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Still Relevant? An Audience Analysis of Public and Government Access Channels

Wenhong Chen, Marcus Funk, Joseph D. Straubhaar, and Jeremiah Spence

The literature on public, educational, and government (PEG) access channels has focused on production rather than audience analysis, which hinders our understanding whether such channels remain relevant forums for public expression and a source of community information in an increasingly digitized and converging media landscape. To address this gap, this study draws on random sampled survey data in Austin, Texas to analyze the audience of PEG access channels. Findings suggest that public access television remains relevant for underprivileged populations, especially racial minorities and less educated people. Online media do not reduce the importance of cablecasting public access content to local residents. Compared to non-viewers, viewers of public access channels have significantly higher social capital. This research has practical implications because many PEG channels across America have been cut back or shut down due to budget cuts.

> Let me bring you up to speed. My name is Wayne Campbell. I live in Aurora, Illinois, which is a suburb of Chicago—excellent. I've had plenty of jobs; nothing I'd call a career.... Okay, so I still live with my parents, which I admit is bogus and sad. However, I do have a cable access show, and I still know how to party. But what I'd really like is to do *Wayne's World* for a living. It might happen. Yeah, and monkeys might fly.... (Michaels & Spheeris, 1992)

Wenhong Chen *(Ph.D., in Sociology, University of Toronto) is an assistant professor in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research interests include social capital, social networks, and social media.*

Marcus Funk *is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Texas at Austin School of Journalism. His research interests include community journalism, local media, imagined communities, and sports journalism.*

Joseph D. Straubhaar *(Ph.D. in International Communication, Tufts University) is the Amon G. Carter Sr. Centennial Professor of Communication in the Radio-Television-Film Department of the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests are digital inclusion, global media, diasporic media, Latin American media, and Latinos and media.*

Jeremiah Spence *(M.A., University of Texas at Austin) is currently working on his doctoral dissertation in western Brazil while enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests include socioeconomic change, virtual worlds, and the history of racism.*

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Public access television has an arguably sophomoric reputation. Images of Mike Myers and Dana Carvey fumbling with television cameras and ''babes'' still offer public access television's most salient reference. Indeed, public, educational, and government (PEG) access channels are designed to offer a non-commercial platform for free speech, citizen media production, and uninhibited broadcast of hyper-local content. The United States Congress designed PEG access channels as ''the video equivalent of the speaker's soap box,'' giving citizens ''the opportunity to become a source of information in the electronic marketplace of ideas'' (Waldman, 2011, p. 171).

Yet, the existing literature on PEG access channels is thin and has focused on production rather than the audience. First, few studies have examined how class, race, or gender may affect access to the PEG access channels in an increasingly digitized and converging media landscape. Second, the lack of audience research hinders academic understanding of PEG access channels: have they become an ''unnecessary platform for self-expression'' in the Internet age (Waldman, 2011, p. 172), or not? Do they remain relevant or have they become a redundant media backwater? Third, there is a lack of study on the potential impact of PEG access channels viewership on individual audience members. Little research has examined the relationship between the viewership of PEG access channels and social capital, which has been identified as a reliable indicator or correlate of community attachment and civic engagement (Lin, 2001). Drawing on a unique survey in Austin, Texas, this study addresses these gaps by examining three questions on the relevance of PEG access channels. First, to whom is it relevant? Second, does it remain relevant in an increasingly digitized and converging media landscape with the complicated co-existence of print, broadcast, online, and mobile media? Third, is the viewership of PEG access channels relevant to the viewers' social capital?

A Brief Historical Development

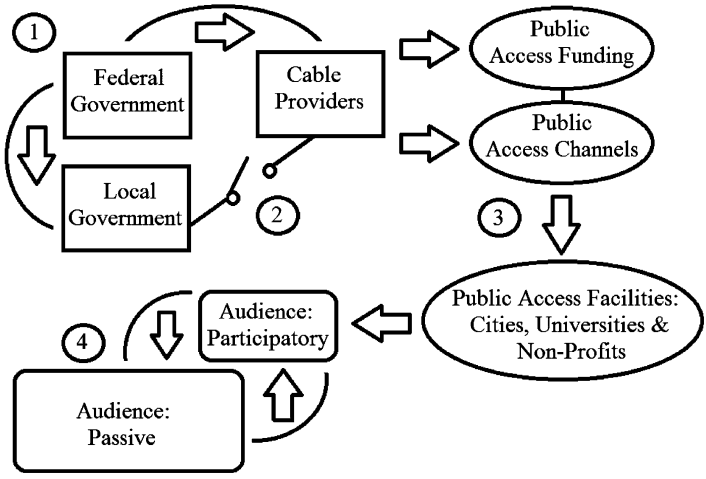
Pioneered by KUHT-TV at the University of Houston in 1953, public access television in America has its roots in education-based public broadcasting (Hawes, 1996). A public access pilot station was created in Dale City, Virginia, in 1968 (Janes, 1987). It was in Canada, though, that American public access television (as opposed to public television such as PBS) drew its primary inspiration, with *Challenge for Change* and *Societé Nouvelle*, two Canadian-government-sponsored programs designed to wage a war on poverty and other social ills through portable video and mobile production crews (Engelman, 1990; Gillespie, 1975). The movement migrated to New York City, where its focus on social equality and Marxist rhetoric continued, and in the 1970s it proliferated throughout the United States. The initial emphasis was on hyper-local production groups or collectives of young activists, ''spurred on by the utopian flourishes of futurists and technophiles such as Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller and Gregory Bateson, groups like Raindance,

