

Sustaining Independent Media (Greenway Ballroom B)

Chair: Andrew Kennis - University of Illinois

Cynthia Conti - New York University - Examining LPFM Licensees as Agents of Localism

The Federal Communications Commission grants Low-Power FM licenses to noncommercial, educational stations broadcasting with an effective radiated power (ERP) of 10 to 100 watts. With LPFM signals traveling approximately 3.5 miles, the FCC expected establishment of the license to “create a class of radio stations designed to serve very localized communities or underrepresented groups within communities” (FCC, 2000, p. 4). LPFM licenses are allocated to organizations with a history of community service, and licensees — including community media groups, environmental protection groups, social service organizations, schools and churches — are expected to apply their locally focused efforts to broadcasting. This is a manageable venture for community organizations due to inexpensive start-up costs for low-power radio stations (Prometheus Radio Project, 2007, section 5). Proof that organizations can handle the cost of stations are in license applicant statistics: the FCC has received over 3200 applications for LPFM licenses and construction permits, and as of January 2008, there are 821 licensed LPFM stations currently operating within the United States and its territories (FCC, 2008). For these reasons, the FCC and concerned citizens consider LPFM an effective method for reestablishing broadcast localism.

The aim of this paper is to explore the premise that LPFM licensees are independent stations focused primarily on serving their communities. Media reformers, legislators, and FCC commissioners describe the LPFM service as a tool for strengthening local radio, pointing to examples of stations run by community arts, public safety, and labor organizations (see Media Access Project, 2007; S. 1675, 2007). To make their cases for LPFM, proponents highlight stations that conform to their understanding of localism in ownership and operation. Absent from these discussions is a look at the bigger picture. Which types of organizations hold the majority of LPFM licenses? How many LPFM stations produce at least eight hours of locally originated programming? Before they were licensees, how many applicants had established relationships with their communities? Answering these questions will inform LPFM proponents about the current state of LPFM.

The intention of this paper is to pursue a broader perspective on LPFM by examining the subject in two ways. First, I will analyze the discourse surrounding LPFM, accessible through documents about LPFM produced by the FCC and other stakeholders, as well as recordings and transcripts of public discussions regarding the service. Such analysis will offer insight into the claim that LPFM is an appropriate method for reestablishing broadcast localism. Second, I will investigate the license holders, largely through their license applications. Within their applications, licensees address organizational objectives and history, sponsors, and anticipated programming schedules. The paper will report on patterns in the content of applications of current LPFM licensees in an effort to provide a general look at the holders of LPFM licenses and their interests in running stations.

References:

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- U.S. Federal Communications Commission. (2000, January 27). *In the Matter of Creation of Low Power Radio Service, Report and Order* (FCC-00-19, MM Docket No. 99-25). Washington, DC: Author.
- U.S. Federal Communications Commission. (2008). Low Power FM Broadcast Radio Stations. Retrieved January 10, 2008, from <http://www.fcc.gov/mb/audio/lpfm/index.html>.
- Local Community Radio Act of 2007, S. 1675, 110th Congress. (2007). Retrieved January 25, 2008, from LexisNexis Congressional database.

Caroline Marie Nappo - University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign - Resisting Abridgment: Librarianship as Media Reform

Media reform is a vital component for sustaining public access to information, and supports libraries in fulfilling their mission as what educator Robert D. Leigh termed “a public agency of communication.” Ideologically speaking, the struggles for media reform are waged side by side with those of librarians. Like media activists, librarians are deeply concerned about issues related to information production, dissemination, and access.

I will illustrate how libraries play a key role, both historically and currently, in providing public access to independent media in print and electronic formats. Specifically, I will look at how alternative and special library collections sustain access to a diverse range of ideas that are otherwise marginalized in mainstream media outlets. I will highlight successful partnerships between libraries and media reform activists, including how librarians championed independent press movements that flourished in the 1960s and 70s, to more recent community networking initiatives. Finally, considering the interdependency of their goals and interests, I wish to advocate for greater collaboration between the media reform movement and library activists.

Jessica Clark (American University), Tracy Van Slyke (The Media Consortium) - Independent Media: New Impact Measurements

Independent and political media projects are often driven more by their mission and the publics they engage than by the imperative to generate profit or audience share. However, dollars and “eyeballs” are exactly the benchmarks used to gauge mainstream media, which sets the dominant patterns for various media industries. While small media projects can often make a significant impact, questions of success or failure are crucial in gaining funding, promoting projects, and obtaining credibility in the larger public discourse. What alternative impact measures are media-makers using to judge their efforts?

This research project that informs this presentation will explore alternative impact measurements through a series of interviews with independent media-makers across various platforms. The research forms part of a larger book project examining the evolution of the political media sector in the United States. The inquiry will start from the hypothesis that impact measurements are based, at least in part, on the initial goals of the media projects. Based on an initial survey of the field, several goals have been identified:

- Mainstreaming an issue—examples: *Sicko*, *An Inconvenient Truth*
- Preaching to the choir—examples: *The Nation*, *AlterNet*
- Taking it to Capitol Hill—examples: *The American Prospect*, *RH Reality Check*
- Combining pop and politics—examples: *Feministing*, Participant Productions
- Reaching targeted audiences—examples: New America Media, *Ms.*
- Fighting the right—examples: Brave New Films, Air America

- Uncovering the news—examples: Talking Points Memo, Center for Public Integrity
- Pioneering new journalism models—example: Off The Bus
- Chasing the tech—examples: Crooks and Liars, The Young Turks

The presentation will synthesize data from the interviews, testing the categories above as frameworks for impact measurement. The analysis will support ongoing research into the structure, function and influence of the progressive media sector, as represented by organizations such as The Media Consortium (www.themediaconsortium.org). The findings will serve both scholarly researchers and academic practitioners in their explorations into independent media, a topic often overlooked by the academic establishment, and will serve as a basis for developing an alternative set of standards for mission-driven media.

Adam Davis - Southern Illinois University - Television by the People, For the People: A Political Economic View of Current TV

Al Gore claims that his new cable network will “open the television medium so viewers can help make television...and reclaim democracy.” The content of Current TV consists of nonfiction shorts submitted by viewers on a variety of social, political, and cultural topics, and has the potential to create a forum for diverse perspectives and fostering democratic debate. Despite its claims, however, Current TV has much in common with the traditional media outlets it seeks to subvert. The private, advertiser-supported company has become very profitable on the strength of its access to cheap content and the support of powerful corporate sponsors. It also employs viewers in producing commercials, making them complicit in the commercialization of media and blurring the line between content and advertising. This paper addresses questions of ownership, access, and the potential for Current TV to contribute to the public sphere and effectively apply new media principles to old media institutions.