

From Service to Access

Re-conceiving Public Television's Role in the New Media Era

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Discourses on the new media era tend to celebrate the interactive, emancipatory, participatory and communal characteristics of newer communication technologies. In this chapter the authors examine these discourses from the perspective of two co-existing models of communication: the traditional public broadcasting Trickle-Down service model and the grassroots Bubble-Up community communications model, exemplified in this treatment by public access cable television typical to the United States. The models are herein applied to the mature television medium within the ideological context of public service. Both models provide useful contrasts with the consumerist model of the global information society premised on free-trade principles and rhetorically touted by neo-liberals as the true expression of the 'free marketplace of ideas.' In the authors' view, this mercantilist perspective is a technopian vision of rationalized consumption camouflaged in a socio-political rubric of worldwide direct democracy transcending the borders of the nation-state (perceived in the neo-liberal model as anachronistic).

The authors suggest that the social, cultural and political role of public television can be emphasized and re-validated, specifically regarding participation (human agency), as a counter-balance to neo-liberal consumerist thinking. We also argue that public television can gain a competitive advantage by first advocating *and then proactively creating* a unique blend of public service programming. That blend would emphasize national cohesion combined with grassroots individual and collective access via the promulgation of and, more importantly, non-interference with independently produced adventurous (i.e., critical) texts.

The authors accordingly stress that the current rhetoric of convergence in the context of television – whether in reference to ownership, technology or content (c.f., Murdock 2000) – must move beyond policy statements and academic speculations. It should focus on the domain of praxis by melding the traditional European public service broadcasting mission of public service with an adaptation of the U.S. tradition of public access.

Public service besieged

The social and cultural role of public service broadcasting has traditionally been defined as representing cultural diversity within the society being served. This practical function hinges on making available a plurality of content that permits audiences to be and to act as citizens in a democracy. It also means providing universal availability of information, education, and entertainment to all residents of a nation or, in some cases, regions within the nation.

Lofty ambitions notwithstanding, the audience for European public service broadcasting has declined in many nations to around a 40% share of television viewers. In the U.S. public television viewing has historically never risen much above its current level of a 3% share in prime time. The commercial broadcasting model, dominant from the outset in the United States, has increasingly begun to hold sway in mixed-system nations, particularly in Europe. The American model brings in its wake the culture of celebrity and seduction – the ‘authority of numbers’ of watchers, listeners, and readers (Bauman, 2001: 66-67).

Many critics increasingly look to a variety of ‘new media’ communicative forms as potential counter-responses to the perceived loss of diversity in representations and political viewpoints which, they argue, is a direct result of public television’s decline. Undoubtedly new media technologies such as the Internet provide a distribution channel by which new modes of global social interconnectedness and celebration of diversity may be explored. But questions are raised as to whether control of these technologies by commercial enterprises with vested interests in promoting additional avenues of commodification of culture are instead contributing to the further disappearance of the shared public realm within which the ideal citizen is constituted (Brown, 1994: 37).

The commercial broadcast model, with its drive to market goods to consumers and its technical infrastructure emphasizing one-way flow maximization, has increasingly taken hold of the Internet. One can therefore legitimately question whether the Net can even maintain a semblance of an open, interactive user-based information sending and retrieval system – the dream of the socially progressive proponents at its birth. If it ultimately fails in this regard, what institutional regime, if any, shall assume this role?

As Ellis (2000: 176-77) has noted, the core aspect of broadcast television has historically been “to provide a voluntary point of social cohesion, of being together while being apart”. Ellis calls this ‘working through’. It is “a collective process of making sense of the modern world that uses the linearity of the broadcast medium” which, in turn, depends on the universal availability of public broadcasting services as “guardians of an open process through which social cohesion can be negotiated”. This can be contrasted, in Ellis’s view, with “most of the models of interactivity and choice [that] imply a lone consumer making choices in isolation”. Ellis calls for a new definition of public service broadcasting in the ‘Era of Plenty’ because it can no longer conceive

itself as an institution that imposes consensus but, rather, it must work through new possibilities for consensus by exploring diversity.

