

CASE STUDY

Channels of Brotherly Love: How PhillyCAM and Termite TV Reflect and Magnify Philadelphia's Community Voice

By Sue Spolan

Philadelphia's independent film and video community has a flavor all its own. Two major factors drive the city's alternative media: an innate sense of community activism and a thriving creative culture. Two groups in particular, PhillyCAM and Termite TV, reflect the larger movement and tell essential aspects of the story.

Philadelphia Community Access Media, or PhillyCAM, is a newcomer to the public access sector. PhillyCAM has been in operation for just one year, although funding for Philadelphia public access was in place since 1983. The Termite TV Collective, in action since 1992, grew from a graduate school project at Temple University. Its mission is to create, produce and distribute experimental and activist media. The story of both groups provides an overview into how and why Philadelphia keeps its independent eyes open.

Blue Collar and Blue Blood

Philadelphia, a city of scrapple-loving self-starters, seems to organically foster both loyalty and creativity. It's not unusual for families to boast four generations living in the same neighborhood. Being born in the city ensures a lifelong allegiance, and those who adopt Philadelphia later in life can be deeply dedicated. Meryl Levitz, CEO of the Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation, has said that she regards the makeup of the city as a mix of blue collar and blue blood. The city is known worldwide for its sports teams, cheesesteaks and soft pretzels, and it's also home to renowned educational, research and cultural institutions. A dozen Fortune 500 companies call Philadelphia home, and countless other businesses with global reach are based in the city.

Philadelphia's labor unions have always played a powerful role in civic life both locally and on a national scale. In a city once known as the Workshop of the World, the Knights of Labor was established in 1869 and rapidly became one of the largest and most important American labor organizations of its time. Philadelphia remains a strong union town that continues to advocate for workers' rights. Philadelphians have come to expect that their voices will be heard, due in large measure to the legacy of labor rights leaders.

There's power, and then there's money. On the other side of the Philadelphia equation is an abiding upper class with deep pockets for local arts and culture. Grantors based in Philadelphia include the William Penn Foundation, the Philadelphia Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Both of the city's segments, the blue collar and the blue blood, share a commitment to critical thinking and world-class quality, although the focus may be on entirely different topics.

How Philly Moves

Philadelphia's history of government bureaucracy and accompanying civic missteps is no different from that of other American cities. Moments city officials would like to forget include the bombing of the black liberation group MOVE in 1985, when Mayor Wilson Goode authorized the use of C-4 explosive on a West Philadelphia rowhome, killing 11 and setting an entire city block ablaze. Reaching further back, the mayoral term of Frank Rizzo stands as a dark chapter in Philadelphia history, when the former police commissioner brought to the mayor's office an attitude of mistrust for leftist politics. During Rizzo's reign, for example, officers raided the Black Panther Party offices and performed a strip search of group members in front of news cameras.

The days of Frank Rizzo and the MOVE bombing are long gone. When Wilson Goode left office in 1992, Edward Rendell ushered in a renaissance of Philadelphia pride. Mayor Rendell was also a major cultural proponent, creating the Office of Arts & Culture and developing The Avenue of The Arts, which runs for about ten blocks through the center of the city. Rendell went on to serve as governor of Pennsylvania, and John Street took his place, offering a mixed bag for the city's creative community. While he closed the Office of Arts & Culture in a move to cut spending, the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program thrived, and more importantly for film and video advocates, during Street's term public access television was finally signed into law.

Mayor Michael Nutter succeeded Street in 2008. Nutter, a big fan of the arts himself, and a pretty good rapper, reestablished the Cultural Advisory Council, terming arts and culture "a tremendous economic development tool" and "a tremendous asset for the city."

Community Access Pass

It is into this reinvigorated cultural landscape that Philadelphia Community Access Media was born after a decades-long struggle with local officials.

In 1983, the city passed a law enabling the formation of cable company franchises, and written into that law was a requirement that an annual fee of eight million dollars was to be paid by the cable companies to the city for the creation and maintenance of public access television. But that eight million was again and again folded back into the city budget. Despite the recurring public access fee on cable customers' bills, funding for public access remained undifferentiated from the city budget at large. For various reasons, some having to do with budgetary shortfalls, public access remained an activist's dream.