VideoFreex and Global Village sought to use these technologies in the creation of nothing less than a new culture'' (Howley, 2005, p. 121).

The growth of public access channels and public television led to the Cable Communication Policy Act of 1984, which remains in place today. As illustrated in Figure 1, the law allows local governments to require cable operators serving their markets to offer, supply, and fund public access channels (Linder, 1999). For instance, if a city council votes to create public access channels, the law requires cable operators serving that municipality to carry the public access channels free of charge and offer or fund citizen producers production equipment and facilities. Typically, such facilities are funded by a portion of franchise fees paid by cable operators to the local government but maintained by non-profit groups; many such facilities offer production equipment for rent to the general public, and an open schedule to broadcast citizen-made programming (Janes, 1987). While the programming used to be available only with a cable television subscription, many public access television programs have become available online, frequently in conjunction with the station's Web site (Fuentes-Bautista, 2009).

Public access channels are designed as open-source television independent from commercial influence prevalent in network and cable television. Programming on these channels is generated by citizen producers working independently of corporate structures or profit motives; as such, much of the programming is amateur but often surprisingly creative (Howley, 2005). The aim is to generate a ''spectrum of lifestyles, values, issues, ideas and viewpoints to audiences with specific tastes and interests'' (King & Mele, 1999, p. 604). Compared to network and cable television,

Figure 1
Illustration of Public Access Television Policy, 1984–Present



public access channel content is user-generated and encourages citizen participation.

By one estimate, there are more than 3000 public access organizations and more than 5000 PEG access channels in the country (Waldman, 2011). Because the Cable Communication Policy Act of 1984 does not mandate PEG programming, PEG channels and programming vary in size and scope from city to city; for example, as late as 1999, Orlando, Florida, had no public access stations at all. Many PEG access channels have experienced sharp declines in funding due to new state regulations, and more than 100 communities have lost their PEG access stations since 2005 (Waldman, 2011); legislation in states like California has allowed cable providers to streamline or downsize their public access facilities (Johnson, 2009).

Local Context: PEG Access Channels in Austin

Founded in 1973, the PEG access channels in Austin are among the oldest and most active in the country (Fuentes-Bautista, 2009). ChannelAustin is the non-profit organization supervising the public access television facility. Channels 10, 11, and 16 are Austin's public access channels. Chanel 10 focuses on education, including Youth Media and Public Affairs Forum. It also has entertainment programs like *The Trailer Park Show* and *Grilldog Presents*, and offers Spanish-language Latino programming such as *Ujima* TV Series and *Alto Conosimieto Teologico*. Channel 11 provides spiritual and religious shows in English and Spanish and alternative programming such as *Yoga* with Haranand Jr. and *Taking Liberties*. Similarly, Channel 16 offers spiritual, religious, alternative, and community programming in English, Spanish, and Korean. Channel 6, as the City of Austin's government access channel, broadcasts city council meetings, public hearings, and live news conferences. Programming also includes *CityView* newsmagazine, *Live From the Plaza* concerts, and educational programming about municipal departments and initiatives. Along with other public access stations in other Texas markets, Channel 6 also broadcasts sessions from the Texas House of Representatives and Texas Senate when the state legislature is underway. Each channel is included free with cable television. Since October 1, 2010, programming has also been streamed live on the City of Austin and channelAustin Web sites; the latter has become a digital community media center for citizen producer and local residents (Fuentes-Bautista, 2009).

