporate owners.

The model defined by Pacifica helped inspire the broader community radio movement that grew rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s. Independent radio stations funded by universities or by listeners proliferated in the U.S. in that period, and today there are over 500 independent radio stations nationwide. Together these stations control a large portion of the total FM radio spectrum in the U.S. In today's Atlanta metropolitan region, for example, five of the 23 radio stations (22%) are non-profit, community stations. Other U.S. metropolitan regions typically have four to six community radio stations in operation. Thus a large amount of the FM radio spectrum in the U.S. is controlled by non-profit institutions insulated from the potential biases of corporate ownership.

Freedom from one kind of bias, however, does not translate into freedom from any bias whatsoever. Community radio's institutional form generates its own influences on programming. Here we consider the influences arising from one institutional characteristic: scale. Community radio stations are small, with few employees (if any) and small budgets. Taken as a whole, the stations are fragmented and cannot easily coordinate their activities with each other.

The institutional characteristic of scale affects content because small stations have difficulties producing their own programming. Although most stations broadcast music programming, little of it is produced in-house. For example, in 1997 Atlanta's WREK community radio station featured just one regularly scheduled live music show per week, an amount typical of all community radio stations in the area. Unable to produce their own programming, most stations broadcast pre-recorded music obtained from outside sources, usually commercial recording companies. This creates a dependence on the corporations that collect,

package, and distribute the programming. Thus community stations are free to broadcast what they please, but only from a selection of programming produced by private corporations. Fortunately, the technology and economics of music production allow for cost-effective production in limited batches, so even small-scale music producers can be recorded on CD and distributed to community radio stations.

The influence of scale is more evident in news and public affairs programming. Here again, local productions can strain a station's resources. Although some stations produce local news shows, few have the resources to produce national news, so they must, again, depend on outside producers. Much of the available programming originates with mainstream corporate-sponsored producers like National Public Radio or with media corporations, however—the very institutions critiqued by Chomsky, Solomon, and others. For example, the business news program *Marketplace*, which is sponsored by the General Electric Corporation, is carried on 240 community radio stations nationwide. When small stations import news programming from corporate-owned or corporate-sponsored sources, they import their biases as well.

A second alternative media institution is community television (formally called public access television). Community TV traces its origins back to the 1970s, when cities and towns around the U.S. began granting monopoly franchises to companies to install and operate cable television systems. Although the details vary from community to community, the essential features of community TV are the same at most stations. Funding for such stations comes from the local cable franchisee, which exchanges a percentage of its revenue for the use of the local right-of-way and for its monopoly franchise. These funds support non-profit corporations, which train citizens in video production, and which cablecast the programming on channels reserved for their use. The funding also supports educational and government access television channels.

Inspired by the successful model of citizen-produced programming pioneered by George Stony in New York City, federal regulations institutionalized community TV nationwide in the 1980s. Today there are some 950 community television stations operating throughout the U.S. Many of these operate multiple channels, making for thousands of independent, non-commercial television channels.

The institutional form of community TV insulates it from the forces that can influence mainstream media programming. With funds coming automatically from the local cable company, community TV is well protected from any attempt at financial control by advertisers and sponsors. As a result it has freedom to air controversial programming. Moreover, federal regulations conceptualize community TV in terms of free speech and an “electronic soapbox,” an institutional mission explicitly related to the exercise of free speech through producing and cablecasting programming. Even the station staff cannot exercise editorial control over programming, except as concerns technical quality or illegal content (such as obscenity).

Still, its institutional form can influence programming content and quantity. Community television finds itself almost totally reliant on in-house production. Some of this is technically and artistically excellent, but much of it is not. More

important, local programming often fails to fill a station's available channel capacity.

Like community radio, community TV is small in scale and fragmented nationally. A community television station in a medium-sized city might have a staff of two to five people and an annual budget of some hundreds of thousands of dollars with which to train citizens in the technology, maintain the facilities, and operate numerous channels. Although much larger than a community radio station (Atlanta's WREK radio station has an annual budget of U.S.\$50,000 and no paid staff), these resources are small for in-house video production. Video production, like film production, is notoriously expensive, with professional production often costing thousands or millions of dollars. Because of the limited resources of local producers, in-house community TV programming is often limited to the simplest production techniques. For example, much of the production in the Atlanta and Cambridge stations examined below consisted of continuous camera shots of people talking.

