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There Is Life After State Cable Legislation Passes

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PEG Channels and Streaming Video Websites: The Dream Ticket

By Joseph Murphy

Stop me if you've heard this one ...

In an epic battle pitting the interests of individual citizens against the unchecked influence of large corporations, two heavyweights square off to be crowned as the people's choice. In one corner is a highly experienced public servant; battle hardened by controversy but with a long history of success. In the other corner is a young and exciting newcomer, widely proclaimed as an agent of change, with a shorter track record but unlimited potential. The former has an older base of loyal supporters built through hard campaigning at the local level; the latter is backed by a younger demographic mobilized in unprecedented numbers through the internet. While both contenders claim to be working toward the same goal, their respective supporters are having a difficult time accepting each other's candidate. The newcomers worry that the veteran might have too much baggage to succeed with a general audience. The "experience" constituency fears that any success by the newcomer would be the end of the line for a venerable institution.

While this introduction might read like a recap of the 2008 Democratic presidential primary, it is actually a summary of the debate surrounding video streaming PEG television content over the internet. In researching this article I was surprised by the degree to which supporters are polarizing the debate over PEG television vs. streaming video/VOD on the internet. Articles and blogs with titles like “Learning to Live without PEG Channels (and loving it)”¹, “Does Public Access TV Still Matter in the YouTube Age?”², and “Who Needs Public Access TV?”³ made it clear that everyone was not on the same page.

These articles and others like them raise the question of whether the internet could or should replace cable television as the primary vehicle for community media. This excerpt from the article, “Learning to Live without PEG Channels...” and a reader’s reply summarizes the core issues:

[From the article] *“I wonder if we might all be better off moving past gnashing our teeth over the demise of PEG channels and instead start focusing on the possibilities of, for lack of a better term, PEG 2.0 channels, which utilize the Internet to deliver content rather than the cable system”*

[Posted Reply] *“Would ‘a world without PEG channels really be so bad’ — for the cable operators? Heck no! They’ve been itching for decades to replace your local PEG lineup...”*

At a time when PEG channels are facing more threats than ever, the internet is emerging as a highly popular, low hassle functional alternative that has the potential of bringing a new, younger and potentially larger audience to

community media. As a result some feel compelled to frame the debate as a zero sum game. Buy why?

Why can’t we have it all: the benefit of experience and the excitement of change; a physical presence in the community and a virtual presence online; the enduring support of older viewers and the interactive involvement of new, younger enthusiasts; the power of television and the promise of the internet?

The answer is, we can have it all...and we should. Community media supporters need to unite on this issue and create a dream ticket where PEG television channels and a streaming video/VOD websites work as one to provide an alternative to the dominance of corporate media.

Toward that end, the following provides some suggestions for a path forward. To continue the political metaphor these may be considered the first planks in a party platform designed to strengthen the hand of broadcasters serving hyperlocal audiences against the dominance of big media.

Unite the Party

The first step in getting PEG TV supporters to embrace the internet, and vice-versa is some “straight talk” about deeply held concerns and conceits harbored by supporters of each technology. Specifically, PEG TV backers have to let go of the fear that internet success is a threat to television channels. Similarly, the streaming media/VOD constituency needs to be more realistic about the internet’s ability to fully replace television.

Viewed objectively, the main threat to PEG TV channels is not the internet but rather the billions of dollars in potential revenue associated with the new video franchising laws and the cable industry’s desire to

reclaim cable bandwidth. It’s a fact that cable companies and telcos try to position successful PEG websites as a reason for reclaiming television channels. But the truth is, with or without a functional alternative, industry pressure on PEG channels would be just as strong because of the money involved. So, rather than vilify the internet, PEG channel supporters should view streaming video/VOD as a way to generate additional public awareness and rally support to their cause. At a minimum the internet can provide a safety net for community media, but it should not be viewed the inevitable replacement as some streaming video/VOD advocates suggest.

The assumption that the web will ultimately replace the TV has no basis in history. Doomsday predictions that new media would make old ones obsolete have consistently been proven false. Since the turn of the last century, new media choices have been mostly complementary not supplementary. Radio did not replace concerts; movies did not replace plays; video rentals did not replace movies; and the internet has not replaced TV – far from it. By every meaningful measure including advertising dollars, viewing time and audience size, television still dwarfs the internet. TV has financial clout and social prestige that the internet can’t match. If it could, corporations would not be putting so much pressure on PEG channels.

Adopting a less fearful, more realistic view of each other’s medium is an important first step, but it is equally important to be sure that efforts to move PEG channel content to the web are successful.

Universal Coverage

Any number of do-it-yourself and self-provisioning solutions can support the mechanics of transferring PEG channel

¹ Learning to Live Without PEG Channels (and loving it); Geoff Daily (www.app-rising.com); 2007

² Does Public-Access TV Still Matter in the YouTube Age?, Citizen Media 8/8/07 (www.saveaccess.org)

³ Who Needs Public Access TV?, Post Gazette, 8/6/07 (www.saveaccess.org)

video content to a website, but then what? If the ultimate goal is to attract a larger audience there are many other issues that need to be addressed. To succeed the website needs to be universally accessible, robust, economical and easy to use.

At a minimum your website should have cross platform functionality supporting both MAC and PC users. There should be an option for setting up live streaming as well as VOD. Adobe Flash is the most popular cross-platform player with a 99% desktop penetration rate. It works on Windows, Mac and even Linux PCs. Flash streaming is better than Flash progressive for longer downloads, like town council meetings, and because it enables viewers to skip forward without downloading the entire file.

Your website needs to anticipate “surge demand.” Popular videos can cause a surge in download activity. It is critical to design a system that can accommodate short-duration, high-demand bursts consisting of hundreds of simultaneous viewers. Be wary of streaming media solutions that limit the number of viewers or your most successful program could become your downfall.

The cost of Internet video delivery is directly related to video quality (kilobits/second) and can be controlled by choosing different video encoding

bit rates for different programming types. You should have enough storage capacity for at least 250 hours (25GB) of content. Monthly bandwidth utilization reports are also important for monitoring costs.

Finally, adding an internet video capability should not mean you have to double your station’s workload. Look for a provider / partner that can automate your move to the web by integrating the Internet system into your existing workflow. In the long-run, a broadcast technology company with experience in both TV and internet systems can save you time, money and effort over single specialty vendors and do-it-yourself solutions.

Work across the Aisle

If PEG channels and video streaming websites are treated as separate entities, the benefits to community media are not being maximized. Moreover, you are playing right into the hands of those who would position one against the other.

For the dream ticket to succeed both vehicles need to reinforce each other through branding as well as technology.

For starters you want to be sure that the web address of your channel’s website includes the name of your town and that the “skin” on your player is customized with visuals that are similar to your channel. If possible,

both should be linked into your town’s website. Think about ways to promote your Internet video on the cable TV channel and promote the cable TV channel on the Internet.

By acknowledging the complementary nature of PEG Channels and streaming media/VOD websites, making the right technology choices and seamlessly integrating both media you can make the community media dream ticket a reality.

Instead of being forced to choose between experience and change, you can utilize both television and the internet as a way to change the experience. ■

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