A Predominately Production-Focused Analysis

The existing studies on PEG access channels have focused either on production meanings and methods (Engelman, 1990; Fuentes-Bautista, 2009; Hawes, 1996; Linder, 1999) or policy/legal analyses (Seung, 2002; Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Public Television, 1993; Waldman, 2011). Most studies have drawn on

qualitative analyses of production methods and citizen producers and have been dominated by two streams. One offers qualitative assessments of personal empowerment (Higgins, 1999; Offir & Aflalo, 2008), feminism (King & Mele, 1999), or community development and democratization (Howley, 2005; Hoynes, 1994). The other is devoted to historical analyses of the shared roots of public access and education-based public broadcasting (Hawes, 1996; Linder, 1999).

Most work on PEG access channels has drawn on Habermas' public sphere theory (1989) and argued that public access television maintains a communicative space for open discussion and deliberation. Its flexible and customizable nature cultivates personal, moral and social self-images, increases media literacy, and creates a sense of empowerment and democratization among the citizen producers (Higgins, 1999; Offir & Aflalo, 2008). A feminist, ethnographic analysis of public access television producers in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, revealed that citizen producers were motivated by personal empowerment (often defined as technical expertise) as well as by community-building and diversity-developing efforts (King & Mele, 1999). Other accounts about public access television in Maryland (DiBartolo & Seldomridge, 2010), in California (Pagni, 2000; Vickroy, 1987), Louisiana (Evans & Wood, 1987), and Australia (Langer, 2001) also focus on production analysis.

Overall, the literature highlights the hyper-local nature of public access television, the civic-minded motivations of public access television citizen producers, and how public access channels may empower citizen producers. However, most studies operate within a production paradigm (DiBartolo & Seldomridge, 2010; Higgins, 1999; King & Mele, 1999). There has been a lack of research on the audience of public access channels—viewers who are recipients but may or may not play an active role in the development or production of television (Waldman, 2011). Marketing research data on the viewership of PEG channels, writ large or in individual markets, is also rare.[1] This is a substantial deficit; the full impact of public access television cannot be understood without an audience analysis. As Janes (1987) noted, ''It remains unclear whether the public access channel is attracting any audience and truly living up to expectations'' (p. 22). The lack of audience research of PEG access channels becomes even more critical due to the growing concern whether PEG access channels have become obsolete in the Internet age (Fuentes-Bautista, 2009; Waldman, 2011).

To fill these important knowledge gaps, this study examines the viewership of PEG access channels in the larger media landscape and how it may contribute to viewers' social capital. Social capital is one of the most contested concepts in social sciences as the seminal work of Robert Putnam (2000) has generated a growing multidisciplinary literature. Although different schools have argued about its definition, causes, consequences, and the appropriate level of analysis, most scholars agree that social capital involves social structure that facilitates or constrains an individual's action due to his or her network's composition, structure, and embedded resources (see review in Lin, 2001). It is theorized as individuals' investment in social relations for instrumental or expressive returns and has been identified as a reliable indicator or correlate of community attachment and civic engagement (Lin, 2001).

Television Viewership, Internet Use, and Cross-Platform Consumption Patterns

As people need to have either a cable TV subscription or Internet access to view public access television, a discussion of the literature on TV viewership and Internet access and use is prudent. Eight out of ten Americans watch TV every day (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Americans spent about 40% of their free time watching TV in the mid-1990s (Putnam, 2000), a figure which increased to about half of their leisure time in 2011 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

Early research suggested that cable subscribers tended to be younger, better educated, more affluent, and live in larger households than non-cable subscribers (LaRose & Atkin, 1988; Lin & Jeffres, 1998). Although cable TV is not a new technology anymore and many demographic factors are only weakly related to cable viewership, gender, education, and race continue to have significant effects on the amount and pattern of TV watching (Lin & Jeffres, 1998). In the U.S., men were more likely to watch TV and watched on average 20 minutes more TV than women every day (Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Gender was the strongest predictor of time spending on TV in a German study, which also identified that men watched more TV than women (Henning & Vorderer, 2001). Age was related with TV viewership. As Putnam described, ''Television viewing increases with age, particularly upon retirement, but each generation since the introduction of television has begun its life cycle at a higher starting point'' (2000, p. 222). One study suggested a U-shaped relationship as elderly and young people tended to watch TV more than middle-aged individuals (Chayko, 1993). Older TV audiences preferred news, while younger audiences were attracted to more situational comedies and violent television (Mares & Ye, 2010). African Americans watched more TV, including cable, than viewers of other racial backgrounds; Hispanic Americans spent fewer hours watching TV and are the least likely to subscribe to cable television (Nieslen, 2011a, 2011b). Less educated were more TV dependent than better educated due to the lack of affordable alternatives (Chayko, 1993); conversely, better educated tended to spend more time consuming online and print media.