Although no objective criterion exists for evaluating quality, this does not hold for quantity. Many stations cannot produce enough programming to utilize their channel capacity. Television channels controlled by some stations may scroll text messages or simply remain blank. This presents the problem of underutilization in its clearest form—a blue video screen. In part this reflects scale: small stations cannot produce enough programming to fill all their channels. It also reflects a related characteristic: fragmentation. Independent stations cannot easily share programs or pool available resources.

Community television also faces barriers to program importation, a condition that sharply differentiates it from its radio counterpart. Commercial video producers, unlike music producers, derive little benefit from having their program carried on community television, so they make little commercial programming available for importation. Even importation of local productions from other communities is difficult, given the mutual independence of all the stations. Finding programming and importing it from the outside requires more administrative effort than small stations can support.

The existence of underutilized channel capacity is not incompatible with a mission to provide an electronic soap box for local free speech. Stations in Cambridge and Atlanta allowed citizens to sponsor imported programming to fill channel capacity not used for local productions. However, because of stations' fragmentation and mutual isolation, citizens who would import programming from other communities face substantial costs in searching for available material. As a result, available capacity at many community TV stations remains unused.

In sum, community radio and television provide an alternative to the mainstream media, but their institutional forms influence the programming they can offer. Their small size limits their ability to produce their own in-house programming, and their independence and fragmentation inhibits the sharing of what programming they do produce. Community radio's solution has been to turn to externally produced programming. However, when it imports news and public affairs it often becomes a repeater for the biases of producers who are owned or funded by large business interests. Community television, with much fewer options for program importation, often leaves channels underutilized.

When considered in light of the critiques of Chomsky and others, this situation is surprising. On the one hand, highly concentrated mass media exercise considerable control over what the public hears on the radio and sees on television. On the other hand, alongside the mainstream media exist hundreds of alternative radio stations and thousands of alternative television channels. Yet these radio stations may offer little independent programming, and these television stations may be unable even to fill their screens. The resources of the alternative media remain underutilized as an alternative to the mainstream media.

If the situation presented so far were the full story, then the alternative media's underutilization would be difficult to change. However, other organizations have arisen in response to the problems of scale and fragmentation.

One solution to the shortage of local programming is to create dedicated organizations to generate more programming. Another solution is to pool existing local programming and distribute it nationally. Organizations to perform these functions exist to serve both community television and radio.

Much independent video production is the work of autonomous artists, but a few organizations exist to regularly produce alternative programming. Two such production sources are the Center for Defense Information (CDI) and *Dyke TV*. CDI is a non-profit, Washington-based organization devoted to providing information about U.S. military policy and to countering the public relations activities of the defense industry. Since 1987 CDI has produced a regular video series called *America's Defense Monitor*, whose episodes analyze issues such as the trade-offs between defense spending and health care, arms procurement, and the tax burden of defense spending. Its programs are available at a low charge (but not free) to community TV stations.

Dyke TV is a bi-monthly video magazine that focuses on issues and themes of concern to lesbians, "providing images of lesbians created by lesbians." The program uses the media to combat the potential isolationism experienced by a minority group in society. It, too, distributes its programs to community television stations around the country. Alongside these organizations exist myriad other small producers addressing topics neglected in the mainstream media (such as labor issues).

The mere existence of alternative programming material does not ensure its distribution, however. Independent video producers suffer from the same problems of fragmentation as do community television stations, which can render program distribution costly and complex. In response, non-profit distributors have arisen to mediate between fragmented producers and fragmented television stations. One of the oldest of these is Deep Dish TV (DDTV). DDTV collects and distributes via satellite the "best" of public access and independent programming to community television stations around the U.S.

Another distributor is Free Speech TV (FSTV). Since the summer 1995, FSTV has distributed four hours of weekly programming to community television stations around the U.S. To make distribution as simple as possible, FSTV avoids satellite distribution and delivers tapes directly to community TV stations. Stations that subscribe to FSTV receive bi-weekly tapes that are ready to plug

in and play, for which they pay nothing and need not even return. Thus FSTV enables community television stations to import alternative programming with virtually no cost of time or money.

