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## ETHNIC EXPRESSION FROM THE GRASSROOTS: Visual Anthropology and Public Access Television

Jesikah Maria Ross, Davis Community Television, California

There exists in the United States a space in which a dynamic form of visual anthropology is occurring. This space is called public access television or community television<sup>1</sup>. It exists within the modern telecommunications system of cable television and it provides an open forum for community interaction and the free expression of ideas. The development, maintenance, and the use of public access television by people of diverse social classes and ideological orientations is a fascinating phenomenon that could itself be the topic for an entire book. This essay, however, will focus specifically on how ethnic minorities in the United States use community television to explore and express their cultural identity and viewpoints within a multicultural society. In this way, community television functions as an empowering form of visual anthropology. I will begin with an overview of the history, structure, and objectives of public access television in order to explain how, in response to the limits of commercial television, it has become a unique medium of cultural self-expression.

Public access television was established in the 1970s by activists who sought to insure media access for individuals in a society whose main systems of communication were rapidly becoming dominated by electronic media, in particular by commercial television. These activists saw commercial television as a monolithic industry that reduced vastly different cultural experiences into neatly packaged, homogenous programming. Commercial television was also perceived as a hegemonic mechanism of production and distribution that functioned to disenfranchise the majority of the viewers. Public access television evolved out of the U.S. model of democracy, a model based on the ideas of diversity of information, the free circulation of ideas, and community interaction and debate. Public access television activists fought, and continue to fight, to provide the means for individuals to create and transmit their own programs and perspectives. Their intention is to democratize the media. 'Access channels are now found in approximately 2,000 communities and cablecast an estimated 15,000 hours per week of original community programming. That is more than ABC, NBC, CBS, and PBS produce in a year combined' (Blau, 1992, p. 22).

Before I say more about the structure and objectives of community television, I want to define in more detail what it is that these activists are responding to: the limits of commercial television<sup>12</sup>. 'Those who control the stories of a culture, control the culture' (Church, 1987, p. 13). Television is the primary means of circulating stories in contemporary United States. And television is completely dominated by commercial networks. As a result, those who control the content of network television programming determine to a large extent the ideological, social, and cultural perspectives of the US public.

Commercial television is also a big business. Programming choices are governed by profit concerns, not by motives based on community interaction and development. Financial sponsors are interested in selling products and image. Consequently, mainstream television shows are designed mostly to arouse and please instead of inform and motivate. In addition, commercial television programming choices are largely determined by one privileged cultural group (White, mostly male, heterosexual) with its attendant biases and ideologies. These specific biases and

ideologies interface with the interests and concerns of the financial underwriters, the result being that only a minute percentage of programming addresses issues or concerns related to cultural minorities. The programs that do feature cultural difference often function to merely contain and control the public's vision of those differences.

Take for example *The Cosby Show*, which recently completed its run as one of the most popular primetime network programs. *The Cosby Show* focuses on the daily lives of a middle-class African American family. Yet in the day to day scenarios represented, topics culturally specific to African Americans like racism, the history of slavery, and afrocentricity rarely seem to arise. Nor do recent infamous incidents like the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill trials or the Los Angeles riots get openly discussed. The fact that the major cause of death for black men between 18-30 is homicide is not likely to surface in the sitcom dialogue. So although *The Cosby Show* features an African American family, it does not overtly address specific African American history, concerns or realities. It dissolves African American identity and cultural difference into a standard American identity.

Another example of how mainstream media erases cultural complexity was the coverage of the riots related to the Rodney King incident in Los Angeles, California. Although the recorded images clearly show Asians and Latinos involved in the rioting and looting, news commentators continuously focused their discussion on the African Americans, portraying the ordeal as some type of revenge against caucasians. The tremendous tension and violence between the Asian and African American community was hardly reported in comparison to the (relatively few) incidents of direct violence against caucasians which seemed to make the headlines hour after hour. What I mean to point out in these examples is that commercial television, through its editorial selection of program content, controls the diversity of information being circulated and thus perpetuates the marginalization and misrepresentation of peoples and events. That marginalization is reinforced by the mainstream media's failure to make available to cultural minorities who are able to produce television programs are often denied access to the mechanisms of distribution.

