Permutations of Theory – Open Channels Then and Now

Holger Briel
University of Nicosia, Cyprus

Abstract: This paper presents the case of Public Access Channels (or Open Channels) in a changing media climate. The author argues that Public Access Television was a forerunner of today's internet, as it honed viewers' interactive capabilities by involving them in the production processes of video material. It was a clear remit of these stations to train individuals to use visual media and become their own directors. Thus, it was argued, they would be able to better understand traditional visual media and would not continue to powerlessly live under their spell. Also, it would empower them by allowing their own content to be screened. With the advent of the internet, many of the above beliefs were realised. And, consequently, Public Access Television underwent a crisis, as its target audience migrated to online media, such as YouTube and others. However, its training remit is still valid today and, perhaps, more so than ever before as much more visual material is pushed onto viewers. Once stations realize the potential of the internet to its fullest (e.g. the need for training and the availability of unlimited channels), they stand a good chance to once again become an important player in video education and local engagement.

Keywords: Public Access Television, media conversion, media training, local activism

I. Introduction

In a 2008 article, Geert Lovink decried today's culture of 'googlization' ruling the life of many people (Lovink, 2008). According to Lovink, such selective searching is detrimental to the cognitive allroundedness he locates in earlier generations. One important aspect in the medial formation of this generation of general common knowledge was, inter alia, the broadcasting power of television. As a consequence, in 1974, three times as many Americans trusted their television news than do today (ibid.). This allroundedness of the TV programme has been a thing of the past for some time though. But despite the fact that television has continued to change rapidly, it has nevertheless been able to create new business models, new

viewer niches and new media realities. In recent times, this change is mostly due to the fact that TV has a new formidable foe, the Internet. According to a recent study, in 2009 German youths watched only three minutes a day more TV than they interacted with the internet (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2009).

These facts the raise important questions regarding the education youths receive to prepare them for the digital (television) life, how their self realization will be shaped by new media and how certain TV applications, such as Public Access (PAC) and Open Channels (OC) will further impact on them. Lastly, these new manifestations also require a rethinking on the part of television theory. Accordingly, TV has begun to react to the threat of the Internet. New internet based services such as Hulu allow for watching TV series episodes anytime and Apple's iTunes store is happily selling such episodes to willing customers. Add to that all the other available legal, semi-legal and illegal download sites for such data on the internet, and it becomes clear that, at least when it comes to dissemination, today's TV does not have all that much in common with TV 30 years ago.

However, this commercial and entertainment side of TV is not all there was nor is. Especially in Western European countries, public TV has always also been charged with education purposes and pedagogy, a fact which has largely been forgotten during the recent commercialisation drives of the medium. One particular niche of programming which has taken this need for TV pedagogy seriously, is the above mentioned Public Access or Open Channels broadcasting. Such channels arose in contrast to the large networks, no matter if they were commercial or public (Engelman, 1990). This niche brought local and educative content to the fore, aiming to narrowcast rather than broadcast. And as will become evident below, the Internet has profited from this older technology at least *theoretically*, if not practically.

The arrival of these OCs goes back to the 1970s. One important contributing factor to their arrival was the introduction of satellite and cable TV in the late 1970s and early 1980s in most parts of Europe. The proliferation of stations and programmes, plus the different goals commercial television had set for itself, changed televisual landscapes forever. One interesting side effect of this was that a number of governments requested from commercial broadcasters an important feature for their consent to commercial TV: the introduction of Public Access TV, a genre explicitly created to allow 'normal' citizens more access to broadcasting tools - Citizen TV. These were mostly local channels produced for and by local people. In Germany alone, over 80 of them went on the air, but they could also be found, in one guise or another, in other European countries, such as Luxemburg, Denmark, Austria, Belgium, but also in Australia, the US, South Korea, Brazil and Fiji (cf. Rennie, 2008). Today, in Germany there exist 63 Open Channels in most federal states, with the exception of Saxony, Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg. Another German federal state, the Saarland, ceased its Open Channels in 2003 due to budgetary constraints and lack of political support.

These channels served a very specific purpose: not only did they provide a forum for microlocal information; they also allowed normal TV consumers to become producers of broadcasting material. Furthermore, due to their specific rules and regulations, many became laboratories for civil action. Theoretically, these changes also instilled a large part of performativity instead of mere representation into an erstwhile one-way medium. This performativity would allow local citizen to present their material (and themselves) to, in a first instance, local viewing communities via cable or terrestrial broadcasting and then even broader and potentially global audiences via the internet.