In community radio, organizations have also arisen to address the lack of independent news and public affairs programming which results from stations' small scale. Here a single organization has established itself as the predominant programmer. The Pacifica Foundation's Pacifica Radio network produces and distributes programming for community radio stations nationally. Its *Pacifica National News* is a half-hour daily news show that offers perspectives and stories neglected in the mainstream media. This programming is distributed to radio stations around the U.S. via satellite and carries an annual subscription fee of approximately U.S.\$2,000.

Organizations like the Pacifica Foundation and Free Speech TV put together programming that community media cannot provide for themselves. They address the problems arising from the institutional form of community media. All the pieces seem to be in place for hours of daily alternative programming.

Yet Herman and Chomsky's charge of underutilization still holds true. In two U.S. cities, including one of the nation's biggest, this author encountered community radio without public affairs programming, and community television with empty screens. In neither case did stations import programming available from Pacifica or FSTV—despite stations' staffs' interest in increasing their programming. Channel space existed in abundance, alternative programming was available, and distribution costs were low, yet these resources remain underutilized.

The causes for the underutilization of community media lie in a variety of mundane local factors. Within radio and television stations there is little knowledge of outside programming sources like Pacifica and FSTV. Furthermore, station staff are often too busy to initiate a new programming activity. Among local citizens who might propose such programming, there is again little knowledge of programming sources. Furthermore, numerous small administrative barriers impede any departure from normal operating procedures. These minor barriers prevent the realization of a richer alternative mass media.

From 1994 to 1995, I worked with Cambridge Community Television (CCTV), the public access television station in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 1996, after moving to Atlanta, Georgia, I worked with three community media organizations: People TV (PTV), the city's public access television station; Clark Atlanta University TV (CAU-TV), the educational access television station; and WREK, a community radio station. Through sustained but only part-time activity I succeeded in significantly increasing the amount of alternative news and public affairs programming made available in these communities. Community television stations in Cambridge and Atlanta began cablecasting Free Speech TV, and community radio in Atlanta began broadcasting *Pacifica National News*. In all cases the potential for such programming had long existed, but remained dormant until someone in the local community brought the resources together. These experiences suggest that the underutilization of community media results from a lack of local activism.

When I began working with CCTV in 1994, the station controlled four channels on the city's cable network. Only two of those channels featured locally produced programs, many of which were repeated frequently to fill the available capacity. CCTV also irregularly imported programming from Deep Dish TV, *Dyke TV*, and *America's Defense Monitor*. To fill the third and fourth channels, CCTV scrolled public service messages in a loop or imported non-English news broadcasts from around the world, available from a continuous satellite down-link. Thus, like many community television stations, CCTV had more channel capacity than it could fill.

This underutilized channel capacity was not a serious concern at the station, since CCTV staff interpreted their mission in terms of production rather than programming. Consistent with this, station staff spent much of their time teaching classes in video production and editing, operating production studios, and maintaining video equipment. (The station has repeatedly won national awards for its best productions.) Programming, in contrast, received less attention. Little time was spent actively searching out additional programming with which to fill the available channels, nor did the station publish a program guide for viewers. When staff learned of the FSTV distribution network it took only a limited interest, seeing it largely as non-local programming that would not contribute to the station's production mission.

In this context I began participating in station activities. Over a year's time, I volunteered occasionally at the station and interacted frequently with staff, all the while advocating increased importation of programming, especially from FSTV. Although the staff did not share my enthusiasm for imported programming, underutilized channel capacity would allow it to be adopted without displacing local programming. Importation of FSTV would, however, require a rearrangement of the programming schedule, a task that would consume scarce staff resources. Therefore the station initially declined using FSTV material. Channels dedicated to scrolling messages remained unchanged.

Over time, I gained some standing as a CCTV member by participating in its activities and by volunteering for various tasks. I spent approximately one evening per week at the station over a year, and passed the training class to become certified as a producer. In addition, I found opportunities to contribute to the station, helping CCTV learn about Internet technology and eventually even serving on the station's board of directors. These activities allowed me to get to know the station staff and to be recognized as a station contributor. In all these activities I continued advocating a greater attention to programming and an increased use of imported material.

In 1995, that advocacy yielded results. CCTV reorganized its program schedule and dedicated one of its hitherto underutilized channels to imported programming. By joining FSTV with programming from DDTV, CDI, and *Dyke TV*, the station was able to fill that channel's prime-time hours with alternative programming every day. The more than 100,000 residents of Cambridge received a significant increase in the alternative video programming available to them. From the perspective of critics like Chomsky, this was a not insignificant achievement. Alongside the mainstream media, Cambridge residents now had one channel of independently produced news, public affairs, and cultural programming. This experience at CCTV confirmed the potential

of community television to serve as a richer alternative to mainstream mass media.