Can public service broadcasters, in rethinking their mission, take advantage of both the interactive technological potential of the new media technologies and the alternative communications potential of 'old' electronic media such as public access cable television in the United States? And in this way, can they broaden the scope of their remit beyond the traditional one-way Trickle-Down model of a national service predicated on what Preston (2001: 244) has termed 'Civic National' ideology?

Existing models

According to Preston's conceptualization of the existing discourses on public communication and participation, Civic National ideology (herein characterized as the Trickle-Down communication model of national service) has been the cornerstone of the European public service broadcasting tradition (c.f., Nieminen 2000). This ideology emphasizes the role of a communication community as a national entity consisting of rational-critical citizens. The media function as information providers for debate and discussion and thus are major contributors to the formation of a public sphere.

Proponents and defenders of the Civic National, Trickle Down communication model argue that public service broadcasting must remain steadfast in its national role as a public sphere institution, maintaining its autonomy from both the State and the market. This, it is argued, is the only way to foster a 'third social space' where citizens coalesce to "critically debate issues ranging from public policy to group needs and identities" (Jakubowicz, 1998: 12). Ideally, in practice, public discourse trickles-down as the country's public service broadcaster supports independent producers in the spheres of artistic, cultural, educational and other production by buying their services or using their work, thereby also contributing to their financing and preservation (Jakubowicz, 1998: 17). This model is by definition *centrist*, implying institutional control of communication and presuming the wisdom of the 'professional and democratic gatekeeper' entrusted with the decision-taking authority to determine the needs of the citizenry. This is deemed especially important during periods of social conflict "when many more people and organizations than usual want to [voice] their views on the issues" (Jakubowicz, 1998: 30).

Evidence from U.S. public broadcasting stations over the past decade clearly points to a trend in which station producers assume editorial control of the work of independent producers from the outset. That is often undertaken to appease the presumed or actual desires of grant-funding organizations or commercial underwriters who exert indirect (and increasingly direct) influence over content. To the extent that U.S. public broadcasting

experience can be viewed as a harbinger of the emerging confrontation between commissioning and distributing institutions and independent producers (who are institutionally conceived as 'low-overhead' creative workers), legitimate concerns arise as to the future status of independent creative output in Europe's increasingly competitive mixed-system environments.

Critics of the Trickle-Down model that so emphasizes Civic National ideology propose replacing this with a discourse that Preston (2001: 244) has defined as "Affective National/Postmodernist Cultural". This model emphasizes a local as well as a national communication community comprised of multiple (and frequently contentious) political, cultural and ethnic identities and voices. We might more simply call this the Community Communications Bubble-Up model. Such a communication community would feature 'local' service emphasizing, on the one hand, both individual and collective identity and, on the other hand, active participation/human agency. This alternative conceptualization assumes that citizens have *rights* to the greatest possible diversity of personal and social experience, and to knowledge and participation. In a democracy citizens *must* be allowed to speak of their own lives in their own voices. That requires access to the means to communicate their experiences through public communications media *without institutional intervention or gatekeeping*. This would certainly include individual symbolic universes, i.e., "multiple, unique and potentially unshared private worlds based on various interests or idiosyncrasies" (Firestone, 1994: 5).

This Community Communications Bubble-Up model can be observed in the 30-year history of U.S. public access cable television¹. It also operates in the public arena of the streets via unsanctioned (by officials) artistic production presented on outdoor billboards, phone booths, printed poster displays in metro stations and at bus stops, and temporary site installations on traffic islands, vacant lots, the sides of buildings, kiosks, and storefront video displays. Finally, it has established a global presence through the new media distribution technology of the Internet. The chaos of this multiplicity of 'unique and potentially unshared' voices (unfettered from dominant cultural institutional screens) that Brown conceives as entropic may in fact be emblematic of *democracy in its purest political (i.e., non-consumerist) form*.