Finally, network television hampers community interaction by encouraging a passive relationship between the audience and the content of the television programming. Since commercial television programming is globalised and not localized - it broadcasts instead of narrowcasts<sup>3</sup> - there is little coverage of community issues or local culture. Consequently, viewers are distanced from both the content and actual creation of programming. The people, events, and stories represented by the networks usually have no direct relationship to the viewers' lives or daily experiences. Add to this the viewing population's lack of media literacy and the result is television programming that not only thwarts audience participation and debate, but also encourages the unquestioned acceptance of under or misrepresentations of cultural difference.

In contrast to commercial television, the structure of community television stimulates community interaction, allows for the free circulation of ideas, and encourages a diversity of information. The objective of public access television is to transform television audiences from mere consumers of predetermined programming to active participants in the creation and circulation of their own stories, cultural traditions, opinions, and visions.



'Access programming has revived the general store or community square, so to speak, by offering groups, clubs, organizations, and individuals an opportunity to be seen and heard through public access channels. For the first time in history an electronic forum can be used by us to express our needs and views with our neighbours in the comfort of their own homes. We can share information, teach techniques and skills, record historical events or entertain.' (Buske, 1985, p. 10)

Since community television is non-profit and hence not governed by commercial concerns, it offers an open forum for unmediated expression. Community television promotes cultural diversity and aesthetic experimentation. Above all, it invests participants with the authority to communicate their ideas based on their own direct experiences. Instead of having reporters imported into South Central Los Angeles to cover the riots in a conventional news format, for instance, people from the South Central community can be their own experts and make their own reports to cablecast on the community television channel, as witnessed in *Hand's On the Verdict* and *The Nation Erupts* produced by Not Channel Zero<sup>4</sup>. Or instead of watching *The Cosby Show*, African Americans can make and televise dramas which creatively feature their cultural heroes and cultural debates. Producer Sam McPherson in Dekalb, Georgia does this in his weekly half-hour series *InnerVisions*. One of his programs, for example, includes a community produced children's play featuring a scripted debate between Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr and Marcus Garvey, a 'gospelmentary' focusing on the early preachings of Ida Wells, and local African American dance instructors discussing how the issues of identity, self-esteem and heritage become part of their dance courses.

In public access television, the free circulation of ideas is facilitated by equipment and facility use that is either free or extremely inexpensive. Moreover, most community television stations provide technical training and production assistance. Because community television stations exert no editorial control, public access television producers can use their technical skills to express their views in the visual or the verbal manner of their choice. Distribution of producer's programs on the public access cable channel is guaranteed as long as the work is non-commercial. There are no limits on program length, content, objectives, or production quality.

Training local individuals in television production inspires community interaction, since local producers tend to create programming that focuses on local issues and events and regional culture. Since public access television facilities are available to people from all walks of life, community television programs often reflect the rich diversity of people and opinions that coexist within communities. As a result, audiences are able to see programs featuring their neighbours and neighbourhoods, discussions of issues and ideas that directly affect them, and the perspectives of other members of their community. 'Public Access television channels can help us meet our neighbours, explore our communities and address issues and areas of local concern in a totally new fashion' (Buske, 1985, p. 10). From city council debates to teenagers talking about the violence happening in their neighbourhood; from ethnic groups' news reports to the grievances of local industry workers, community television provides an outlet for free expression which exposes audiences to a wide variety of viewpoints. Such exposure stimulates community dialogue.

Because of its structure and objectives, community television, enables, cultural minority, to do many of the things traditionally associated with visual anthropology, such as document and preserve customs, communicate values through storytelling, and explore cultural identity and experience. In fact, many ethnic groups are responding to the marginalization and misrepresentation of their cultural experience by using the tools of television to address their issues, share their stories and traditions, and represent their lifestyles. From studio to on-location shoots, these groups are recording their customs, expressing their values, and investigating their multicultural identity. What follows are examples of this innovative form of visual anthropology.

The *Last Kwaayamii* (Lluna Plunket; San Diego, California) profiles 90 year old Tom Lucus, the last member of the Kwaayamii tribe which once inhabited the southern region of California. In this oral history program, Lucus details the disintegration of his tribe and homeland. In *Indigenous People and the Land* (Pele Defense Fund, Hawaii) A Hawaiian medicine man and a Hula dance instructor discuss the heritage transmitted through the teachings and show how the desecration of the rainforest, caused by the building of geothermal plants, is destroying their traditional lifestyle. *Street Art* (Ben Gutierrez; Long Beach, California) explains the different forms and functions of graffiti and confronts the negative typecasting of this urban communication/art. 'Most people think of graffiti as a visual pollution or just a bunch of hoodlums with spray paint destroying the city. The thing that they don't understand is that it happens to be an important cultural expression' (Gutierrez, 1992).