Earlier Internet adopters were disproportionately young, better educated, affluent, urban, and white (Chen, Boase, & Wellman, 2002). The digital divides do not just disappear when access is available. Socio-economic status continues to affect Web skills and the kind of Internet activities people conduct online (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). While an early gender gap in Internet access has disappeared, American women still spent less time online than men (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Pérez, 2009; Kennedy, Wellman, & Klement, 2003). There have been pronounced generational differences in Internet access and use. Younger generations had a substantially higher rate of Internet access than older age groups, and they were most likely to communicate via social networking sites, watch online videos, play online games, and download music but less likely to seek information, email, or shopping (Jones & Fox, 2009). Members of different racial groups also had different patterns of Internet access and use. African Americans were less likely to access the Internet

than other racial groups but they lead other racial groups in using mobile Internet (Horrigan, 2009). Education was related to Internet use for political participation, career advancement, or healthcare (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). Given these important differences in access and use of television and the Internet by socio-demographics, it seems logical that different demographics would utilize PEG channels differently. As few studies have offered any insight on the relationship between demographic variables and PEG viewership, we develop the following research question:

RQ_1: How do gender, age, class, and race/ethnicity affect PEG viewership?

It is also important to draw from the literature on cross-platform media use. Most studies suggest media multiplexity or a ''the more, the more'' hypothesis as media omnivores consume more content across media platforms (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Rothe, Harvey, & Michael, 1983). For instance, there was a reliable, positive relationship between cable TV adoption and newspaper readership (Lin & Jeffres, 1998). TV news and newspaper consumption complement each other (Putnam, 2000). Internet users were more likely to use traditional media (Robinson & Martin, 2010). Thus, it is logical to expect that cable television subscription and Internet access would have a significant impact on the viewership of public access channel as viewers need at least one of them to watch public access channels. We also expect that newspaper subscription and cell phone ownership may be related to the viewership of public access channels.

As the Internet and social media increasingly offer accessible and affordable forums for free expression and community building, there have been growing concerns that PEG access channels may become unnecessary (Waldman, 2011). Advocates, however, point out that the online distribution of public access programming helps to increase the interaction between the audience and the producers and encourage civic engagement of both groups (Fuentes-Bautista, 2009). As existing research has offered limited insight on the relationship between the frequency of Internet use, the levels of Internet skills, and the viewership of public access channels, we address this critical gap by asking:

RQ_2: How is the exposure to newspaper, cable, cell phones, and the Internet related to PEG viewership?

PEG Access Channels and Social Capital

The relationship between media use and social capital can vary by medium. Putnam (2000) made a strong case that TV viewership was negatively related with many indicators of social capital: attending club or public meetings, having interest in politics, writing to Congress, and serving in community organizations. Putnam's work has also inspired a debate on whether the Internet increases, decreases, or

has no impact on social capital. More than a decade of research, by and large, shows that Internet use does not decrease civic or political participation (Hampton, Sessions, & Her, 2011; Wellman, Quan, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). The main purpose of PEG channels is to offer ''a wide diversity of information sources for the public—the fundamental goal of the First Amendment'' (Waldman, 2011, p. 301). Community programming aired on public access channels may encourage the participation in civic and political activities. Government access programming is designed to encourage open government and inform citizens about government action and proceedings; it may provide an uncensored venue for civic engagement and political participation. As studies on the implications of PEG channel viewership on social capital are almost non-existent, we ask the following research question:

RQ_3: Is PEG viewership related to social capital?

Each of these research questions is designed to measure the relevance of PEG programming in different ways. The vibrant evolution of online and mobile media calls into question popular use of, and subsequent effects of, traditional community media, quantitatively measuring the PEG audience, determining its use of new media platforms, and documenting the relationship between PEG viewership and social capital will gauge the modern relevance of this traditional television platform.

Data and Method

Sample and Measurement

Data are drawn from the Austin Internet and Global Citizens Survey (AIGC Survey), funded by the City of Austin and the University of Texas at Austin. A self-administered paper-and-pencil survey questionnaire was mailed to 15,000 Austin households in November, 2010. The mailed survey was chosen because an online survey would exclude people who do not have access to the Internet; selected households were stratified by geographic location, race, and income level. Within each household, only current residents aged 18 or older were eligible. By January 2011, 1701 questionnaires were returned. Using AAPOR's RR2 formula, the response rate was 11%. A comparison of the AIGC Survey with the Austin general population demographic parameters from the 2010 Census and the 2009 American Community Survey demonstrated an overrepresentation of women, White, elderly, and better educated residents; thus, the AIGC survey data were weighted by gender, race/ethnicity, age and education to ensure the dataset reflected demographic distributions in the general Austin population. Sample weights were constructed using the rake procedure in Stata. The weighting procedure adjusted the demographic distribution of the sample as close as possible to the Austin general population pa-

rameters based on the 2010 Census and the 2009 American Community Survey. To ensure generalizability, sample weights were applied to all analyses presented here. Table 1 reports the sample and descriptive characteristics. After listwise deletion of cases with missing values on variables of interest, the analysis sample included 1484 respondents and among which 1341 Internet users.