While Nordic and other European public service broadcasters have made numerous attempts during the past decades to create a more participatory audience involvement, on balance such attempts have remained relatively isolated incidents in the political, organizational and professional ideological climate of the Civic National, Trickle Down model. At the beginning of the new millennium it is already evident that the changes of the past decade in the European television landscape not only manifest themselves, for instance, in the convergence of various media forms and technologies, but also in an ideological climate. On the one hand this climate allows deregulation and such radically altered policy rhetoric as the European Union (EU) definition of media audiences as 'sovereign consumers' (Pauwels 1999). On the other hand, it celebrates the notion of access to new media, as in the Infor-

mation Society Program of the Government of Finland. At the same time the growing use of 'low-tech' video equipment by professionals as well as 'ordinary people' has, it is argued, begun to alter both the aesthetic and thematic conventions of television (c.f., Fiske 1993; Aslama 2002).

Thus, in this new climate, electronic mass communication should ideally be able to reconcile the two non-consumerist models by establishing both a technological infrastructure and an institutional policy framework that accommodates the strengths of each model and allows independent producers greater control of both content and distribution venues. The authors believe that public service broadcasting must be a primary institutional player in elaborating such a regime.

The role of community in the new media milieu

Graphic communication tools such as affordable video camcorders, video post-production workstations, and user-friendly multimedia web page design software of increasing sophistication have entered into use by a wide public outside the traditional cultural communities. They are, in turn, changing the image cultures in which they exist. "A new populist circulation of images with disregard for 'high culture' has arisen through...exhibitions on the Internet, and through new distribution routes. This vernacular phenomenon [is] opposed to more elite forms of representation...their fresh aesthetic is based on simple graphic applications and a populist imagination" (Lovejoy, 1997: 260).

This new populist circulation of images exists within what Lull (2001) terms the 'superculture' – a fusion of universal values, international services, nations, regions, and practices of everyday life. According to Lull, "[P]eople today routinely fuse the near with the far, the traditional with the new, and the relatively unmediated with the multimediated" (2001: 133). Lull's emphasis on the 'super' rhetoric of the global on the one hand, and of the individual or local on the other, offers one timely and useful way to view the different levels of culture which seem to be present and shared *to a degree at least in high-income societies*. The manner in which Lull presents the construct, however, suggests a certain de-emphasis of the everyday practices of the national and communal by celebrating technology and the individual. He writes, for example, "the crystal-clear technical quality of digital audio and video actually enhances emotionality by purifying the desired information to a level that greatly exceeds the acoustical expectations of unmediated, interpersonal exchanges of sentiment" (Lull, 2001: 159).

While new media "technological tools are capable of...communicating and exchanging ideas and information far afield" (Lovejoy, 1997: 257), this does not (and should not) be read as an immanent and transcendent technological fix. National boundaries, and the national social and cultural configura-

tions they encapsulate, while admittedly under assault from commodified global culture are, at least for the foreseeable future, not likely to disappear. And 'local' cultures in the form of geo-historical communities, ranging from the small town to the big city neighborhood, remain to varying degrees vital integrative forces that help to maintain social equilibrium by emphasizing direct 'acoustical' human contact amongst their inhabitants.

Of course attempts to define *community* have generated a vast literature. The authors choose to focus herein on two most relevant intersecting constructs: 1) community as geo-historical entity and 2) community of interest. The first construct recognizes the need to be grounded in a place defined by intimacy in face-to-face social contact and associated with shared (and disputed) social/cultural memory, both of which ultimately connect to common concerns that directly impact peoples' daily lives. The second construct recognizes the need to seek out like-minded individuals and groups who constitute communities of interest preoccupied with concerns that often transcend the specifics of distinct milieus defined by locality. For the purposes of this essay, the two roughly correspond to 1) electronic community communications media such as public access cable television and local radio, and 2) traditional national public service and commercial broadcasters and the Internet.

The 'traditional community' as epitomized by small town rural formations, and also certain urban and suburban neighborhoods that are segregated de facto by ethnicity, race, or income, may be conceived as a sociocultural entity characterized as a self-contained structured society. The individual is embedded to such an extent that a full life can only be lived as a corollary to full membership in the community. Such a conception implies a total identification embracing both space (generally the smaller the space, the more likely the individual's embeddedness) and time (real time and *Urzeit* or primeval time/origin identified with 'the' past, a time not measurably related to the present). Also key in determining an individual's embeddedness is the extent and degree of institutionalization, tending toward maximal purposiveness *vis-a-vis* integration of the individual into the sociocultural framework. This so-called "prime society" is a complete cultural, political, economic, religious and social entity characterized by an inherent distrust of the 'Other' – of outsiders who threaten cohesion (van Nieuwenhuize, 1966: 18-31). This definition, by extrapolation, applies to both contemporary cults and fascistic national formations.

