

Low-Power Television (LPTV) is a revolutionary solution to the shortcomings inherent in public broadcasting policy in Canada. The trouble is, it's a solution whose day may never come – the problems are evolving faster than the policy could ever hope to. Centralized broadcasting now appears a little lame, as it is overshadowed by centralized cablecasting, highly capitalized satellite transmission and an increasingly market-driven public policy (as witnessed in the incredible decision to railroad the CBC's proposed news service).

Yet LPTV continues to hold interest in certain circles. Perhaps its viability is increasing as the power of over-the-air television transmission wanes. In any case, LPTV seems to be a viable option in the eyes of the CRTC: "Stations should be established in areas which have insufficient television service... (providing) service within a Grade A contour (urban area) or Grade B contour (rural)," (from *CRTC Broadcast Procedure 22: Requirements for the Establishment of LPTV Broadcasting Stations*, 1983).

Defining exactly what insufficient television service is may involve some imaginative analysis, and could lead to some interesting tele-social developments. In one interpretation of 'insufficient service', which sidesteps the CRTC completely, a group of Ontario College of Art graduates have developed a low-power transmitter which broadcasts on Channel 15 in a radius of about a mile, and which could be retained on a nonprofit basis for about \$400. Their goal is to set up an unregulated (or self-regulating) urban television network that anyone with a few hundred dollars and a VTR or camera could participate in. Clearly these people believe that there are many social or cultural needs which are not being fulfilled by the half-dozen existing broadcasters in their area.

At the same time, the potential impact of such an unlicensed, scaled-down network could re-humanize the airwaves in a way that is increasingly necessary in our post-modern, post-literate, post-everything-else age.

Economy of scale simultaneously inhibits and necessitates self-initiated ventures such as this one. On one hand, the scale of the CRTC application process prohibits anyone other than a media corporation from successfully applying for licenses. At the same time, the potential impact of such an unlicensed, scaled-down network could re-humanize the airwaves in a way that is increasingly necessary in our post-modern, post-literate, post-everything-else age. Perhaps the existence of such a network would cause the CRTC to deregulate Channel 15, much as the proliferation of CB radios in the '70s caused regulators to concede most of their control over that part of the airwaves.

Apart from those OCA graduates, I know of only one active, institutionalized, unlicensed-yet-permitted, LPTV service operating in Canada today. It is the Community Transmitter Project of the Memorial University Extension Service in St. John's, Newfoundland. Memorial has a longstanding commitment to increasing community awareness, and for using technology to help address the province's social issues. Since 1979 Charlie Callanan and a group of people from the university have ventured to relatively isolated communities on the island with their portable transmitter and some simple equipment and conducted mini-media blitzes. For a few days at a time they will park in Winterton or Trinity Bay or Admiral's Beach and tap into the local community culture. They broadcast interviews and discussions, they host phone-in shows, and cover events from amateur theatre to street hockey games. They blend this 'soft programming' with hard issues, often involving provincial politicians in question-and-answer sessions. In Buchans they created a forum for discussing the recent closure of a mine – the principal industry in the area – and helped create a hopeful vision for the future.

The most recent broadcast, their 18th, was an 11-hour phone-in transmitted via satellite to all of North America. (Although this program, on the theme of "Awakening the Entrepreneurial Spirit", was principally intended for Newfoundlanders, the potential of continent-wide transmissions for promoting tourism, etc. is being considered.)

Without a doubt, the Community Transmitter Project has identified a target audience which is 'insufficiently served.' Not because they don't get *Dallas* or *Sesame Street*, but because they have special needs, specific regional concerns and a culture steeped in oral tradition.

I think that the group of urban LPTV enthusiasts I referred to earlier are on the verge of discovering a similar need – not that their community and the one in Newfoundland have many issues in common – but because the need for culturally-based narrowcasting is more widespread than we may have thought.

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