The inception of these channels then was largely legitimated by sociological discourse of the time, and there in particular that of the Frankfurt School with its emphasis on 'authentic' self formation, self realisation and self maintenance. Going beyond that, they were also early

electronic challengers of the public/private bifurcation when it came to broadcasting, an issue easily forgotten in times of 'reality' TV. These channels have since influenced the democratised and democratising way in which the internet is being used, having pioneered formats that would later mutate into chat rooms or blogs.

In the following, I will analyze how some of these stations have dealt with the challenge of the Internet. In 2000 I undertook a comparative study of two such channels, ROK TV Rostock Germany and Manhattan Neighborhood Network New York (MNN), and analysed their self-understanding and programming structure and philosophy. At the time, much of it was still dependant on older media theories (Briel, 2005). In 2010 I revisited these stations and discussed especially their relation to the internet. It became clear that most of their understanding had now shifted to media theories related to distributed identities and networks (cf. Briel, 2012). Some of their earlier practices had vanished, some converged and other formats had been successfully maintained (cf. Busse, 2010).

In a final step I will suggest ways in which TV and Internet as fragmented systems can learn from these stations and how this new media situation can be embedded in a (politically) revolutionary theory of distributed agency.

II. Open Channels

The development of a two-way, participatory public media culture is not a new phenomenon, nor is it restricted to TV. Grassroots media, or media from below, have been around for quite some time, with alternative print media becoming a mass phenomenon perhaps as early as the 1960s with the popularisation of underground magazines (Cf. Hoofacker 2009, Olson n.d.). This development also took hold of the airwaves, with 'pirate' radio stations springing up, such as *Radio Caroline* broadcasting from off-shore locations to Britain. And when looking at the receivers' side one might even go back as far as 1750 and the beginning of the newspaper era, as was suggested by Anders Ekström (Ekström 2010). With electronic media, however, entrance barriers to participation were higher and two-way-communication would not begin in earnest until the 1960s and 1970s.

In Germany, the history of Open Channels (*Offene Kanäle*) took shape in and can be traced back to the 1979 report of an expert group, entitled 'Rules for the Open Channels'. Open Channels were thus defined as "a forum for all kinds of audiovisual material, initiated (also produced) by rightful users who are responsible for its contents; those programmes are not bound by any user guidelines or limits except the ones mentioned below" (Kamp 1997, p.18; Spielhagen 1996).

The 1987 German Broadcasting Act (Rundfunkstaatsvertrag), amongst other issues, also specified the running of PACs. Their funding was to be provided by a percentage of the TV licensing fee, which lies somewhere between 1% and 2% of the overall fee and continues to be charged until today. Their existence is not written in stone, however, as they have to be re-licensed every five to seven years. As the above mentioned example of the Saarland shows, this means that it can also be switched off, depending on the political and financial situation.

Despite the existence of Public Access Channels for over 40 years now, the idea of broadcasting as societal common property seems to have still not been anchored properly enough in people's minds. As Kamp reminds us, PACs were intended to fulfil a number of valuable pedagogical services: In an Open channel, people are enabled - without goal-oriented actions on the part of the organisers – to

-    become more tolerant or remain so in their relations with others

- become competent in regards to media and topics
- re-think their own views and formulate viewpoints on issues
- address the public with their views and issues in order to become politically active
- further develop their actions.'

<div align="right">(Kamp 1997, p.18)</div>

Despite these strong arguments, PACs usually only re-emerge in the public's mind when the issue of raising TV licensing fees is discussed. Due to the relatively low awareness and take-up of PAC production and dissemination services in the general public, its services recurrently come under scrutiny by the public eye and especially conservative media question the whole package. As if this wasn't enough, they then also have to go through rigorous re-licensing procedures. Despite such counter pressures, these channels are continuing to strengthen and intensify their TV media work.

Comparing programming structures of Rostock's ROK-TV's ten years ago with today, it becomes apparent that broadcasting has been extended from 2.5 to up to 5 hours daily, with reruns broadcast three times a day. This is still far from a full programme, but time slots and programmes have been stabilised and attract many more viewers than before.

ROK-TV broadcasts daily, with new content screened on Tuesdays from 18.00 to 20.30, Wednesdays from 18.00 to 23.30 and on Thursday from 18.00 to 21.30. On the other days, only reruns are broadcast. Typical broadcasting content consists of music shows (the largest content chunk, aired on Wednesdays), news about film festivals, international fairy tales, interviews with BMX riders, slots for foreigners and related issues, local festivals, travel reports and other user generated content. It also has a cooperation agreement with the Institute for New Media at the University of Rostock for co-productions.

Compared to the broadcasts of ROK-TV, Manhattan Neighbourhood Network seems much more like a complete and full broadcast station. It has four different channels, Spirit, Community, Lifestyle and Culture, and airs around the clock.