Attempts to preserve the integrity of the prime society are often seen in what historian C. Vann Woodward terms 'the democratization of nostalgia.' This entails the ennobling of certain aspects of the past to "enhance...lineage, pedigree, national pride, or status" and the denigration of other aspects to "dismiss a shameful heritage" (1989: viii). In marked contrast to this conception of the inherently conservative (and in extreme instances, reactionary) milieu of the traditional community, is Bauman's (2001) notion of community as defined by 'sociality' – a 'shared living' context characterized by societal

self-organization which nevertheless must avoid 'parochialism' to be progressively effective.

Bauman's notion implies the existence of multiple public spheres "where differences are recognized and appreciated" (Sassi, 2000: 278) – a plural and de-centered public sphere constituted not by total identification as in the traditional community but, rather, by *conflict that combines notions of interest and identity*. It is therefore characterized by the overlapping of an array of institutions and practical discourses, including informal movements and associations where solidarities are formed as well as formal governmental and legal institutions.

The dynamic of communicative confrontation – of messy conflict and dispute – in both the non-parochial, discursive geo-historical community and the transnational community of interest is the flip side to Lull's concept of an individual-centered, seamless global/local superculture. It is manifestly apparent in traditional community communication environments ranging from the unmediated New England town meeting to local call-in radio talk programs, public access cable television programs in the United States, and local commercial cable channels promoting a youth-culture avant-garde aesthetic. An important example of the latter is the commercial cable channel ATV in Helsinki, Finland, of which more later. It is also apparent in progressive political collectives on the Internet which emphasize 'transparent editorial gatekeeping' as an essential element of meaningful debate, such as The Independent Media Center (*indymedia.org*), a collectively-run global democratic newswire linking contributions from 57 media centers throughout the world.

In sum, the so-called new media era pertains not only to technological advancement, but also suggests a number of alternative theoretical interpretations as well as practices of a 'community'. Thus, it can be argued that for those public service broadcasters willing to become meaningfully involved in their respective societies in the new media era, it is crucial to revisit the traditional notion of audiovisual participation (and the nature of community formed by it) embedded in the Trickle Down model, and moreover to contrast it with new, emerging interpretations.

Modes of audiovisual participation

Community communications (whether local, national, or global as conceived in this essay) implies robust democratization of participation, whether as a maker of programs or as an engaged spectator. It also implies that anyone, professional *or amateur*, has the ability, with minimal training in the use of technology, to convey by electronic or other means of communication her or his message to others. These tenets, grounded in the tradition of alternative media activism, stand in direct contradistinction to the dominant audio-

visual milieu characterized by hierarchical control of the means of production and distribution manifested to various degrees by traditional public service broadcasters. The exclusionist regime of the latter is defended by arguing that creative ‘talent’ is limited to a select few artists capable of constructing meaningful narrative that will engage significant numbers of spectators (i.e., the ‘numbers game’ earlier alluded to in the discussion of the culture of seduction and celebrity). Allen (1998: 65) offers an example of this thinking in arguing that ‘effective narrative’ in television can *only* be created by talented professionals and “the number of people capable of creating attractive television programming, in any useful sense, is strictly limited”.

Two suppositions offered by Allen are especially problematic. What, in his view, is ‘effective narrative’? And what is meant by ‘useful’ attractive television programming? If, by effective narrative he implies stories with which audience members can identify and which they may find useful, these narratives do not by definition have to be packaged in ‘attractive television’ forms. They may, for example, be presented as Brechtian didactic theatre in an intentional deconstruction of the artifice of seamless narrative. Or they may be told through oral histories by the barely articulate whom, despite their unfamiliarity with the conventions of the medium they employ, nevertheless have important thoughts to convey to interested others. Such ‘amateur’ productions constitute an important genre of public access cable television programming in the United States. While they may not command legions of viewers – that ‘authority of numbers’ – they have contributed to community cohesion and collective memory.