A 1990 article, "Access Mess," in the *Philadelphia City Paper*, a local free weekly, explored the reasons that public access was not yet established, despite dedicated funding from area cable franchises. (Full disclosure: I was the author of this bit of activist journalism, and today am a member of the PhillyCAM community.) From that article, a group of determined citizens gathered to respond, including several people who became lifelong devotees of public access, like Gretjen Clausing, PhillyCAM's current executive director, and Keith Brand, now co-chair of the board of directors at PhillyCAM.

When asked how he became a public access activist, Brand told me, "It's your fault." In 1990, Brand was enrolled in the PhD program at Temple University's Radio, Television and Film School. He approached his professor seeking advice on a topic for independent study, and the professor handed him my *City Paper* article. Brand got involved in the fight for access, saying that the city was "really good at stalling and stalling."

By the mid 1990s, the Philadelphia Community Access Coalition (PCAC) was out in force. Ricky Paul, a newly elected PhillyCAM board member, has been fighting alongside Brand since the early days protesting in and around City Hall. "I became involved with PCAC through AIDS activism," says Paul, who had met cable activist Inja Coates at AIDS activist gatherings. Paul says the reason for the lengthy delay was "old-school backroom politics," citing the legacy of Frank Rizzo.

Public Access: 24/7 Porn?

Paul grew up in Philadelphia, and describes the 1970s and '80s as tumultuous. "With the MOVE headquarters being blown up, Philadelphia had such a bad reputation, similar to Chicago's politics under Daley." He adds, "I think about how Philadelphia's changed since that time, taking a positive step forward internationally." Paul does not know the specifics of the deal that was cut in 1983, but he says, "My impression was, here's another case of a big business that didn't want to follow the

rules." Paul recalls one theory: "I have been told that they were concerned public access would be 24/7 porn."

Gretjen Clausing explains all of the fits and starts of that lengthy battle with the city. In the late 1990s, PCAC made the first of many visits to city council, meeting with then president John Street, the Urban Affairs Leadership Council and other civic leaders. On Street's last day as president, a resolution was passed to hold a public hearing to investigate public access.

Publicly, the tide seemed to be flowing toward the creation of a public access entity, but behind the scenes at City Hall, it was a very different story. Thanks to Comcast, city council members were treated to a screening of a show filled with nudity and racist jokes that had aired on another city's cable access channel. Despite this tactic, hundreds of people showed up for the 1999 city council hearing on public access, where members from PCAC and the community at large testified for over five hours in support of the channels. Following that hearing, over a dozen articles supporting public access appeared in local papers.

In 1999, a bill unanimously passed in city council approving public access amendments to the city's agreement with Comcast, at the time the only cable provider in Philadelphia. And yet no channels were established.

The Long Haul Pays Off

When John Street was elected mayor at the end of that year, he received over 5,000 letters in support of cable access, but the creation of the channels was stalled. Activists were becoming exhausted from the long haul. Gretjen Clausing points to a pivotal moment in 2001, when she and her colleagues had all but given up. At the annual conference of the Alliance for Community Media, PCAC was given an award for its extraordinary commitment to public access and media democracy. Clausing says it was that moment, in a ballroom filled with cheering people, when she found the strength to keep going.

The next year PCAC, along with seventeen other community organizations, filed suit against the city for failing to fulfill its promise to establish cable access. The case was thrown out for lack of standing. After that lawsuit and the accompanying press attention, the community at large began to realize that cable access was a tool for all activists involved in social justice work. Jonathan Stein of Community Legal Services gathered a team of attorneys and was able to begin mediation with the city in 2004. What followed was a leap of faith by both sides. PCAC needed to trust the city, and the city needed to know that the channels would not fill with incendiary programming. The city asked PCAC for a business plan, bylaws and a board, and PCAC created a strategy whereby public access would not cost the city a cent by exchanging four of its five designated analog channels for four digital ones.

A Digital Foundation

Today PhillyCAM is housed in temporary quarters at the Painted Bride Art Center, a performing and visual arts venue in the Old City section. PhillyCAM's permanent home is under construction, just a block west of Independence Hall, in a two-story former photography studio. Easily accessible by public transit, the media center will have a large sound stage, a public studio with a storefront window, classroom and meeting space, editing suites and the latest in digital video editing technology. Gretjen Clausing, who always has a huge contagious smile, says, "Because we are starting up now, we don't have the baggage of analog technology. We can start from a completely digital foundation."