But it is also active in community media involvement and equipment rentals, the second leg of PACs. Between 2005 and 2009, the last year for which data was available, it has trained over 12,000 people and has achieved an impressive record of studio and camcorder rental time and editing effected (Manhattan Neighborhood Network 2012).

In 2011, MNN moved to a larger, more modern facility. Today, its web pages are professionally attended to, with much more content available and cross-overs with their internet pages and YouTube channels.

In comparison then, it becomes clear that MNN has several advantages over ROK-TV: it has the more prominent location, its public acceptance is higher, it is staunchly multilingual and its funding is generally more generous, due to its funding structure. In operation since 1992, it is funded by Time Warner Cable and the RNC Corporation in a franchise agreement with the City of New York. Its annual revenues are in the lower double digit millions figure (thus significantly higher than ROK's) and it employs a larger number of staff, approximately 50 to 99. ROK is by far the smaller organisation, but a typical one for a German Open Channel. It also offers similar services and training to the public, and both of them have to deal with re-licensing issues. ROK TV is overseen more tightly and is a public broadcasting station governed by the German state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, whereas MNN is less strictly governed, as it is more autonomous vis-à-vis governmental influence.

These two stations are then typical for two distinct models of Public Access Television: the German (and in many ways perhaps also the European model) is managed by governmental broadcasting regulations and sees itself mostly as a media education institution. MNN is a much larger organisation and holds a special place within the US PAC mediascape, and it

sees itself more as an entertainment station and offers a large segment of its broadcasts in non-English languages. ROK's funding structure is broadly in line with most other German open channels, , whereas MNN is more dependent on generous private money but also the insecurity and fluctuating funding that comes with that. On the other hand, it is able to react more quickly to market changes and has much less red tape to deal with. Both of them are achieving significant market share in media training, but MNN is ahead of ROK when it comes to audience figures.

Despite the levelling power of the internet, we are thus still a long way from global mediascapes and this is perhaps for the better as this allows competing systems to develop new best practices. In general, the most pronounced differences still exist between an American, commerce driven public access mediascape and a European, more government-driven one. Both systems have their advantages and disadvantages. The American model has to source its funding from foundations such as the MacArthur Foundation and the public and is thus more flexible than the European one, but any Europeans (and, presumably, a large chunk of the American audience as well) having had to sit through stations' fund drives can attest to the annoying effect this has. Conspiracy theorist might even hold that this is an intended effect put in place by commercial media and conservative governments. But its European counterpart also has its work cut out for itself. It has to convince governments of changing political colours of the necessity to continue media education as a state funded undertaking, a laborious and drawn-out process. In either case, both of them have to somehow harmonise their utopian media ideals with the harsh realities of funding scarcity.

III. Questioning Community Media Players regarding Distributed Cognition

When discussing changes within public access broadcasting, it pays to speak to major players in the field. In the following I will summarise three interviews with such media activists about what has been called 'distributed cognition' (Reilly 2010) and then analyse what their responses mean for the field of TV studies.

In an interview on 25 June 2009, Bettina Pinske (Pinske 2009), then outgoing MD of ROK TV, stated that while it was true that ten years ago most of the Open Channel stations in Germany as elsewhere were worried about competition from the Internet, this was no longer the case today; the internet has become a complement to ROK and allowed it to actually increase its reach globally and attract new viewers. In many ways, it provides a platform for the anchoring of programmes and activities, such as its popular music programmes. Nowadays this function has been taken over perfectly by the Internet. And since this programme segment especially appeals to younger viewers, it becomes clear that cognition here is achieved between the media and not on one single platform. Lastly, for the last ten years, financing has remained solid, as ROK has become a stable agent in the state's mediascape. In this sense the symbiosis between Open Channel and Internet has been a fruitful one.

Other officials from OCs echo these remarks. In an interview conducted during the *viducate* workshop on 1 October 2010 in Berlin, Jürgen Linke, Managing Director of the Bundesverband Offene Kanäle e. V. (Federal Association of Open Channels), largely confirmed Pinske's views. He stressed that today's young request easy access to media no matter which media they were. Oftentimes this is still not offered by Open Channels, as there is a certain element of bureaucracy involved, due to the fact that they are public institutions. This Linke considers one of the main barriers for OCs to recruit the next generation of content providers and users. When compared to the easy to use software and distribution channels offered on the internet, many of the Open Channels require much more formal

training and face-to-face interaction, something young people might not want to spend their time on.

Linke also confirmed that the early use of internet technology by Open Channels consisted in making it a public relations tool rather than using its interactive features. It was used to quickly disperse information about OCs to wider and younger audiences, but not for programming or implementing new two-way communication strategies. This came only much later and it continues to be one of the main challenges for OCs. According to Linke, it is a matter of survival for OCs to (re-)define their role in the digital age and master the skills to successfully compete for user numbers and platform providing.