David Hesmondhalgh (2000: 121) effectively counters Allen’s cynical approach to communicative value when he defines the conditions which foster “democratized alternative media activism” in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin. Those conditions include:

1. widened participation and access
2. collaboration rather than hierarchical control and competition
3. greater equality of reward, opportunity and conditions for creative workers
4. geographically evenly-spread resources and talent
5. promotion of critical participation of consumers, to produce and receive
6. high-quality, diverse, innovative and adventurous texts emerging from such participation.

The authors would take Hesmondhalgh’s argument one step further by expanding the definition of access to include participation in both the actual production of material and, of equal importance, *the knowledge that such production is possible and that the opportunity to produce is available to them*

if they so choose. Such a definition emphasizes the pleasure of participation and the enjoyment of narratives in a decidedly different manner than mere appreciation of 'attractive television programming'. It implies, as well, the acceptance of the aesthetic consequences of non-professionalism that comes to symbolize authenticity, even and significantly to the point that such non-professional authenticity is routinely incorporated into the professional audiovisual aesthetic. This development is clearly illustrated, for example, by the shaky hand-held camera and low-grade image quality of amateur video one now finds characteristic in many modern – and popular – television programs.

The importance of providing attractive television programming for purposes of audience building has been debated by public access cable television programmers in the United States from the outset (Himmelstein, 1982: 19-20). If access is conceived as a 'producer's medium' – meaning that programs must be aired no matter their technical and aesthetic quality or sophistication of content – then the question arises as to whether viewers will be attracted to the access channel and stay tuned? If, on the other hand, access is conceived as a 'viewer's medium,' then for a program to be aired it must be of at least reasonable technical and aesthetic quality and be substantive. In that event, would video novices, i.e., the very people for whom the idea of access was originally intended, thereby be screened out of the alternative communication process?

The compromise position and, one may argue, the best possible resolution of this conundrum, has been premised on the institution of formalized production training programs for would-be community program producers as a gateway to being given the use of the access channel's video production equipment. Because program making is seldom an isolated venture, such formal training fosters a face-to-face collaboration focused on a collective goal that is a key element in any community-based initiative.

In the United States, public access cable television, while mandated by federal legislation, is funded locally. The cable operator agrees to annually provide up to five per cent of its gross subscriber revenues to the city government in exchange for a multi-year franchise to operate. Ultimately, the city government determines how much of the gross subscriber revenues shall be dedicated to public, educational, and government [PEG] access channel operation and how much shall be assigned to the city's general fund. It is thus the citizens' responsibility to lobby city government to achieve the optimal distribution of funds to public access television. What at first glance appears problematic, i.e., the need to lobby local officials for what many citizens perceive to be a 'right,' may in fact be a civic blessing-in-disguise. The energy, focus, and organizational skills necessary to gain access in such a structure encourages collective civic participation that perhaps best defines community.

The traditional local public access facility was (and still is) a tangible public brick-and-mortar site (and discursive space) where people gather to collectively engage, 'face-to-face,' the pressing political, social and cultural issues

that concern the citizens of their community, using the means of electronic mass communication as an empowering tool. Recent significant advances in affordable and user-friendly electronic technology contributed to the birth and growth of public access television and today allows the individual and the independent production collective (typically operating on limited production budgets) to transcend the confines of locality in order to connect with the larger global community from their own private places via the Internet. Issues driving these independent producers' need to connect with like-minded individuals and groups may be global in scope; but global issues have local consequences. Linking local public access television with the global dissemination of the creative works of alternative media activists in the 'superculture' opens electronic media to the direct participation of those heretofore shut out of the mainstream media milieu and eliminates the 'professional' gatekeeper who otherwise determines what is worth disseminating.

Possibilities for the re-validation of public service broadcasting: Combining service and access

Chester and Larson (2002: 12) call for increased funding for public broadcasting in the United States which, they argue "needs a much broader mandate in the digital future," including especially the freedom to innovate. While there are clear differences in both the status and level of funding of public service broadcasting in the United States and in most countries of Europe, there can be little doubt that public service institutions on both continents are increasingly pressed by commercial competitors.