This fresh start means PhillyCAM doesn't have to deal with the the old way of doing things, says Clausing. There is no need to replace outmoded equipment, and producers have access to HD

digital technology. "We can break the conventional public access wisdom that we are only operating a TV channel. We can think more expansively. We are a community media center. We're creating an organizational culture that is more than being a TV channel, bringing together our members to learn from each other." And, she adds, PhillyCAM can distribute member-produced content through the web, too.

The ability to program the station's channels remotely via internet connection dramatically changes the way Deborah Rudman, PhillyCAM's programming director, does her job. In the past, Rudman would have to physically change tapes on site. Now, with PhillyCAM's turbo server, Rudman is able to load shows and change the schedule from anywhere using a desktop, laptop and her smart phone. She can send files for cablecasting to the server, and PhillyCAM's website also has an on-demand component, which she can load from anywhere. When I was researching this article, Rudman added programs to the queue that I could watch from any computer.

Storefront Video from the Express Studio

At this post-analog moment into which PhillyCAM is born, the facility under construction will look dramatically different from its shag-carpeted predecessors. At the PhillyCAM annual meeting in March 2011, members were treated to a life-sized 3D walkthrough of the proposed build-out by Metcalfe Architecture and Design.

One of the more outstanding features of the new facility is on the ground floor, at street level. The planned Express Studio will have a storefront window. Producers will be able to create live programming right in front of those walking by, and shows will air simultaneously on PhillyCAM, allowing for a dramatically different sort of spontaneity.

PhillyCAM membership went from zero to 230 in one year. Antoine Haywood, PhillyCAM's membership and outreach director, describes the membership's diverse demographics, with people aged 16 to 70 participating, from every single zip code in the city. "Some people come with experience, and then there are people who are new to this and have an idea for a show." Members must either take a brief certification class in order to sign out cameras and use editing equipment, or they must place-out through testing. Members can also provide programming completed off site.

Current shows include *Focus on Fitness*, with host Reverend Jesse Brown; *Double Lives*, a 30-minute dramatic series written by teens; *Unsolved Philadelphia*, which opens up real-life cold cases; and the somewhat notorious *Richie Antipuna Show*, which enters the viewer into a nearly perfect alternate universe.

Richie Antipuna grew up in Kensington, one of the toughest neighborhoods in the city. He was a talented student who started making movies at age 11, but dropped out of school at 15 to sell crack. "I became a victim of the streets of Kensington. I saw all the money my classmates were making, in the world we lived in, and I fell into the crack dealer outfit." It wasn't long before Antipuna got in trouble with the law. "I lived the life of a king as a young kid, with my own limo and chauffeur. I vowed I would never be broke again, but of course all the money went to bail and lawyers." What began as a sentence of community service transformed into the life of a community documentarian, posting videos shot in Kensington on YouTube and his own website. Antipuna exists in a rare place where he is both respected by his neighbors and trusted by local media.

When he heard about PhillyCAM, he decided to create *The Richie Antipuna Show*, filming and editing segments featuring local politicians, community members, musicians, artists and crime reports. The gritty, homegrown hit offers an alternate telling of local events unmediated by news editors.

It Takes a Video Village

During all the dry years without public access, Philadelphia's independent film and video community continued to flourish. Scribe Video Center, founded in 1982 by Louis Massiah, where Gretjen Clausing worked for some time, continues to offer training and production facilities to community members, with regular screenings of locally produced documentaries and dramas. Temple University's Film and Media Arts Program has always been instrumental in fostering local independent production. MediaTank, the Media Mobilizing Project and Prometheus Radio Project are other independent outlets for grassroots productions, and along with Scribe, they now use PhillyCAM to broadcast programs. Drexel University's DUTV also offered a home for independent producers, including the group known as the Termite TV Collective.

Burrowing Deep for the Story

In 1992 three Temple graduate students, Jim Oспенson, Merle Perlson and Michael Kuetemeyer, were so blown away by Manny Farber's 1962 manifesto, "Termite Art Vs. White Elephant Art," that they formed the Termite TV Collective. Kuetemeyer, the only founder who remains active in Termite TV 19 years later, explains that one line in Farber's essay resonated powerfully with the trio: "A peculiar fact about termite-tapeworm-fungus-moss art is that it moves always forward, eating its own boundaries, and likely as not, leaves nothing in its path but evidence of eager, industrious, unkempt activities." Kuetemeyer explains, "What was inspirational for us was Manny Farber's definition of 'termite art' being art that doesn't strive for perfection, where the emphasis is on exploration, on taking risks, rather than relying on a formulaic style of producing work that has been successful in the past. This freedom to experiment creates a sense of playfulness and spontaneity in the work that we produce."

