

# Scottish Local TV Forum

digital local television for scotland  
delegate paper #1

## A Local Television Reader



Institute of Local Television



COSLA



The Broadcasting Trust



**At its simplest local television is commercial or community TV on a smaller scale than regional TV. But with small-scale come possibilities for new forms of ownership, new opportunities for participation, representation and interaction through television.**

**With broadband local television can be distributed to scattered communities of interest as well as distinctive geographical localities.**

**The **Scottish Local TV Forum** is an opportunity to explore the scale and opportunities for digital local TV in preparation for digital switchover in 2009.**

**This is the first briefing to be circulated to the Forum's delegates. The Forum's objective is to explore how local digital TV might be introduced to Scotland.**

## **A Local Television Reader**

### **Tower block TV**

In Gateshead in the late seventies a video player was connected to a spare channel of the cabling installed in tower blocks. Today using computers **TenantSpin** is a live interactive channel produced by High Rise tenants in Liverpool which aims to promote resident participation in regeneration and social housing issues through constructive debate and shared experience.

### **Community TV trials of the nineteen-seventies**

A slight relaxation in the cable-relay licencing regime allowed community organisations to adopt spare channels on the communal cable networks installed to provide off-air signals to house-holds in poor TV reception areas. These cable companies involved collapsed when terrestrial reception improved using additional relays and as the better UHF signal came to replace VHF. At the time there were claims that the Home Office failed to look kindly on the community TV services. Perhaps best remembered among them was Swindon Viewpoint which survived the longest.

### **Voluntary sector TV**

Lord Hunt's Cable Act 1984 required all the cable franchise applicants to make provision for channels of benefit to local branches of voluntary organisations. Since the franchises were awarded to match local authority boundaries many local authorities were persuaded to go along with the disruption caused by cabling on the assumption the network owner would be accommodating a community service. The Cable Authority failed to enforce carriage arguing that the Cable Act did not require the regulator to take seriously this part of the application. In the end, the mostly US cable investors proved less enthusiastic than the inward investing Canadian telcos – who did support some early community experiments. Very few community cable initiatives remain to this day, with Imimage 2000 a notable exception.

Consolidation of the cable industry has centralised technology, channel playout and management and there's been reluctance from NTL and Telewest to carry local and community TV. A recent cable carriage agreement for the Channel M RSL (see below) in Manchester suggests there might be more favourable times ahead.

### **Live TV**

Of the two newspaper companies that invested in cable local TV stations the Mirror Group's Canary Wharf based Live! was rolled out to several city-based stations to serve cabled areas. Liverpool Echo funding was behind the Channel One cable news channel in Liverpool and stayed the course longest. But as with all local and community cable TV it's not the size of the overall UK cable audience that's important: it's the percentage of viewers subscribing to cable in the local TV news or entertainment universe that's important, and that's mostly less than 20% in each cabled area.

### **City TV**

In the mid 1990s the Institute of Local Television drew up its bid for a city based TV service for the channel 5 frequencies with Channel X, The Scotsman and Herald newspaper groups. An earlier city-based initiative based on Moses Znaimer's City TV in Toronto had collapsed before the bid deadline. Both proposals included a network of city stations supported by a common spine of shared programming. The Toronto City TV model has more recently been adopted by the Manchester Guardian Group, the newspaper behind Manchester's Channel M or Metro channel.

### **The RSL - terrestrial TV with the restricted services licences (RSL)**

The TV RSLs were introduced after some background lobbying around the Broadcasting Bill in 1995. When the RSL compromise was offered in place of opposition amendments – it was hastily based on the radio RSL without thinking through the engineering differences between radio and TV transmission or reception. In the enthusiasm to get on-air some RSL applicants took insufficient note of the poor frequencies being offered by the ITC and Radiocommunications Agency. There was a headstrong rush for the acquisition of dormant licences which pulled the rug from under much of the sector. In parallel the ITC's consultation on RSLs requiring a minimum 60% local content was an ill conceived regulatory spanner in the investment works, withdrawn quietly a year or so later: but too late its damage was done.

Those RSLs that have survived in the face of shrinking analogue audiences have adopted a variety of commercial and community forms awaiting access to digital spectrum and a possible synergy with other media platforms. Some hope to achieve a greater critical mass of viewers with larger 'local' audiences on a metropolitan or micro-regional scale, a few plan for success linked with newspaper and/or radio groups while others favour better access to more localised audiences through must-carry rules and guaranteed carriage across all locally available digital platforms.

### **2.4TV**

A practical Institute of Local Television intervention to use the licence exempt 2.4 Ghz band to deliver TV services to tower blocks, schools, hotels and other centres which have an internal cabled network for relaying off-air TV signals to rooms and apartments.