Dependent Variables. Respondents were asked how frequently they viewed Channel 6, the City of Austin's government access channel, as well as Channels 10, 11, or 16, the public access channels in Austin. Two dummy variables were constructed to measure the viewership of government and public access channels. Government access channel viewership was coded as 1 if the respondent viewed Channel 6, the City of Austin's government access channel, and 0 otherwise. Public access channel viewership was coded as 1 if the respondent viewed channels 10, 11, or 16, Austin's public access channels. In addition, two ordinal variables measured the frequency of viewing government and public access channels, respectively, using a 1–3 scale (1 = never, 2 = less often, 3 = weekly or more frequent). A total of 7% of the respondents had watched the government access channel at least weekly, 27% less often, and 66% never. A total of 12% of the respondents had watched the public access channels at least weekly, 25% less often, and 63% never.

A third dependent variable measured social capital through the position generator approach, which has yielded reliable and valid empirical evidence on the instrumental or expression returns of social capital (Lin, Fu, & Hsung, 2001). The position generator maps the respondent's social capital via a list of high- and low-status occupations, which indicates access to a wide range of resources. The position generator used here had 16 occupations, adapted from a list of 22 occupations developed and tested by Lin and colleagues (Lin, Fu, & Hsung, 2001). It included nurse, farmer, lawyer, middle school teacher, babysitter, janitor, personnel manager, hair dresser, bookkeeper, production manager, factory operator, computer programmer, taxi driver, professor, police officer, and CEO in a big company. The variable social capital was the summed total score of occupations in which the respondent knew someone ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 3.35$).

Independent Variables. The key independent variables included socio-demographics and socioeconomic status (i.e., gender, age, race, immigration status, civic status, family structure, and education) and media access and use (i.e., newspaper subscription, cable TV subscription, cell phone ownership, and Internet use). Gender was a dummy variable where female was 1 and male was 0. Categorical variables for age were constructed representing 1) 18 to 24, 2) 25 to 34, 3) 35 to 44, 4) 45 to 54, 5) 55 to 64, and 6) 65 to 97. Race had four categories: Whites, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians or Others. Immigration status was measured by whether the respondent was born in the U.S. Civic status had three categories 1) married or living with a partner, 2) divorced, separated, or widowed, and 3) single. Family structure

Table 1
Descriptive Analysis

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Government channel viewership					
Likelihood	0.34	0.47	0	1	
Frequency	0.14	0.62	1	3	
Public access channel viewership					
Likelihood	0.37	0.48	0	1	
Frequency	0.15	0.70	1	3	
Female	0.47	0.50	0	1	
Age					
18–24	0.15	0.36	0	1	
25–34	0.32	0.47	0	1	
35–44	0.20	0.40	0	1	
45–54	0.16	0.37	0	1	
55–64	0.10	0.30	0	1	
>= 65	0.07	0.26	0	1	
Race					
White	0.54	0.50	0	1	
African-American	0.06	0.24	0	1	
Hispanic	0.31	0.46	0	1	
Asian and other	0.09	0.29	0	1	
Immigrant	0.18	0.38	0	1	
Civic Status					
Married	0.55	0.50	0	1	
Divorced	0.15	0.35	0	1	
Single	0.30	0.46	0	1	
Number of children <=18	0.64	0.84	0	2	
Education					
<= High school	0.32	0.47	0	1	
Some college	0.23	0.42	0	1	
BA	0.29	0.45	0	1	
Postgraduate	0.16	0.37	0	1	
Newspaper subscription	0.23	0.42	0	1	
Cell phone ownership	0.94	0.23	0	1	
Cable TV subscription	0.60	0.49	0	1	
Internet access	0.91	0.29	0	1	
Frequency of Internet use (square root)	5.72	0.81	2.00	7.75	1341
Internet skills	27.87	5.92	7	35	1341
Social capital	5.73	3.35	0	16	

Note. N = 1484 if not otherwise indicated.

was measured by the number of children under 18 living in the same household. Education included 4 categories: 1) high school or less, 2) some college, 3) B.A. or B.S degree, and 4) postgraduate.