In *Speaking Out* (Stephanie Heyl; St. Louis, Missouri) a Native American woman sits on a kitchen counter, directly faces the camera in a medium shot, and speaks about cultural repression. 'Censorship of people of colour is insidious and all encompassing. It enters into the professional and the personal and the emotional spheres of one's life. To combat this the voice is a powerful weapon. It can slip through the cracks and give body to the story of survival' (Heyl, 1992). *Air Your Concern* (MATA; Milwaukee, Wisconsin) is a regular, live phone-in program which gives the local African American community the opportunity to broadcast their issues and concerns. *Oriental Express* (Richard Reichel; Palm Harbor, Florida), on the other hand, highlights local Asian American events and traditions. In the segment 'Japanese Calligraphy', for example, one of the few practitioners of an ancient form of calligraphy demonstrates and discusses the symbols and instruments used in this traditional form of writing.

'Its very important that we know our history and that we empower ourselves through knowledge of our literature, of our culture, of our song, of our traditions, and of our political movements' (Diyanini, 1992), states an Asian American student activist in *Asian American Journal* (Sheryl Narahara; Davis, California), a program dedicated to celebrating Asian American Ethnicity. *We Are Hablando* (Raul Ferrera-Balanquet; Iowa City, Iowa) focuses on the sense of split identity caused by being bicultural in the United States. In this short, intimate interview, a young Mexican American male voices his experience of straddling two cultures:

I had to try to express myself and my home life, which was my more Mexican side of my culture, in terms of English and American values. And it became a struggle just to learn how to find out and express that part of myself first of all, and second of all once I found the means of expression, I found I couldn't always express in certain



groups of friends certain views that I hold from a cultural perspective. (Deep Dish Television Network, 1992)

All of these examples of public access programs, most of which feature low resolution, shaky camera-work, uneven editing, and non-standard English, are unlikely to be broadcast on commercial television. Community television then functions as an alternative media forum. Its infrastructure gives cultural minorities access to the tools and technology of modern communication systems to speak their truths, address their issues, preserve their heritage, and represent themselves in their own visual and verbal languages.

Traditionally, anthropology is a field dedicated to creating experts on specific cultural groups. These experts are professionally trained to research and theorize about the histories of particular cultures. Generally, ethnographic film-makers are also professionally trained; instead of writing about cultural groups they make films about them. Public access television, on the other hand, promotes the goal of being your own expert. It encourages the public to take the media into their own hands, to become an authority on their own cultural experiences. In addition, community television staff don't play the role of the expert. Nor do they act as advocates on behalf of the minorities or as mediators of their issues. Community television staff function as facilitators; they provide training, production assistance, equipment, and facilities but do not direct, control, or comment on producer's programs.

Disenfranchised from commercial television, ethnic groups are able to create community television programming on their own terms. They can go into their communities, their kitchens, living rooms, backyards, classrooms and record and cablecast their own version of their multicultural experiences. They have a space in which to directly communicate about or comment on their cultural reality.

Peering into cultural experiences through the eyes of insiders is nothing new to visual anthropology. But it is unique when these insiders are self-motivated, not trained and prodded by anthropologists seeking 'more genuine' data for a case study. It is unique when these insiders are empowered to transmit messages for and about their community, instead of lead by ethnographic film-makers to document their life-styles and customs in a prearranged production. Because of its distinct structure and objectives, community television programming is a potent form of visual anthropology. It offers a unique window into the expression and exploration of cultural identity and experience as produced, directed, edited and circulated by the cultural groups themselves.

### Notes

\* Adapted from a video and paper presentation given at 'Contrasting Worlds', an international conference on visual anthropology; Granada, Spain, October 1992.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the essay, public access television and community television are used synonymously.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I use the terms commercial television, network television, and mainstream television interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> 'Whereas commercial television is broadcasting, aiming at a large and diversified audience, access is narrowcasting, aiming at a small audience with perhaps a single common bond of interest' (Buske, 1985, p.8)

<sup>4</sup> *Not Channel Zero* is an African American video collective in New York City that compiled programs from around the nation, including Los Angeles, and created these two programs to be cablecast as part of the Deep Dish Television Network's 1992 autumn series *Rock The Boat*.

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