A successful year long trial in Aberfeldy in 2002/03 with The Broadcasting Trust proved

the robustness of this cheap off the shelf video-sender/CCTV kit. Roll out in Leith, Edinburgh city-centre and Doncaster is expected over the coming months. Southwark, Winchester and Merthyr Tydfil have explored how 2.4 might help support or kick-start their community and educational TV initiatives and encourage a local TV broadcasting culture in advance of local digital access. Total cost: £3000 plus loads of volunteer input.

### **Local digital terrestrial TV**

Not here yet but broadcasting regulator Ofcom seem to favour using the interleaved frequencies for local TV - which means less problems with international assignment - and upwards of 200 services across the UK. Expect proposals for local digital TV to be out by Autumn 2005. Meanwhile in March 2005 the Department of Culture Media and Sport are expected to launch a consultation on the local digital terrestrial licence. So local digital terrestrial TV could start in Scotland as early as 2008/9. Analogue RSLs can expect some trade off into digital, while those without a present foothold in frequency will probably have to bid – with a beauty contest or some other approach yet to be determined with input from consultations like this Scottish Local TV Forum.

### **Broadband**

Because a licence is not required - nor do cable operators need to be convinced to carry services - broadband offers the least resistance to local and community TV initiatives. It is ideal for sharing programming across dispersed communities who have a common interest - and an active computer enthusiasm. Many community TV activists – and Scottish Screen – favour broadband over the somewhat protracted pursuit of the digital terrestrial frequency or the willing cable company. Southwark TV have demonstrated that a valuable broadband-based service can be localised by screenings and production courses fostering educational and community partnerships. RegenTV are also rolling out a model based on their East London experience. DigiTV is another example originating from Kirklees.

What is necessary for TV on computer is better bandwidth in less populated areas.

### **Broadband TV**

An exciting newish option introduced as HomeChoice in London sends broadband, phone, television and on-demand video down the traditional copper phone cable and via a set-top box onto the TV. With BT about to launch a similar 'broadband TV' product most of BT's digital switches could provide the supply point to the home – so enabling a truly neighbourhood TV service possibly from as close as a mile away. Again there are problems when that switch is further away from the home because the signal expires – so the remotest rural areas might have to wait (once again).

### **Satellite**

Largely ignored as offering too big a footprint and expensive if using those satellites towards which the smaller domestic dishes are pointing. But not to be overlooked as a means to provide a common spine of programming for relay by other means to the home as part of a more local or community channel. The Community Channel (on Sky, cable and Freeview) might adopt such a role supporting local TV with common programming for communities of interest.

### **Must carry rule**

The argument for this (in my own case) goes back to 1984 and has recently resurfaced

in the Institute of Local Television's, Association of Community Television Operators', Community Media Associations' and commercial local TV industries' collective view that local (and community) TV should be regarded as a 'public service broadcaster' (PSB). This has helped maintain the momentum of the local TV debate throughout the three Ofcom PSB reviews, suggesting (as an ambition) access of right for local channels to locally available digital delivery platforms. Also, with funding from a proposed Public Service Publisher there may be financial support for PSB content offered on local digital TV channels in future.

### **Open Channel**

Exemplified by Germany's Offenen Kanäle these cable delivered channels provide uncensored access for individuals and communities to express their points of view. Often described as 'communication' not 'broadcast' channels these are filled with diverse views limited only by the producer's willingness to take responsibility for what they wish to have aired. Like the US access stations 'open channels' were introduced to support freedom of expression. Unlike the US stations in Germany at least they are funded from a percentage of the licence fee ceded to the regional Lande who appoint the staff and oversee their budgets. Open Channels in Sweden are a bit different because it's community groups who pay a small sum to the organisers of the channel to gain access and support administration and there's no public subsidy. There are further 'open or access' variations in the Netherlands, Denmark and Belgium.

### **Open Channels for Europe**

Set up in 1997 to demonstrate and facilitate better integration and practice in open and access TV throughout Europe, OCE currently argues for a best-practice Television *Within* Frontiers look at the pan EU Television *Without* Frontiers framework to highlight how accessible broadcasting actually is for individuals and interest groups in the different member states .

### **City TV – Europe**

Not to be confused with city TV in the US supported by the major TV networks or the innovative Toronto City TV and its franchised South American and European offspring. The European-grown model includes (among others) examples from Rotterdam (Stads TV), an Amsterdam city news channel (also called Stads TV) and two locally news-based TV channels – one for each religious minority - in Brussels. This type of city-service is often municipally funded – either entirely or with advertising and sponsorship - and in several cases comprises a half hour news show transmitted live in early evening together with a half hour documentary or arts and music show. The hour block is then retransmitted every hour till the following morning - when other low budget programming addresses more specific issues - or till the next evening news and documentary show is transmitted. This formula promotes high quality from a small focused staff at peak viewing with further opportunities to watch. Channel budgets vary between €500,000 in Brussels to €3m in Barcelona.