Media access was measured by four dummy variables: whether the respondent subscribed to newspapers, subscribed to cable television, had a cellular phone, and Internet access. A total of 94% of the respondents had a cell phone, 91% Internet access, 60% cable TV subscription, and only 23% newspaper subscription.

In addition, the frequency of Internet use was the summed total score of how often the respondents used the Internet to read or send email, play online games, buy a product online, pay bills online, discuss politics, listen to music or radio, watch videos, read a blog, comment on a blog, participate in a discussion forum, use social network sites, and visit a virtual world. The frequency of each of the twelve items was measured by a 1–5 point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *daily*). The Cronbach's α was 0.83. As the distributions of the frequency of Internet use was skewed, its square root term was used as suggested by the ladder procedure in Stata. Internet skill was the summed total score of 7 items on how much the respondents agreed with the following statements regarding their Internet skill: uploading content (e.g., videos, photos, music) to a Web site, blocking spam or unwanted content, adjusting my privacy settings on a Web site, bookmarking a Web site or adding a Web site to my list of favorites, comparing different sites to verify the accuracy of information, creating and managing my own personal profile on a social network site, and creating and managing my own personal Web site. The 7 items were measured by a 1–5 point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) and the Cronbach's α was 0.88.

Results

Addressing RQ_1 on the relationship between demographic variables and PEG viewership and RQ_2 on the relationships among media exposure, Internet use, and PEG viewership, we began with an analysis of the likelihood and the frequency of public and government access channel viewership (Tables 2–3). We then examined RQ_3 on the implications of PEG viewership for viewers' social capital (Table 4). Due to the distribution methods of PEG channels, most viewers should watch public access programming through a cable subscription or the Internet; however, it is plausible that viewers could consume broadcast and digital media from public places or the homes of relatives or friends. Thus, the analysis adopted two strategies: one using cable TV subscription and Internet use as independent variables and the other narrowing the sample to respondents with either cable TV subscription or Internet access. The two strategies yielded consistent results; thus, only results using cable TV and Internet access as independent variables were reported here. Results were robust as known confounds are controlled. Multicollinearity was checked and the VIF and tolerance (1/VIF) values suggested that multicollinearity was not a concern here.

Table 2
Public Access Channels Viewership

	Logistic Regression		Ordinal Logistic Regression	
	Model 1 Coef.	Model 2[a] Coef.	Model 3 Coef.	Model 4[a] Coef.
Female	0.22	0.21	0.22	0.23
Age (ref: 18–24)				
25–34	0.06	0.21	0.13	0.16
35–44	0.07	0.06	0.16	0.16
45–54	0.05	−0.13	−0.21	−0.12
55–64	0.42	0.39	0.60	0.38
>= 65	0.19	0.05	−0.11	−0.04
Race (ref: White)				
African-American	0.87*	0.97*	1.16**	1.35
Hispanic	0.51†	0.54†	0.63*	0.60
Asian or other	−0.41	−0.55	−0.37	−0.37
Immigrant	0.28	0.42	0.35	0.34
Civic Status (ref: Married)				
Divorced	−0.22	−0.24	−0.23	−0.14
Single	−0.01	−0.19	−0.51†	−0.54
Number of children <=18	0.33†	0.33*	0.18	0.16
Education (ref: <= High school)				
Some college	−0.95*	−1.03**	−0.94**	−0.91
BA	−0.89**	−1.00**	−0.87**	−0.89
Postgraduate	−1.30***	−1.41***	−1.29***	−1.30
Newspaper subscription	0.03	0.12	0.00	0.07
Cell phone ownership	0.62	0.81	0.87	0.76
Cable TV subscription	0.63*	0.40†	0.36	0.34
Internet access	1.40*		1.27	
Frequency of Internet use		0.34		0.34
Internet skills		−0.02		−0.02
_cons	−2.75**	−2.72†		
/cut1			2.53	2.48
/cut2			4.16	4.17
Log pseudolikelihood	−875.59***	−784.50***	−1155.68***	−1114.79

Note. [a]Internet users only
***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, †p < 0.10.

Public Access Channels

Table 2 reported the results of multiple logistic regressions on the likelihood of PEG viewership (Models 1 and 2) and the results of multiple ordinal logistic regressions on the frequency of viewing public access channels (Models 3 and 4). Results indicated that compared to African and Hispanic Americans, White Americans were significantly less likely to watch the public access channels and watched them less frequently. Better educated people were less likely to watch public access channels, and watched them less often, than individuals with an education of high school or lower. While having more children underage 18 living in the same household was associated with a higher likelihood of watching public access channels, it did not increase the frequency of watching such channels. Singles watched public access significantly less than married people. Both cable TV subscription and Internet access were significantly related to public access viewership ($b = 0.63$, $p <= 0.05$; $b = 1.40$, $p <= 0.05$, respectively); however, none of them had a significant relationship with the frequency of viewing such channels. The frequency of Internet use and the level of Internet skill had no significant relationship with the likelihood or the frequency of viewing public access channels. Newspaper subscription and cell phone ownership were also not significant to the viewership.