The trio began by producing a half-hour weekly independent television broadcast and quickly took on more members. These early shows, available for viewing on the Termite TV website, began with a clip, run backwards, of a television being smashed with a sledgehammer. Largely political in focus, themes included the Gulf War, the *bons mots* of Frank Rizzo, consumerism, gender and health. The Termites interspersed plenty of levity through split screens, various distortions of color, sound and images and general absurdities, like a human-sized bunny.

Extending Grad School Indefinitely

"We were grad students in the Radio-Television-Film department," says Kuetemeyer. "Many of our classmates and other artists produced segments for the shows. The unique multidisciplinary and genre-mixing nature of the department created the supportive environment." Mike O'Reilly, an early member who currently works as a producer for WHYY, the local PBS affiliate, joined Termite in season two. He recalls that some very profound moments emerged from all the experimentation.

Funded in part by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and individual donors, the collective has created a massive body of work over the years, with thousands of videos in its archive. Termite's main office is in the Crane Building, a former warehouse in the Fishtown section that houses many artists and arts groups. In true Termite fashion, the TV collective's small office actually exists within a larger office. To get to it, you must first pass through Perfect Prototype, a company that creates virtual reality exhibits and advertisements, and be sidetracked by that company's breathtaking Augmented Reality projects.

On an early spring evening, I arranged to meet members of the Termite TV Collective in their office. Debbie Rudman, Laura Deutch and John Pettit arrived in person, but Anula Shetty and Michael Kuetemeyer Skyped in from the Kunalea Volcano National Park in Hawaii, where Mike's mom is a park ranger. The meeting was a fitting blend of real and virtual, or local and distant, mediated by screens but also quite intimate.

Termites Walk, Talk, Teach

These days, Termite TV is actively engaged in multiple projects: *Walk Philly*, *Messages in Motion*, *Life Stories* and *Food Water Shelter*. As technology has changed since the early 1990s, Termite has changed its methods of collecting, editing and displaying work. One major benefit for Termite TV is the ongoing participation of Debbie Rudman, who oversees programming at PhillyCAM, where she can schedule Termite TV productions. As is the case with many in the Philadelphia independent film and video community, lines are blurred, and collaborations across groups and organizations are common.

Termite's Walk Philly project is innovative because it involves the use of iPods as mobile video viewing devices. Debbie Rudman opens up Termite TV's Walk Box, which is a stenciled strongbox, to show the contents: ten iPods, plus splitters to enable walkers to share. Participants can also download Walk Philly walking tour videos to their own iPods or iPhones. As of this writing, there are 25 videotaped walking tours, and the database continues to grow. "Each *Walk Philly* video tour is a personal interpretation evoking different moods, memories and histories ranging from the playful to the experimental to the informative," according to the accompanying brochure inside the Walk Box.

One *Walk Philly* tour follows an urban forager on the *Wild Weed Walk*. *Old City Walks*, created in conjunction with the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, offer three options for strolling through the historic downtown Philadelphia neighborhood, passing the U.S. Mint and the Ben Franklin Bridge along the way. *Chinatown Walks*, in collaboration with Philadelphia's Asian Arts Initiative, consider the changing character of the Chinese neighborhood. *Walk Phillies*, a double play on words, is a five-part cinema verite account of the 2008 Phillies victory parade along Broad Street following the baseball team's World Series win. The *Walk Philly* series tends to meander, often showing nothing more elaborate than undifferentiated stretches of sidewalk, but suddenly the narrator might tell a fascinating story, and this is what Termite TV is all about. As Mike O'Reilly explained, the experimental techniques of Termite TV generate a lot of useless stuff, but also some unexpected gems within, creating moments of profound depth.

Termite's Laura Deutch is in charge of Termite's *Messages in Motion* project (*MIM*), which is about self expression as social change. *MIM* "works with neighborhood programs and community-based organizations to produce, distribute and exhibit short-form documentary videos as a way to support and enhance existing community organizing work." A van containing handheld Flip video digital recorders, laptops, internet access and a viewing monitor travels throughout the city, offering writing and video training, multiple distribution platforms and groundbreaking teaching models.