In September 1996 I moved to Atlanta, Georgia, and attempted similar advocacy work with three community media institutions. The first of these was People TV, the public access television station in Atlanta, where I again tried to sponsor Free Speech TV. As with CCTV, PTV's top priority was the production of in-house programming. Imported programming like FSTV received a lower priority.

Where PTV differed fundamentally from CCTV was in its channel capacity. PTV controlled just one cable television channel to CCTV's four, and that one channel was largely filled with local productions, so there was less underutilized capacity. PTV did add FSTV to its program in early 1997, but it cablecast just one of the available four hours per week. Still, since PTV's audience included millions of residents in the Atlanta metropolitan region, even this one-hour time slot offered the potential of millions of viewer-hours. Local advocacy achieved some results.

My involvement with a second Atlanta television station was quite brief—and achieved nothing. Atlanta's educational access station, CAU-TV, produced much of its own programming but not enough to fill its evening hours. To fill that channel time CAU-TV imported programming from the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), at times repeating programming already available on the local PBS broadcast affiliate. The station seemed well suited to importing FSTV, since it had available capacity and its imported programming duplicated what was already available in the region.

In the summer 1997, I contacted CAU-TV to suggest that they carry FSTV programming. A variety of barriers stood in the way, however. As an educational rather than public access station CAU-TV did not normally accept proposals from citizens in the community, so I could approach the station only as an interested outsider. With no opportunity to contribute to the station or to build a relationship with the station staff, I could not develop any standing as a station contributor. Moreover, the station seemed satisfied with the programming from PBS and expressed little interest in the FSTV programming. This attempt at advocacy bore no results.

I had more success with community radio. Atlanta's WREK was a university-owned, student-operated radio station with a powerful 40,000 watt transmitter that covered most of the metropolitan region. Here conditions were favorable to increasing the utilization of alternative media.

In 1997 WREK broadcast almost no news or public affairs programming. This was not for lack of interest or channel capacity, however, for station staff had long expressed both an interest in such programming and a willingness to reduce music programming to accommodate it.

However, a variety of mundane administrative and technical barriers had prevented it. First, despite their interest the staff lacked time to translate their intentions into action. Second, the staff had little knowledge of what programming they might import and how to go about obtaining it. Seeking out sources and wading through complex contractual documents was an intimidating prospect, and staff turnover caused by student graduations inhibited the accumula-

tion of relevant knowledge. Finally, the importation of any such programming required that repairs be made to the station's satellite receiver, a project that would make demands on the technical staff. As a result of these barriers, WREK offered no regular news programs.

In 1997 I joined WREK in the role of faculty advisor. This position precluded an advocacy role, but did allow me to assist staff in implementing their own projects. Initially I advised on projects to which the staff assigned high priority, such as series of negotiations with university units who wanted WREK to import commercially produced programming. By interacting with students and donating my time, I developed a relationship of trust with station staff.

This evolved further when I helped them solve their long-standing problem with public affairs programming. Part of this involved information gathering about contractual procedures with other outside news suppliers. Various options were investigated and evaluated: Howard Stern's syndicated program was discussed but rejected as unaffordable; news programming from the British Broadcasting Corporation was rejected, since it was already carried by another Atlanta station; and Pacifica Network News was scrutinized for its technical implications, especially because it might require the purchase of new receiving technology.

Any imported programming would require an operating satellite dish, so the author helped the staff investigate cost and technology options. WREK had financial resources to pay for outside programming, but this required assistance in collecting some overdue payments from a firm that had rented WREK facilities during the 1996 Olympics. These various activities consumed nearly a year's time, but they eventually yielded results. Early in 1998 WREK staff contracted with Pacifica to import their daily news program. A community radio station that previously had carried almost no public affairs began airing programming from an independent source. The approximately one million radio listeners in the region gained an alternative news source alongside the mainstream programs already available.

These four cases show that it is indeed possible to increase the utilization of community media. In Cambridge, resources that were readily available were combined to provide tens of thousands of citizens with regular alternative television programming. In Atlanta the greatest increase in utilization occurred in radio, where alternative programming became available to over one million potential listeners.

