

LGBTs hurt in public-access TV cutbacks

by Yasmin Nair

When AT&T unveiled its U-Verse television programming service, the company waxed about the new technology that allows subscribers to access 320 channels. Recently, however, the company has come under fire for limiting access to public-access programming. The Illinois chapter of the National Association of Telecommunications Officers (NATOA) and CAN TV (Community Access Television) have joined a nationwide coalition to file a petition with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). On its Web site, NATOA says that customers of "AT&T ... can't switch between commercial and PEG channels, set a DVR to record a PEG program, or depend on getting timely local emergency alerts. AT&T's system deprives PEG channels of basic capabilities such as closed captioning."

The limited access affects all members of the Chicago viewing area, but it has significant ramifications for the LGBT community. Critics contend that not being able to easily access PEG programming leaves the LGBT AT&T consumer without vital public-health information and creative programming.

Ordinarily, a subscriber can find CAN TV programming by going to one of the five channels: 19, 21, 27, 36 and 42. He or she can flip back and forth between any of those and commercial programming, and can tape shows.

But under AT&T's U-Verse system, a viewer must go to channel 99, where all public-access stations

are. From there, the viewer must scroll through a list of different cities and find "Chicago," and then scroll through another menu that shows what is available in the city. Once you leave your PEG programming, getting back to it requires you renegotiating all the menus.

Public-access television is federally mandated; every cable provider must provide access to that in its cheapest package. This is to ensure that those not watching network television can still access public information and programming that is both educational and entertaining, and free of market-driven mandates like popularity and ratings. So, public-access television programming can take risks by offering programs that provide health care advice without advertising from pharmaceutical companies. It can cover events otherwise ignored by the media. For instance, CAN TV has frequently covered events at the Gerber/Hart Library. The coverage is of professional quality but deliberately unfiltered. Imagine it as something resembling C-SPAN, but in different formats that include talk shows and television plays.

Mark Hodar, HIV/STD services manager at Howard Brown Health Center, is passionate about the need for CAN TV programming. For the last two years, he has been host of the 15-year-old program "AIDS Call-in Live." The show rotates between four different agencies, including the Chicago

Department of Public Health. Every week, for half an hour, hosts take live calls about HIV/AIDS from the general public. Hodar sees a real need for the program in the context of AIDS funding. He said, "CAN TV reaches a number of communities in this one venue. I came [to Howard Brown] around the time of the protease inhibitors, which resulted in the cutting of prevention dollars since they kept people from dying. But you can't cut the prevention dollars." Hodar felt that CAN TV allows him to compensate for cuts, adding, "I sometimes feel that CAN TV is like a garden hose to a fire. It's the best we can do in a lot of ways."

Hodar pointed out that, given the lack of sex education and a renewed emphasis on abstinence-only programs, programs like his provided vital information to the straight community as well, particularly to youth: "I get questions from young women about how to talk to their boyfriends about condom use and from young men asking, 'How do I talk to my girlfriend about STDs? It reaches everybody, even though Howard Brown is LGBT-focused.'" The show receives roughly 10 live phone calls every time, but operators will also take questions about referrals and anonymous queries.

To illustrate the importance of the show, Hodar related an anecdote about a woman who called in saying, "I need to access healthcare because I have HIV." It transpired that the woman, who

was African-American, had never really been diagnosed but had assumed she was positive because she had unprotected sex and then read about the high rates of infection among Black women. Hodar said, "So she came in to Howard Brown, her test came back negative, and she had lived like this for 10 years. She cried and cried and cried. We got her into counseling. Helping people realize their status: It's that fundamental. A lot of us just assume our status. And to have U-Verse cut into that is really detrimental to the LGBT [and wider] community."

Emmanuel Garcia, a member of the Association of Latino Men for Action (ALMA) , has hosted the organization's call-in program for the last three months, titled "ALMA Latina." (Garcia occasionally writes for Windy City Times.) Garcia felt that the LGBT community has very little opportunity to provide information in the media: "The reality is that images of LGBT folks on television are close to nothing. CAN TV has given ALMA an outlet to reach gay segments of the LGBT population that are oftentimes isolated if not underrepresented under this umbrella we call community. For any cable company to get in the way of transmitting or delivering that message is an unfair use of power and really defeats the mission of what public-access television is all about."

"ALMA Latina" is part of a weekly LGBT consortium, begun in 2001, that is broadcast every Friday night, 6:30-7 p.m., and Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) also hosts the show once a month. Marc Wigler is the host of that show, and was disturbed by the potential loss of viewers. PFLAG, according to him, is "non-partisan, not affiliated with any

religious, economic, or political group; we maintain a symbiotic relationship with everybody." Wigler said that the group is especially able to reach out to a broad range of viewers. PFLAG is unusual in that it, unlike ALMA or Howard Brown, has achieved relatively high visibility in national media; its representatives have even appeared on The Oprah Winfrey Show. Despite that, Wigler believes in the central importance of the group's exposure on CAN TV because, "We have more control, we are given free rein, with 25 minutes of uninterrupted commercial-free time." Like the others, he felt strongly that AT&T needed to be challenged: "For them to be a friend to the community, they need to provide accessibility to all customers so that the community message for building capacity is achievable."

Simone Koehlinger of the Chicago Department of Public Health was, like Wigler, particularly appreciative of the unfiltered and uncensored access to information that CDPH could provide CAN TV viewers.

Koehlinger says that the effect of the public-health shows is immediate: "The phone is non-stop, all lines lit up the entire time. People call in with very good questions, and sometimes with some very basic questions. It's clear that there's a need in the community to have access to this information. They get someone who can answer their questions live."

Asked about the importance of the show in relation to CDPH's larger mission, Koehlinger said, "We put a lot of stock in public information and social marketing and of course to get messages out to vast numbers of people, you have to

have access to good media. We love newspapers for that reason, we love online services but access to public TV is very important. We don't have a large budget and we don't want to be censored either, so I would say it's incredibly important."

According to Czerina Salud, communications director of CAN TV, the structure of the station also benefits the various LGBT agencies: "With access to CAN TV, they always have the opportunity to repurpose their content for web video streaming and they also encounter the phenomenon of people surfing the television. That's not the same audience you'd have access to if you posted on a web site. So the incidental traffic is increased greatly." CAN TV reaches a million subscribers in Chicago

Windy City Times contacted AT&T for comments about the charge that the U-Verse system would make public access virtually inaccessible to customers, and inquired if the company had comments about the investigation. In response, spokesperson Rob Biederman e-mailed that " [o] ur more inclusive methodology is removing the geographic and technological barriers that sometimes separate communities and limit the distribution of important information, news and entertainment ... In response to the investigation: We are certainly following the letter and the spirit of the law. It's absolutely acceptable under state law to deliver our PEG product this way, and it was extensively discussed during the legislative process that it would be placed in this centralized location." The FCC is currently reviewing the petition.