

Municipal Television – A Clash Of Vision

by Marcus Banks

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On one channel, the titles of the shows have a tang – there is “Secrets of New York,” “Cool in Your Code,” “Globe Trekker,” even “Tommy Tang’s Modern Thai Cuisine.”

In the other channel, there are hours and hours of a show called: “The Council.” (One recent highlight: “The NYC Council Subcommittee on Housing”)

The first is channel 25; the second is cable channel 74. They are both part of the NYC Media Group; they are both owned by City Hall. And they both are being criticized, for nearly opposite reasons.

Don’t misunderstand. Both are also praised.

The [NYC Media Group](#), conceived by Mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2003 and consolidated into its present form in early 2005 and housed within the Department of Technology and Telecommunications, is comprised principally of flagship broadcast channel 25, and cable channels 71, 73, and 74.

Channel 74, which focuses on the doings of government -- hearings, press conferences -- now is also available [online](#), certainly an innovation. (Channel 73 mostly offers programs in languages other than English geared for immigrants, and channel 71 is run by the New York off-track betting corporation.)

Channel 25 offers outstanding production values and broadcasts [a schedule of cultural and entertainment programming](#)

with a New York slant that is so various and popular that, beginning in September 2006, some of the most popular night-time shows on 25

[also began airing during the daytime hours on broadcast giant WNBC-TV](#)

. This was a first in city history.

But Gale Brewer, head of the New York City Council’s Committee on Technology in Government, argues that the government-oriented programming -- which is the reason behind municipal television in the first place, required by the [City Charter](#) (page 227) -- is often of

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poor quality and aired at inconvenient times.

From 1992 to 2003, the city's first official municipal cable station, [Crosswalks Television](#), exclusively aired government programming. NYC Media has departed considerably from this tradition, and this has led to clashing perspectives about the proper function of city television.

Brewer would like to see NYC Media devote some of the creativity that is evident on channel 25 to its government programming on channel 74. (Despite popular opinion to the contrary, she does not believe that public affairs television must be stodgy and boring. Rather than a cooking show that is similar to those on the Food Network, for example, Brewer might broadcast a discussion with a member of the City Council about how the health department's proposed ban on trans-fats at restaurants would affect their district.

Brewer's vision is directly at odds with that of Arick Wierson, the general manager of NYC Media Group. "We have to look like regular TV, TV that people are used to watching. So we made it hip, we made it flashy," [Wierson said](#) following a recent council hearing to discuss the direction of NYC-TV. He noted that cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles and Houston are looking to New York for lessons about how to revitalize their municipal television productions.

Brewer suggests just the reverse, that New York can look to other municipalities for suggestions on how to enliven government programming. Among the innovations done elsewhere:

- Posting topics of City Council hearings on the Internet in advance of the hearings
- Running captions providing information about the topic of the hearing as they are broadcast (similar to C-Span)
- Providing interactive forums where city residents can speak directly to government officials.

Brewer also proposes other ideas that are not so common around the country:

- Developing "explanatory" programming that provides a broader context for the work of government officials and agencies
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- Running snippets of a hearing, rather than gavel-to-gavel, then offering roundtable discussions of it and man-on-the-street interviews
- Partnering with film students to produce low-budget documentaries about how government works

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- Broadcasting meetings that do not take place in City Hall, such as the gatherings of local community boards

Whatever changes occur on channel 74, Wierson plans to continue channel 25 as it is. As he succinctly stated at the recent hearing, ["Television is meant to be watched"](#). ^