Government Access Channel

Table 3 reported the results of multiple logistic regressions (Models 1 and 2) on the likelihood and multiple ordinal logistic regressions (Models 3 and 4) on the frequency of viewing the government access channel. Results showed that compared with African and Hispanic Americans, White Americans watched the government access channel significantly less, and less often. Education was negatively and significantly associated with watching the government access channel. Women were less likely than men to watch the government access channel but the difference was only marginally significant. Native-born Americans were less likely than immigrants to watch the government access channel but the difference disappeared when Internet use and skills were included. There were no significant differences between native-born and immigrant respondents in the frequency of watching government access channels. There were also no significant differences in watching the government access channel by generation, civic status, or the number of children under 18 living in the same household. Cable subscription was significantly associated with the likelihood and the frequency of watching the government access channel. Having a cell phone was positively associated with the likelihood but not the frequency of watching government access channel. However, there were no significant differences in watching the government access channel by newspaper subscription, Internet access, the frequency of Internet use, or Internet skills.

Table 3
Government Access Channels Viewership

	Logistic Regression		Ordinal Logistic Regression	
	Model 1 Coef.	Model 2[a] Coef.	Model 3 Coef.	Model 4[a] Coef.
Female	−0.47†	−0.37	−0.32	−0.36
Age (ref: 18–24)				
25–34	0.24	0.53	0.12	0.53
35–44	0.31	0.65	0.36	0.72
45–54	0.39	0.68	0.51	0.84
55–64	0.48	0.75	0.59	0.79
>=65	0.61	0.81	0.68	0.75
Race (ref: White)				
African-American	0.92†	1.06*	1.00†	1.25
Hispanic	0.63*	0.72*	0.70*	0.71
Asian or other	−0.01	0.35	0.32	0.45
Immigrant	0.98**	0.40	0.42	0.14
Civic status (ref: Married)				
Divorced	0.02	0.39	0.26	0.42
Single	−0.39	−0.23	−0.37	−0.27
Number of children <=18	0.22	0.16	0.19	0.17
Education (ref: <= High school)				
Some college	−0.54	−0.66†	−0.26	−0.49
BA	−1.17***	−1.18***	−0.83*	−0.97
Postgraduate	−1.14***	0.04**	−0.77*	−0.87
Newspaper subscription	0.13	0.04	0.03	0.06
Cell phone ownership	0.92†	0.78†	0.24	0.41
Cable TV subscription	1.39***	1.49***	1.37***	1.47
Internet access	−0.43		0.17	
Frequency of Internet use		−0.10		−0.07
Internet skills		−0.01		−0.01
_cons	−2.07*	−1.98		
/cut1			2.28	1.79
/cut2			4.33	3.79
Log pseudolikelihood	−775.88	−698.77	−972.67***	−926.59

Note. [a]Internet users only
***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, †p < 0.10.

Viewership and Social Capital

Table 4 used multiple regression models to examine whether viewing PEG channels was related to social capital. Model 1 in Table 4 was the baseline model and only included socio-demographic, socio-economic, and media access variables. The results by and large confirmed findings in the existing literature that African Americans, immigrants, and less educated people tended to have lower levels of

Table 4
Multiple Regression of Social Capital on Viewership

	Model 1 Coef.	Model 2 Coef.	Model 3 Coef.
Female	0.45	0.42	0.41
Age (ref: 18–24)			
25–34	0.64	0.64	0.64
35–44	0.34	0.33	0.31
45–54	0.98	0.98	0.99
55–64	0.14	0.07	0.02
>=65	−0.16	−0.20	−0.19
Race (ref: White)			
African-American	−1.63*	−1.78*	−1.90**
Hispanic	−0.02	−0.11	−0.14
Asian or other	0.61	0.67	0.65
Immigrant	−1.15†	−1.19*	−1.19*
Civic status (ref: Married)			
Divorced	0.27	0.31	0.30
Single	−0.66	−0.67	−0.60
Number of children <=18	0.13	0.08	0.11
Education (ref:<= High school)			
Some college	0.94†	1.10*	1.10*
BA	1.18*	1.34*	1.33*
Postgraduate	1.32**	1.54**	1.55**
Newspaper subscription	0.10	0.10	0.12
Cell phone ownership	0.38	0.28	0.27
Cable TV subscription	0.07	−0.03	−0.01
Internet access	1.69**	1.46*	1.45*
Public access channels		0.80*	0.65*
Government access channels		0.00	−0.04
_cons	2.69*	2.73*	2.10†
R^2	0.14***	0.15***	0.15***