This mastery would not infringe on other virtues of OCs, such as their central media pedagogy and skills programmes. What it does mean for those areas, though, is that they need to be updated to be compatible with new forms of usage and platforms. Thus, OC Berlin offers workshops on shooting mobile phone video clips, a strategy which allows both the broadening of the viewer base, but also the involvement of it.

But Linke also sees other dangers coming from within the network of OCs in Germany. Fact is, for instance, that the large number of Germany-based migrants engaged in OCs before has dwindled recently, as they have begun choosing easier options such as the internet when interacting with peers. Discrete circles of digital community engagement have taken over from the broader, more inclusive aims of OCs, leaving the latter bereft of a diversity that had always been constitutive for their own self-understanding and the goal of strong minority inclusion.

One other voice should be heard here, this time from the USA. In a recent interview (conducted 18 October 2010 in Nicosia, Cyprus), John Higgins (Higgins, 2010), a former board member of the San Francisco Community TV Corporation (SFCTC), stated that his entrance into community TV came with reading the book *Guerrilla Television* in the 1970s (personal discussion with author, October 2010, Nicosia). As a result, he has worked at Community TV stations in Ohio and California.

While internet technology and philosophy is critical for the success of community media, Higgins questions any unreflected celebration of technology as saviour of community media. He mentioned the 2007 Benton Foundation report on Community media, which concluded from the gathered evidence that local media commitment was a much stronger factor in the success of local media than their celebration of newer and better technology (Benton Foundation 2012).

For the future, Higgins predicts a continued growth rate of community media, taking place, however, under the threat of the changing of the institutional framework under which Community TV is working in the USA. This has to do with the fact that cable and satellite operators met with quite good success in forcing local government to diminish the former's responsibility to community media. And this will force community media to painfully search for local sponsors, much more so than in the past. And it is not only the sponsors PACs have to worry about. This attack makes it clear that old media continue to fight upstart and ideologically inconvenient media organisations and the fact that such stations are having an impact on mediascapes.

Already in 2008, Bronx Congressman Serrano defended the right of Public, Educational and Governmental stations (PEG) to exist and their need for government protection (McCausland 2008). And thus, while PAC organizations have done the sensible thing and shifted their philosophical stances from a worried distrust to an enthusiastic embrace of new media, their services for media literacy are needed today even more so than before. And indeed, this is what many provide, as the example of Manhattan Neighborhood Network demonstrates.

Having successfully concluded a merger with internet technology and created new administrative and creative venues and operations does not mean that the battle has been won.

Many battles remain to be fought. For one, and perhaps one of the most serious ones, is the fact that despite the acceptance of new media by Public Access, there still remains a gap between its usage and its presentation. An overwhelming number of portal pages of PACs are fraught with bad design, dead links and little evidence of understanding of the importance of such portals. Young users' main criteria for accessing material on the web is its aesthetic presentation (Thorlacius 2004).

Here a technological as well as a philosophical distance is evident between the creators/managers of PACs and their intended audience of today. Many of the former still grew up with very bad copying machines and other 'Inferior' technology. This will not do today. For better or for worse, aesthetics has become part of the message and PACs would do well to remember that. They are involved in a selling process and thus need to take into consideration the needs of their consumers. This is one area where not much has changed over the last ten years. Other areas have improved remarkably; taking the web pages of MNN (mnn.org) for example, interfaces have become better, more material is available for downloading, the four available channels have been differentiated more and taken on separate identities, the offerings in Spanish have increased and the Latina/o community is actively approached, select content is available on YouTube and all MNN channels are available as live streams. But, and perhaps more importantly, activism is also not neglected. Applications for government media grants and Tactical Tool kits are addressed and producers are invited to avail themselves of them. Here a bit of *Realpolitik* is visible. MNN does not adhere to the 'prosumer' idea of say, a Henry Jenkins, but it is very much aware of the fact that producers have different needs from users. The difference between the computer as a lean forward medium and the TV as a lean backwards medium is still very much evident here. And, judging by experience, perhaps rightly so. This is not to say that a user cannot become a producer; after all, this is the very thought that gave rise to community media. But this is not an automatic process. As the above quoted 2009 German study showed, only 5% of youths create sound files, 3% of them write weblogs, 2% write in online encyclopaedias and only 1% upload videos. Compare this to 69% who write instant text messages, 69% who are part of online communities and 58% who listen to music online (Dworschak 2010, p.123), and the picture becomes clear: While they may not recognize the internet per se as a distinct medium their usage is exactly that: they use the web as a distribution channel but do not create multimedia content for it.