Compared to the total amount of programming in these cities, these increases were modest. But compared to the total amount of alternative programming initially available, the increases were huge. Cambridge went from a few scattered programs to a dedicated channel for alternative programming. Atlanta went from virtually no alternative radio news to a daily 30-minute broadcast of independent news. In addition, Atlanta cable television viewers saw a slight increase in alternative programming with the addition of an hour of FSTV. Although hardly a media revolution, these incremental changes greatly increased the availability of alternative programming in two U.S. cities.

Furthermore, these four cases show that the key to improving the utilization of community media is increased local activism. The needed resources already

existed. With the exception of People TV, the stations examined here had the capacity to add programming. With the exception of CAU-TV, they had an institutional mission that supported alternative programming. With the partial exception of WREK radio, which had to repair its satellite dish, they had easy access to low-cost programming. What made the difference was patient and sustained effort by someone in the local community to overcome the shortages of knowledge, time, and administrative experience that kept the existing potential from being realized. The key to better utilization of existing alternative media was a community media activist.

What are the elements of effective community media activism? The cases examined here offer lessons that may apply to communities around the U.S. and possibly abroad as well. First, community media activists cannot succeed if the required resources are not available. There must be institutions willing to host such programming, and they must have available channel capacity. In the case of Pacifica programming a station must also have the funds to pay for the programming and the satellite technology to receive it. Absent the institutional mission, channel capacity, funding, and technology, advocacy may be irrelevant. As the cases show, however, these resources often do exist.

Second, community media activists need knowledge of the resources that are to be combined. Local citizens are often unaware of the existence of community media, especially public access television, or do not know about external sources of programming. Similarly, community radio and television stations' staff may not know about external programming sources or may not know how to access them. A major contribution of activists is to educate the interested parties about existing resources and the opportunities that are available. (The appendix below provides Internet web addresses for the organizations mentioned in this essay.) Recognizing the opportunity is the first step towards taking effective action.

Third, activists must possess time, energy, and patience. Logically, it is an insignificant step to take available resources and combine them, but in practice even the smallest change to an organization's activities can require months or years of work. At WREK, payment of Pacifica's subscriber fee required that a check be deposited, but the check had expired. Obtaining a new check took months of phone calls to an outside firm's accounting department. Likewise, attempts to have CCTV import FSTV programming were put on hold for six months while the station moved to a new building. Successful advocacy requires dogged persistence and a sense of humor in the face of a seemingly unending series of setbacks.

Fourth, community media activists need to develop relationships with the station staff. Staff are painfully familiar with local citizens who give unsolicited advice about how to do their job better. A much less familiar sight is someone volunteering to help out. By contributing to the station's overall success, an activist's suggestions carry much more weight. Activists with valued skills, such as computer expertise, or with special qualifications, such as a prestigious institutional affiliation to bring to the board of directors, can make an even greater contribution. Once the staff knows and respects an activist they are more likely to entertain proposals for new programming.

These lessons may seem obvious or trivial. Yet the continued existence of underutilized capacity in community media suggests that these lessons remain to be widely applied. In Cambridge and Atlanta the potential for richer alternative media existed but lay dormant until a community media activist combined the available resources. Similar efforts in other communities could yield comparable results.

APPENDIX: MEDIA WEBSITES

- Alliance for Community Media
<http://www.AllianceCM.org/>
- Cambridge Community Television
<http://www.cctvcambridge.org/>
- Center for Defense Information
<http://www.cdi.org/>
- Deep Dish TV
<http://www.igc.org/deepdish/>
- Dyke TV
<http://www.dyketv.org/>
- Free Speech TV
<http://www.freespeech.org/>
- Marketplace
<http://www.marketplace.org/>
- People TV
<http://www.peopletv.org/>
- Pacifica Radio
<http://www.pacifica.org/>
- Paper Tiger TV (DDTV)
<http://www.papertiger.org/>
- Z Net (Chomsky)
<http://www.lol.shareworld.com/ZNETTOPnoanimation.html>

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Hans Klein teaches in the School of Public Policy at the Georgia Institute of Technology.
Correspondence: School of Public Policy MC: 0345, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA 30332-0345, U.S.A. E-mail: hans.Klein@pubpolicy.gatech.edu