Note. ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, †p < 0.10.

social capital (Lin, 2001). Results suggested that Internet access was significantly related to higher levels of social capital ($b = 1.69$, $p <= 0.05$), while newspaper subscription, cable subscription, and cell phone ownership were not significantly associated with social capital. Model 2 and Model 3 further included the likelihood and the frequency of viewing PEG access channels, respectively. Viewing public access channels, in terms of likelihood and frequency, was significantly related to higher levels of social capital. However, government access channel viewership was not significantly related to higher levels of social capital.

Conclusion

The existing literature on public access television has focused on production. Few studies have examined the viewership of PEG access channels in a complicated media landscape. To address this gap, this study draws on a random sample survey of residents in Austin, Texas, to analyze the audience of PEG access channels. Our analysis found that despite major innovations in digital and mobile media, traditional PEG channels remain a highly relevant source of information and the viewership of public access channels is significantly related to social capital. Further results are threefold. First, public access television remains relevant for underprivileged populations. African Americans, Hispanics, and less educated people watch PEG access channels significantly more, and more often, than better educated and White Americans. These findings resonate with Fuentes-Bautista's (2009) evaluation of the public access channels in Austin which found citizen producers were more likely to locate in neighborhoods with lower income and higher minority populations. Two factors may contribute to the over-presence of racial minority and less educated viewers. First, as existing research has shown, less educated and racial minorities are more TV dependent than better educated and White Americans. More time spent on TV watching may increase the likelihood and the frequency of viewing PEG access channels. Second, religious and ethnic programming of public access channels may be more useful and gratifying to these audience groups.

Second, our research offers solid empirical evidence that public access television has not been eclipsed by online content sharing platforms. Having Internet access is positively related to the likelihood of watching public access channels. Cable TV subscription is significantly associated with the likelihood and frequency of PEG channel viewership. The Alliance for Community Media estimates that more than 375,000 organizations use PEG service and citizen programmers produce more than 2.5 million hours of local, original programming in a year (Waldeman, 2011). This number may not seem impressive compared to YouTube statistics claiming its users collectively upload 1 hour of content every second (YouTube, 2012); however, the significance of cable TV subscription and the non-significance of Internet use and Internet skills for PEG access channel viewership suggest that online media do not reduce the importance of cablecasting public

access content to local residents, especially among members of disadvantaged groups.

Third, compared to non-viewers, viewers of public access channels have significantly more social capital. Even though the data are cross-sectional and it is impossible to determine causality, the positive association between the likelihood and the frequency of viewing public access channels and social capital is important. Previous studies have focused on how public access channels may empower citizen producers. Our findings suggest that public access channels can empower the audience members as well, further indicating their relevance in the Internet age.

This study has several limitations and calls for future research. First, data are limited to Austin, Texas, a city known for its creative economy and support for public access media (Fuentes-Bautista, 2009). Given the variations in funding and size of PEG channels, the results may not be generalizable nationwide. Second, the measurement of social capital focuses on the embedded resources in people's social networks. While it has a reliable relationship with civic engagement, future research needs to directly measure civic engagement and collect longitudinal data to gauge the impact of PEG access channels. Third, the data have no information about citizen producers and thus are not able to examine the dynamics between them and their audience. Fourth, the data do not allow us to explore why PEG programming seems to be more relevant to minority or less-educated audiences. One venue for future research is to draw on the U&G approach and examine psychological and social factors contributing to the significant differences in the viewership of PEG content by race and education.

Despite these limitations, this research fills a critical void in the existing literature and offers a unique perspective on open-source traditional media in the era of social media. PEG access channels serve as a forum of public expression and a source of community information, especially for racial minorities and less educated people. The digitizing, converging media landscape is enhancing public access channels viewership, not diminishing it. Moreover, cablecasting remains crucial to the distribution of PEG content. Most encouragingly, public access channels remain relevant to building social capital of the audience members. These findings are valuable for advocates, practitioners, and audience members in a time that PEG channels across America have been cut back or shut down due to budget cuts.

Note

[1]We contacted channelAustin. Officials confirmed that data on public access television audiences can be expensive to obtain through surveys or media research groups; often, those costs are prohibitive for small non-profits groups administering local public access programming and facilities. We also contacted the Nielsen Company to inquire about their rankings for public access television. Officials at Nielsen said they compiled only limited data on public access television, and only in certain specific markets. Such information is only available with a fee.

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