The above distinction is important. Most members of online communities of course produce written content and also upload the occasional picture. But many, if not most of them are not aware of any philosophical implications associated with these activities. For those they would have to rely on training in the same way as previous generations were dependant on McLuhan for television, Brecht for radio or Weber for newspapers.

What youths are very good at is platform hopping, the switching of platforms depending on their location and need (e.g. INCLUSO − Social Software for the Social Inclusion of Marginalised Youngsters, n.d.) . And this is also something PAC stations have realized over the last years and therefore they follow their users across platforms and offer their wares in transmedial forms. This will be discussed further below.

During the interviews, all three media professionals/activists stressed very important points in relation to the changing public access mediascape. First and foremost, it becomes clear that the internet has become an ally in many ways. These include timetabling, technological and personnel issues. Public Access allows for flat hierarchies and an optimum of user production via broadcasting channels. Pinske underscores the need for the professionalization of broadcasting structures. This indeed is an important factor to retain audiences and an advantage point for public access vis-a-vis the internet offerings which are still far removed

from achieving such iterative structures. Linke puts his emphasis on the missed interactivity which is creating large problems for public access. Those who want easy access to production and dissemination tools have already opted for internet sites and it will be an uphill battle to get them back.

Another connected issue is that, typically, many community stations were founded by activists, who had a strong sense of community commitment, usually coupled with progressive and leftist politics. For them, activism had been the prime impetus to enter citizen media in the first place. These founding activists are getting on in age, and today there seems to happen a changing of the guard within community stations and organisations. This is the case on both sides of the Atlantic. Younger staff are willing and more able to tap into the new media market and are actively propagating convergence with the internet.

Lastly, all three deny any overwhelming impact of technology on the public access framework and express their conviction that public access is robust enough to continue even in the digital age. In the light of Public Access's own genesis this strikes one as a problematic viewpoint. It was exactly the lowering of price barriers that first of all made public access possible. While it is very true that it needed agency, theoretical and practical, to avail oneself of TV technologies in the 1960s and 70s, but it also needed such technological TV breakthroughs as satellite and cable TV. And, especially, when the rapid technological changes are considered that the internet has brought about in visual broadcasting, to underestimate theses technologies seems hazardous. This is particularly the case when one analyses the change of theory associated with and prompted by the advent of these new technologies.

IV. TRANSMEDIA THEORY, PARTICPATORY CULTURE AND DISTRIBUTED AGENCY

This technological digital change has not only affected public access, it has also had a large impact on the TV media sector as a whole. Media theory has to account for this change. This does not necessarily involve the re-invention of the media wheel as it were, but rather using parts of older undervalued theory and bringing them to bear upon the changed medial situation of today. One of those is the participatory culture theory, as first developed already in the 1950s and 60s by such media philosophers as McLuhan, Marcuse and Debord. It provides us with many of the tools to approach and analyse the new media situation. It could even be stated that it needed the new media in order to come wholly into its own.

Case in point is today's transmedial practice. Transmedia, oftentimes in association with storytelling can be defined as the usage of multiple media to tell disparate pieces of a single cohesive narrative (cf. Phillips 2010). In 2009, William Uricchio, described *transmedia* as a new "lens" to be used to make sense of our multifarious environments. This lens can be directed backwards but also forwards into the future (Lim 2009). This typically includes different content on the internet, in broadcasts and in documents, all related to an overarching master narrative. A very good example is the US TV series *Heroes*, which makes use of the internet, comics and TV to add a variety of depth to the overarching storyline. That transmedia is not only a fad, but has already had an impact on the media industry as a whole is proven by the fact that since 2010, Transmedia Producer is an officially recognized US job description by the Producers Guild of America.

There exists the belief that the new generation of digital natives is much more able to understand and use new media, and especially the internet, for all issues of life (cf. Media activism, 2012, Media Culture, 2012; Apperley 2007). This is at least somewhat erroneous.

As recent studies have shown (cf. Schmidt 2009, Hargittai 2008), while youths are very able to approach internet media without fear or worries, when it comes to serious research, they are challenged, perhaps even more so than previous generations who had spent more time searching for and appreciating scarce resources. And this is not just true for research; in general consumers of web content by far outnumber producers of web content. The above cited large scale German study also evidences that youths still by far prefer face to face over internet meetings. They also do not speak of the internet per se, but rather of applications such as FaceBook or Google, whereas older generations still see the internet as a monolithic medium. So in many ways, the young generation does not perceive media differentiations as strongly as older generations did. The historic battles between newspapers and radio, or radio and TV, and their ideological subtexts (i.e. written text vs. the spoken word, the spoken word vs. visualisation, etc.) do not seem to bother them when it comes to their media consumption. Transmedial content is received as any other, indeed welcomed and subordinated to their individual and group needs.