### **Variations on a theme:**

#### **Open or Access Channels**

The Open Channel model as found throughout Germany offers unrestricted access and holds the individual or group who are broadcasting legally responsible agents for what is said and shown. There are some drawbacks to emphasising equality in expression if the only option on an Open Channel. Broadcasters who aspire to quality production tend to escape the OC's first come first served approach. As the

coherence of their message increases they can be lost to viewers through the anti-scheduling of the open channel system. Following annual TV conferences in recent years (mostly in Berlin) the open channel approach has been debated and scheduling has been introduced for part of the air-time. The channel now includes regular access slots for non-commercial work from other open TV aspiring countries. Scotland began broadcasting onto Offener Kanal Berlin in 1995, first through a monthly magazine, 'Berlin Tapes', then over an ISDN link. Scotland at the time was denied any capability of broadcasting to itself - but was able to transmit to 3 million viewers in Germany.

More recently special programming on Offener Kanal in Berlin uses an OB truck to film political debate across the city – rather than have activists and politicians turn up to the studio. Several projects on media literacy have evolved with schools and students producing topical magazine shows for transmission at regular intervals.

As an electronic Hyde Park Corner the 'Open Channels' model represents a baseline for debating the qualities of representation of local and community television – does the individual or organisation have access to policy, ownership, management, equipment as well as air-time? Indeed, should they?

Notwithstanding the purity of the OC station in offering all these the capacity of local commercial stations has led some in the UK (Edinburgh Television and Channel 6 Dundee) to offer community access slots in peak and near peak to charitable broadcasting trusts, set up to provide training and encourage access programming.

But the question of programme quality remains an issue for the professional-community 'hybrid' channels – especially if the linear understanding of channel remains fixed in the viewer's imagination. However, a properly signposted series of community, access or participation slots on an otherwise professional channel generates a unique public service role.

### **Stads TV model**

Fifteen years on from Stads TV in Rotterdam, a news show broadcast live and retransmitted on a loop for twelve or twenty four hours seems a wasteful use of linear TV channel airtime. A few strategic repeats and updates of the news (changed presenter, updates to camera perhaps) can be backed up with footage streamed on broadband – offering access for twenty four hours to a global interested community as well as a further chance to view for those not catching the news first time around.

### **Browser TV**

One way to address the dilemma for small-scale TV stations maintaining quality at fixed costs is 'browser tv'. Browser TV is television for the MTV generation. Music videos have the highest production value per minute of any made for TV material. Together with cartoons (and TV commercials) they can be watched several times. With premium rate dial-up requests – like the service on cable channel 'The Box' in its early form running from a server at each cable station (and not in its UK-wide satellite incarnation) - a localisable and youth-attractive channel can help establish loyalty to viewing and some shaping of the local and community programming elements. At least this was the Channel 6 Dundee experience: local radio with pictures where the spaces in between the music videos – the adverts, the logos, stings, vox pops - together with the longer arts programme elements – served to localise by choice national and global dial-up music videos and cartoons.

Running from a server at the transmitter site there was near to live updating for smaller items via ISDN. Some of the longer twelve-fifteen minute programmes were in turn broken down to sit on the server as three to four minute clips for later request via dial-up premium rate phone.

Dial-up revenue was 25-30% of station income and this approach later spawned the dirt cheap entirely volunteer run dial-up element of the 2.4Ghz 'etv' station in Aberfeldy – this time instead of music The Broadcasting Trust ran locally made and tourist oriented videos from a £1500.00 video juke-box.

### **TV versus computer**

Broadband is available to provide many variations on the TV theme without the need for broadcasting licences. There are great archives out there too – not least the CMA's *commedia.showcase*. The cost and availability of bandwidth for the viewer still limits access and the quality of compressed files for computer down-loading is not high enough for TV viewing – so eventually we'll have to re-load these in some better resolution if broadband content is to service more localised TV based channels.

Taking advantage of the higher bandwidth, file compression and the ready access to the home of the 'phone line' Broadband on TV will provide high quality video files for downloading onto the TV. Broadband TV is probably a serious rival to cable and may be more willing to accommodate local programming. The 'broadband on computer' versus 'broadband on TV' argument is also only temporary. The concern is that local news (especially) should be as 'free to air' as 'national news': just as the local newspapers sit alongside the national and regional dailies on the newsstands.