Deutch says the *MIM* project, which began in 2009, grew out of youth workshops. Adding the Termite spirit into the mix, Deutch saw the Flip video camera as a quick, sturdy and efficient method of providing accessible technology to young people who would otherwise lack access to the technology. Deutch parks the van at a branch library and conducts a one-hour workshop for five to ten young people, who learn how to gather images and do voiceovers. Deutch wants to help kids understand how to use media to create a message that can be personal or political. The results are striking. In neighborhoods that normally only see a video crew covering a murder or fire, young people create poignant video postcards that portray everyday lives, sometimes using poetry as narrative.

MIM recently received a grant for its upcoming *Securing Spaces* tour, with a mission to "rethink what it means to be secure by looking at how communities address the interconnected issues of physical well-being, water safety and food safety to create safe spaces in their neighborhoods." Deutch hopes that *MIM* will be able to travel out-of-state by the end of 2011.

Life Stories: Tell it in Five

Life Stories bills itself as a no-questions-asked collection of five-minute episodes, with names like *Iron Chef*, *Ugly* and *Paranormal*. Rudman tells the story of its inception: "Dorothea Braemer came up with the idea when Anula, Mike, Carl Lee and she went on their bus tour of community media centers across the country and needed a way to gather stories and edit them as they traveled. They would set up a booth by the side of the road or at different locations and people would stop to 'tell their life story in five minutes.' Along with all the five-minute stories, there are a number of half hour Termite TV episodes around the theme of life stories. *Yo! Taxi* was a life story project based around that on the larger topic of worker rights. *Prison Life Stories* was also part of this ongoing project. Before my involvement there were life stories programs made from that trip and new initiatives locally such as *Life Stories from Washington Avenue* and *American Street* which were more place-based. We plan to do a life stories recording at the Media Literacy conference this July in Philly."

Another upcoming project for Termite is *Water Food Shelter*, also known as *The Basics Trilogy*. Three 29-minute episodes, produced over the past three years, address basic human essentials, and are set to broadcast in mid-May on PhillyCAM. *Water* looks at both the poetic and political: "While we attempt to restrict water use through pacts and treaties, sometimes we just can't stop that slow leak on the roof." In part two of the series, Termite TV examines what food means to individuals and to the media, and what our current conditions imply: "As our basic needs become more and more dear, our modes of survival must be creative, efficient, and self-sustaining." Part three, *Shelter*, examines concepts of home, housing problems, alternative architecture and sanctuaries.

Mike O'Reilly wishes he could be as flexible at WHYY, but decisions about programming come from the top down at the venerated public TV station, and new initiatives take a lot of time, much like changing course on a giant ship. Union rules, corporate structure and the nature of the institution get in the way of quick change. Termite TV, by contrast, is able to make decisions from the bottom up, by collective action, and the resulting work is spontaneous, playful and experimental, blending personal and political, able to be limber, light and distributed.

Community TV in the Age of YouTube, and What Quakers Have To Do With It

In the case of both Termite TV and PhillyCAM, these questions come up: Does grassroots video remain relevant in the age of YouTube? When anyone can post anything online, is there still a need for a community collective? Absolutely, says Bruce Schimmel, recently elected to the PhillyCAM board. The difference is in community. Schimmel notes the distinct advantage when film and video makers work as a team. "A lot of stuff on YouTube is garbage. Making decent media requires community. I've worked in radio stations and newspapers, and I can tell you that things are better when people collaborate." Gretjen Clausing says that nationally there is a crisis of journalism. As the tide shifts toward media consolidation, it's important to preserve local media. And while people may have access to cameras and the ability to upload what they've shot, well crafted videomaking requires training, which is top of the agenda for PhillyCAM: how to compose a shot, how to prepare for an interview, exploring what creates compelling content. People are more likely to watch longer-form programming on television, and there is also that magic when a viewer stumbles upon a public access program while flipping channels. At PhillyCAM, a member learns how to create industry standard programming and could get a job at a TV station following training.

As long as mainstream media exists, activist grassroots media will continue to generate local, personally relevant alternative content. In Philadelphia, Quaker philosophy is in the city's DNA. A tenet of Quaker thinking is that all people are equal in God's eyes. While a minority of the city's population self-identify as Quaker, the assumption of equal justice and equal voice pervades and informs the community at large. At both PhillyCAM and Termite TV, stories flow from diverse Philadelphia populations across class, race, ethnic and economic boundaries. We are all storytellers and we all want to be heard.