And here Henry Jenkins and his research need to be addressed a bit more in detail. Arguably, Jenkins is one of the most vocal promoters of Citizen Media when it comes to participatory media in general. With his work at MIT, and since 2009 at USC, he has decidedly helped to shape academic discourse on digital media. In 2007 he published *Convergence Media*, still one of the most read texts on the convergence of old and new media. Here, especially its last chapter, 'Democratizing Television? The Politics of Participation', is of interest.

In this text, Jenkins claims that convergence of media is a paradigm shift which moves content from being medium-specific to content that "flows across multiple media channels, towards the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture." (2007, p.243).

One global example he cites for such a venture is the TV Channel Current, currently broadcasting in the USA, Ireland and Italy. It is a platform for video watching, but also for production. Financially stable and having the support of the likes of Al Gore, it aims at introducing web-like content and sociability to and on TV.

For Jenkins, media consumption would then move from an individualised to a collective activity. "Rather than talking about personal media, perhaps we should be talking about communal media – media that become part of our lives as members of communities, whether experienced face-to-face at the most local level or over the Net. (2007, p.245). Against those critics whom he labels as "critical pessimists" (Chomsky et al.), he calls himself a "critical utopian" who focuses on empowerment rather than victimization. And then he states: "one focuses on what we are doing with media [critical utopians], and the other on what media is doing to us [critical pessimists]." (2007, p.247)

Here, Jenkins makes valuable points also relating to community media. Indeed, he uses community media as a blueprint for the new (commercial) media landscape. At first glance, this seems a vindication for such media. But what he overlooks is the fact that this larger commercial system is not driven by activism, as community TV is; the commercialisation inherent in the media system at large will allow for activist stances, but activities will not automatically veer in the direction of political activism. One might fear that it will lead to mere "consumerist activism". And even if the impetus is on media understanding, participation in media events such as popular casting shows will certainly increase one's knowledge of the workings of TV stations, the advertising system and audience control. What is to be questioned, though, is whether such activities lead to a heightened understanding of the systemic and political repercussions such a system has. Here Higgins' above quoted category of the 'narcissist' community TV star finds entrance again, with strong overtones of the Benjaminian chastisement of the star system in Hollywood in his *Art in the Age of*

Mechanical Reproduction. If this 'communalisation' of PACs and cyberspace alike is left to market forces alone, then, as a benign as it may sound, it will not be able to deliver the kind of activism engendered by present community media. And here Jenkins' provocative question, "Is ideological and aesthetic purity really more valuable than transforming our culture?" (2007, p.249) does not go far enough. It is exactly those community media practices which should shape ideological and aesthetic judgements. Purity has not really been an issue, but community is. And a community which is sensitised to media even more so. Subjecting any ideological and aesthetic judgements merely to market forces has so far had mixed results at best. With the advent of mass media production facilities, this verdict was to cover production as well. Adhocracies and fandom are necessary elements for thriving cultures, but reflective practices still need to be learned. And here community media must be in the forefront, professional and self-reflexive at the same time. And, indeed, Jenkins further remarks on the necessity of teaching media literacy turn his argument into this direction.

Problems do arise when media are viewed mostly from a commercial aspect. Case in point is entertainment4 where transmedia is mostly made fruitful for commercial media professionals. Jenkins' is largely an American perspective which does not cover the European situation unless properly localized. Already from its inception, American TV history has a very different background than European TV history. American TV was solidly built on commercial companies, whereas in Europe TV developed out of state regulatory agencies, mostly postal offices. This governmental regulatory framework remained by and large intact throughout the last 90 years, with commercial TV playing a much smaller role than in the US. And therefore TV remains much more politicized in Europe. The fact that in Germany the conservatively ruled federal states did not allow public access to be established clearly demonstrates that they took a conservative standpoint regarding broadcasting media, thus disclosing a certain fear of these media if they were handed over to the masses. In retrospect, this fear was wholly unfounded, as the 'masses' never availed themselves of these broadcasting means for the first time, which also was a shock, but this time for the leftists.

Other media philosophies highlight the fact that new media change the makeup of our cognitive processes. This is true for the way media influence our own identity formation, but also includes acts of cognition via and in media themselves. Thus, Erin Reilly speaks of 'Distributed Cognition" and defines it the following way: "We define distributed cognition as the ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities. [The resulting] Collective intelligence focuses on the ability of humans working together and is a complementary skill to the new media literacy, distributed cognition which can push our notion of pooling knowledge and expanding our capacity to include not just humans but the tools we use in sharing and expanding our knowledge." (2010) Distributed cognition is therefore one of the new skills individuals have to acquire in order to survive in medatized times. And there are quite a number of other ones which require attention as well. In the text *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century,* the author defines the areas of intervention needed to produce media sensitised active citizens.