In the United States, many national cable program services are essentially duplicating the Public Broadcasting Service's most popular programming, while all the major broadcast and cable news services are actively exploiting web sites to offer expanded news/current affairs coverage. In Finland, to take an example from European public service broadcasting, the two national commercial channels (MTV3 and Nelonen) are effectively competing with the public service broadcaster YLE in terms of the diversity of overall program output (Aslama et al., 2001). Moreover, two commercial cable television services, ATV and Moon TV, have established a niche among the Finnish youth target demographic by offering programming that could be interpreted as a post-modern ironic parody of traditional 'official' current affairs journalism. The two cable upstarts offer coverage of events ranging from rock festivals to local peace demonstrations and provide sharper political commentary than any nationwide channel would ever dare to broadcast.

Such examples raise thorny questions. How can a public service broadcaster position itself in the emerging media culture to retain a substantial share of its traditional audience base, thus justifying its nation-bound service-oriented original remit, and at the same time cultivate the growing frag-

mented and individualized audience increasingly accustomed to the new media universe? The answer perhaps lies in re-formulating the traditional definition of 'service' to include greater citizen participation in electronic media via various forms of community communication, including local access. When the Trickle Down climate is not the dominant one, or when it begins to shift, these efforts may perhaps be more successful than the earlier attempts to enhance access and participation. This may be seen, in some aspects, in the public access cable television model which has evolved in the United States; or in the more recent approach developed by the U.K.'s BBC in the form of its Community Programme Unit. Both approaches give individuals and local community groups the means to produce their own broadcasts within public transmission models. The concept could also draw from web-based local/global interconnectedness. In the new media era such a concept is both socially desirable and more easily realised than ever before.

Hills and Michalis (2000) note that public service broadcasters are responding to the challenge from commercial competitors by establishing their own web sites that offer those interested (and connected) such ancillary services. These include expanded news and news analysis, sport, weather and traffic reports, archival material, adult learning material, links to external sites, and games or other diversions. But all of this is undertaken in an effort to expand audience reach. Some sites include the possibility for limited viewer interactivity, albeit only within a framework established and controlled by the public service broadcaster. While many such services may provide potentially useful enhancements of the public service broadcaster's traditional mission, they do not address the issue of engendering a more robust communicative participation raised throughout this essay.

With the advent of digital terrestrial television multiplexes in European countries the threadbare scarcity of airtime thesis can no longer justify excluding the wide variety of work by independent producers. That is especially relevant when broadly defined to include both those who are professionally trained and the so-called 'amateurs' without formal training but possessing an intense desire to communicate electronically. The issue thus ultimately becomes one of 'gatekeeping' (i.e., determining quality and appropriateness of content) versus 'opening the floodgates' (i.e., providing the broadest possible unrestricted 'gateway' allowable by law to all creative efforts regardless of their perceived quality or appropriateness).

The latter approach, i.e., the public access model of the producer's medium as discussed earlier, would result, in Linder's terms, in a range of programming "from silly to sublime, serious to sensational" (1999: 38). Depending on the broader cultural context in which audiovisual work is produced and/or distributed, limited proscriptions might, of course, be imposed by legislation or judicial decision. In the United States, to take one example, the Supreme Court has defined public access television as a 'public forum'. As such, according to the Court, "[A]ll parties have a constitutional right of access and the State must demonstrate compelling reasons for restricting access to a single

class of speakers, a single viewpoint, or a single subject” (quoted in Linder 1999: 25). This rationale has been used to protect political speech exercised by the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group. On the other hand, the Court has held that obscenity is not protected ‘speech’ in a public forum.

Spectators in this relatively unrestricted milieu, as the authors have also noted, could experience the pleasure of participation in and enjoyment of non-professional authentic narratives if they so choose. They could reject these out of hand, if they so choose. But the choice would be theirs. The key to such a discursive exchange is the very availability of such narratives. Such a programming approach would in no way preclude the pursuit of the public service broadcaster’s primary mission – producing and disseminating high-budget narrative and non-narrative efforts of acknowledged quality with a national and/or regional focus as part of its mandate to promote social cohesion.