### **BBC plans**

Following successful trials in Hull the BBC plans to launch a localised service for up to 60 localities across the UK – 12 in addition to the 48 'local' radio areas. Initially this service will be broadband (on computer) but may come to be transmitted on Freeview and lie under the red button – while later still in larger areas perhaps they'll become full-blown local channels?

### **Undercurrents**

This excellent news collective – based out of Swansea and Oxford – provides a possible model for a national and international news agency to serve the local-to-local network.

### **The local-to-local network**

This is the Institute of Local Television's proposal for a centre-less network of neighbourhood, community and local TV services which cluster in a variety of configurations for simultaneous transmission (or later re-transmission) according to the most appropriate scale for the programming and for its audience. News might be neighbourhood in distribution for a few minutes followed by local for ten minutes or so, drawing on news clips from other neighbourhoods that have local relevance – a diaspora news. The news packages could be hived off to a server for picking up and reuse by other channels. In turn news clips at the neighbourhood or local scale can be extended from the news story into longer 'programmes' adding debates as blogs or web reported commentary for circulation on the web which in turn stimulate items and commentary that can be picked up and broadcast as part of subsequent bulletins.

To maintain critical mass for commercials or sponsorship to fund local channels entertainment programmes might be made collectively by or for two or three (or more) local channels particularly where audiences for each individual local channel is small and also (possibly) geographically scattered.

An Aberdeenshire channel and an Aberdeen channel might combine for part of their news output and for nearly all of their entertainment programming – providing a larger audience for advertising and the potential for programming to pull viewers out into the country as well as into the city for leisure and entertainment. Combined together these small channels become medium scale channels. Taken further a combination of all the local channels (in Scotland) could provide the nation with its news and programming coverage.

Combined but in a more fragmented way across Scotland or the UK the local-to-local network could support the language programming requirements of (eg) Gaelic, Urdu and Panjabi speakers or even establish a Celtic dimension joining together channels in Wales, Ireland, Cornwall, Brittany and maybe the local TV channels in Galicia, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.

As an extension of Browser TV the local-to-local network would store programming clips on a server and forward clips from news and other programming – allowing viewers to download on broadband as well as offering access to local TV channels looking for complimentary programming or inserts. Maintaining news and entertainment clips in short-form encourages downloading on slower broadband – music videos at a premium rate, news for free - but offering access by whatever means bandwidth is available.

### **Creative commons**

The creative-commons idea promoted at the Ofcom mock-tender forum for the Public Service Publisher in November 2004 would help underpin the notion that publicly sector funded programming should be archived for future common access and rights-free non-commercial use.

### **Local authority TV**

This is a surprisingly new arena - with local authorities able to hold broadcasting licences since 2003. There is every chance that each local authority might either want to own and run a TV channel or at the least to be a shareholder/stakeholder in its local or community service. How might this be?

At the Scottish Local TV Forum on 23<sup>rd</sup> March we'll consider how a local authority might spend a percentage of its current local advertising budget on commercials and sponsored programmes with its local TV station – perhaps in exchange for a percentage shareholding in the local channel company. This is potentially a win-win scenario, a local authority would spend some of what it currently spends – but slightly differently while gaining values in securing a stake in its local television media.

### **COLT**

For council programming: COLT – Coventry's Own Local Television was a monthly magazine programme produced in the mid-1980s by Coventry council's PR department in conjunction with the local cable company. The programmes had an annual budget of £30k, requiring the full time work of one junior PR member of staff

who was given access to the cable company editing suite.

This topical news-oriented, show-and-tell approach to council business encouraged staff as well as councillors to engage with viewers/voters and present issues throughout the process of policy formation.

Edinburgh Television's Cityscape programme updated this model while looking to the council and beyond to community councils, voluntary organisations and other local stakeholders particularly focused on the city environment.

Also on Edinburgh Television the local charity, Edinburgh Television Trust, produced two weekly shows – Politics Show and Diverse TV – which focused on the structure of politics from community to Scottish Parliament to European Parliament and offered programming in minority languages made with young film-makers drawn from a wide cross-section of communities in Edinburgh (see [www.commedia.showcase.org.uk](http://www.commedia.showcase.org.uk) and type 'Broadcasting Trust' into the browser for access to programmes made by Edinburgh Television Trust, the Scottish Television Trust, Edinburgh Television and Channel 6 Dundee).

The cost of television production has dropped massively since Covntry City set up COLT in 1986, the principal cost now is wages rather than film equipment or post-production rental.

**So ..... Desktop Television has arrived but its potential won't be fully realised till we have open access to frequency and channels.**