The long list is a call to arms for Community TV and media. The areas in which media participation training is necessary include play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, transmedia navigation, networking, negotiation and visualization (Jenkins et all n.d.)

Here I would argue that this is exactly the point of intervention for public access channels. They are able to use philosophies tuned during the absolute reign of TV and broaden their educational approach to new media. This is today more necessary than ever.

The chance Public Access TV has because of convergence is that it allows for transgression between platforms. This will also change content flow. It is changing from a structured top

down model (i.e. producer → aggregator → station → viewer) to a 2-way model in which aggregators receive feedback and data from stations/communities and viewers:
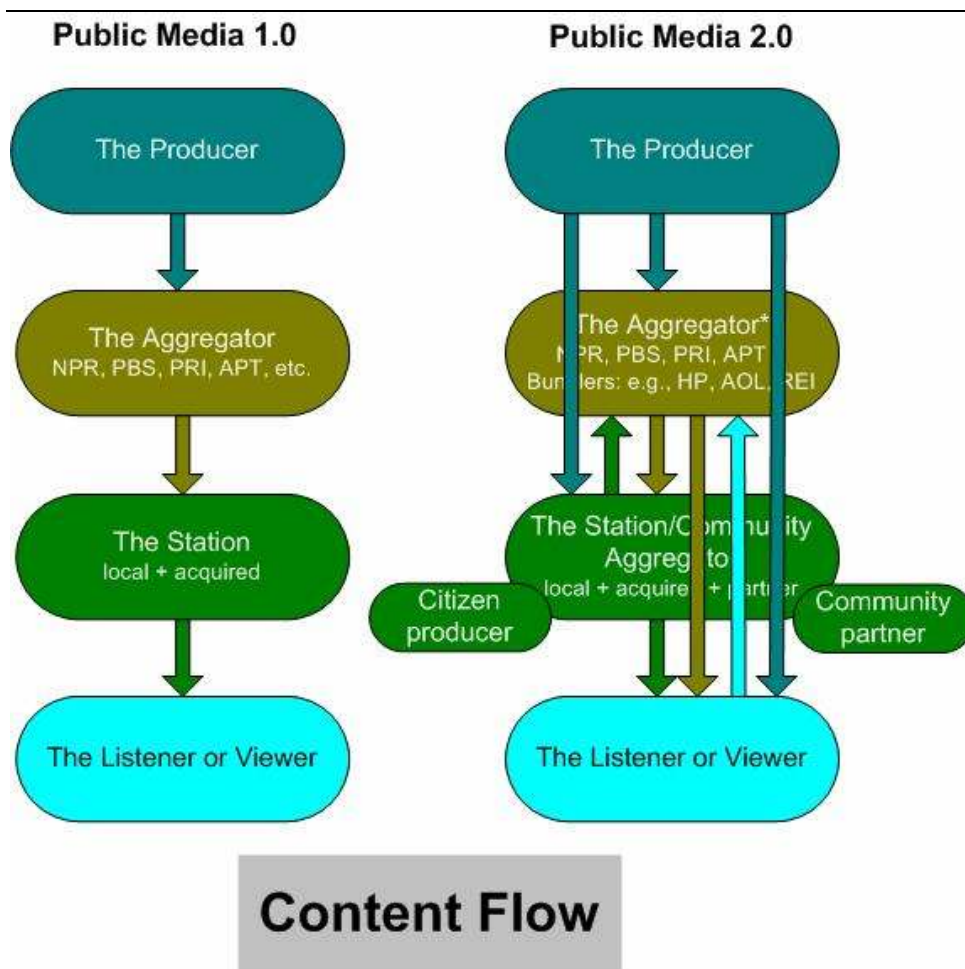
(Content Flow, n.d.)

Already Jenkins made clear that a distinction should be drawn between "interactivity," which he sees as a technological property, and "participation," which he considers to be a social and cultural response. He also observed that much of the viral content online right now has emerged from partnerships of new media makers and traditional non-profit organizations. "There is a new opportunity for alliances," he said. But he cautioned that non-profits and public broadcasters also need to be aware of ethical issues such as the debate about free labor—"not just in terms of uncompensated labor but the sense of consumer-driven content being exploited." (ibid.)