By creating a public access infrastructure within its primary ‘service operations’ the public service broadcaster could satisfy the demands of both Trickle-Down service mandates and the emerging grassroots Bubble-Up access potentials. In terms of encouraging modalities of human togetherness (i.e., providing a voluntary point of social cohesion), the traditional mainstream programming would continue to emphasize national issues and identity, reinforce existing collective attitudes and beliefs, and emphasize solidarity in times of (political and/or economic) crisis. That could involve mobilization to action or, at least, encourage collective passive support or agreement. Moreover, such an infrastructure would extend the tradition of collective ‘insurance’ against individual incapacity and misfortune while stressing tolerance and even the celebration of diversity.

In simultaneously assuming a role in fostering community communications the public service broadcaster would create a public forum in which local challenges to entrenched collective attitudes and beliefs could be aggregated regionally and nationally. It would thereby help to create a discursive space for collective political action engendered by the process of ‘working through’ confrontation and controversy, beginning at the local level.

By thus re-conceiving and reorienting its mission in such terms, the public service broadcaster would more comprehensively address modalities of individuality. This is especially relevant in terms of its service mandate with regard to de-emphasizing the traditionally conceived role of the individual as a passive consumer of cultural products, goods, services, and politics (presently construed as the citizen’s primary role as voter in a political horse race). Such a reorientation would emphasize the importance of the individual citizen’s *obligation* to participate in political processes, even (and perhaps often) as a dissenter. It would therein celebrate the individual’s holding and publicly proclaiming identities that may challenge dominant legitimated social positions. Equally important, by demystifying the audiovisual creative process it would encourage the individual to become an independent producer of mediated communication, and thus an active participant in social debate.

While the socio-cultural ramifications of technological convergence discussed in this essay are still in the formative process, certain clear outlines are beginning to emerge. Audiences can be characterized as increasingly fragmented and individualized. These individuals nevertheless continue to live in and to varying degrees resonate with geo-historical communities defined by locality. At the same time, they exhibit tendencies to actively seek out communities of interest associated with self-conceptions of identity (often with political repercussions) as they electronically traverse geography with increasing ease, melding the local and the global. In the process, they are becoming information producers as well as consumers. Commercial broadcasters and digital developers recognize and have begun to act on these trends in their own mercantile self-interest, for in the end those in the commercial sector depend for their livelihood upon knowledge of what they perceive audiences need (Caldwell 2002: 272-73).

Ultimately, the authors believe, the access model proffered herein may be viewed as a propitious public-service-specific opportunity to redefine its remit and remain connected with this evolving, increasingly self-directed and active audience. Public service broadcasters who choose to either ignore or dismiss this socially engaged aspect of the emerging new media milieu do so at their own peril.

Note

1. Linder (1999, p. xxvi) provides a useful functional definition of public access television as conceived and developed over the years in the United States: 'Public access television, or community television, as it is frequently called, began as an "attempt to use television as a direct means of communication without interference from professional middlemen such as journalists, directors, and producers" . . . [it] consists of people not affiliated with the cable operator, using their own equipment or equipment provided to them by the cable operator or local government at no or minimal cost, to produce non-commercial television shows that are cablecast over a channel that is provided, at no cost, solely for public access television. Public access television enables people to disseminate their messages to a local television audience, without the content being edited, filtered, or altered. And for minorities this is especially important.' By the late 1990s, U.S. public access cable television served approximately twenty percent of United States communities and produced more than fifteen-thousand hours of new local programming each week—more programming than is produced by NBC, CBS, ABC, FOX and PBS combined. Major users of public access channels include local activists, senior citizens, and government officials, amongst others. 'It is the nature of public access television that allows for an extremely diverse group of producers and programs' (Linder, 1999, p. 38). Programming deemed 'controversial' by directors of public access facilities includes 'sex and health education, particularly AIDS education; topical call-in; programs featuring political fringe opinions; programs featuring cultural minorities, especially young people; and experimental videos' (Linder, 1999, p. 43).

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