Additionally, public media makers need to consider the "participation gap." He notes that participation requires time and specific competencies that are not available to everyone. He also cautioned that diverse groups of people must feel empowered to participate. "As exciting as it might seem to funnel content and have a DIY ethos, we still have a ways to go before we achieve the goals of diversity," he said. (ibid)

Already during the 2008 Beyond Broadcasting Conference at the American University a session entitled 'Mapping the Money' stressed the fact that Public Broadcasting must also avail itself of commercial media. Thus, in 2008 PBS began to make some of its broadcasting

available on Hulu, a move not applauded BY all, as it was seen as a sell-out of public broadcasting by some. References in blogs would also be helpful to break into online viewership, as would social networks. The average age of a PBS viewer is 46. Ernest J. Wilson from the University of Southern California stated:

"As we think about business models, I want to reintroduce the notion of why we care about this—representation, openness, freedom, democracy….If you don't get this right pretty soon, the quality of democracy will decline and stagnate...and it will be our fault….We are way behind the curve in public service media in adjusting to what is taking place on new digital platforms. It is frustrating and ridiculous." (Schuler and Clark 2008)

At the same conference, Larry Irving pointed out another important change: 'Appointment television is dead. You carry it with you. You go where you want to go. You watch it when you want to watch it.' As an example, he cited Slingbox, a mobile device to watch DirecTV when traveling (Schuler and Clark 2008). The new mobility of TV would then add to the death of its programming schedule, as broadcasts would become both time and locale indifferent.

V. Conclusion

Remembering the beginning of Public Access Television, it is good to note that much of it had been dependent on grassroots movements, on media activism. At least in Europe, these movements were then taken under the wing of mostly progressive governments and institutionalised. Many of them have existed for well over 20 years by now and while funding continues to be precarious, they have edged out a niche for themselves. The incision of the internet, as scary as it was at its inception, has in the meantime become a mainstay for these channels and has enhanced their programming power immensely, e.g. with YouTube clips or whole segments of programming being available for downloads or streaming. The reason for this alliance is that the internet itself sprang from the ideological bedrock upon which these stations were founded and was thus bound to create a positive impact.

Something many segments of the public have not completely come to appreciate, though, is the second function of these stations, the media training they offer. And while their programming has perhaps become contingent in some aspects due to the larger offerings available on the Internet, it is this media training that makes these stations an invaluable asset today. It is their ability to sensitise the public to and teach media participation which gives them their added value today. Oftentimes, they already in the beginning had forged close ties with media and/or communication departments at local universities, as indeed ROK TV did, but, especially in the times of the internet, this participation needs to be addressed much earlier on. Many European countries have already adopted what used to be called media literacy programmes, but what are perhaps better called 'media participation programmes', for schools and other early education institutions. It is these that Open Channels need to target and to forge alliances with. In the often-touted information society, these channels are simply a *sine qua non* when it comes to citizen media education. Here perhaps also lies one way of alleviating their universal funding crisis. For this to happen, governments need to be convinced that these channels are a valuable instrument and a ready source to tackle media education tasks. Initiatives such as the digital storytelling initiative by Northern California Public Broadcasting (KQED Education 2010), the *Beyond Broadcasting* conferences (Schuler and Clark 2008), education course downloads for children and youth as made available by MNN, media on offer from the Independent Media Center, the *Waves of Change* Google map project or the European *Viducate* network, the last one partly funded by the EU, are best practices which bring out the best in Public Access cross-over into the internet domain.

As demonstrated above, the American and European models of Public access do not necessarily coincide. It is also for this reason of differing (and not only financial) bases that some of the practices by media academics and activists from one realm might not readily translate into the other. Case in point is Jenkins attempt to come perhaps too close to commercial media in its effort to secure public access. However, when it comes to participatory culture and the highlighting of the need of distributed agency, both models fulfil their remits and successfully attract a significant number of individuals willing to risk their own identities in a mediated environment. Both systems are not optimal and it might be that they need to take onboard lessons learned from other parts of the world, especially those where media activism does not just result in funding problems, but rather might be detrimental to one's life. In 2009, a record 68 journalists were killed worldwide (Nichols 2009). And it might be that media practices as resistance in such countries could remind Western media systems of the importance of such resistance (cf. *The global village cat*, or the *Alliance for Community Media*, which provide links to citizen media on a global scale).

Thus, while the public access stations were forerunners of the kind of media intervention which would bring the internet to its own, they now reap the latter's benefits by successfully applying its many channels. Over the last 15 years or so, Public Access has gone from being an ideological tool forged by (leftist) media activists against conservative governments to being a reservoir of media support and practices which help to participate in today's media societies, from competitor to co-creator of new media consciousnesses. Activism is needed as much today as it was 20 or 40 years ago and the structures and networks created of Open Channels go a long way towards the goal of a Popperian open society embedded in a post-modern media environment.

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