

The Cable Guys

Two stalwarts demonstrate what public-access television can do

BY DAN KENNEDY

IT MAY NOT be etched in stone, but it's a rule nonetheless: No one can write about public-access television without making reference to "Wayne's World," the *Saturday Night Live* skit—later a movie—about an access show starring two high-school-age stoners who prattle on about the heavy metal they can't play and the sex they haven't had. If you don't believe me, try Googling "public access" and "Wayne's World," and you'll see what I mean.

Not only that but you can't even *talk* to people involved in access TV without the Mike Myers–Dana Carvey stereotype creeping in. That's what I discovered when I set out to write this story about Joe Heisler, Chris Lovett, and Boston Neighborhood Network (BNN), the city's public-access system. Heisler hosts a weekly political talk show. Lovett anchors a nightly newscast. Both they and their programs are well-regarded. But "Wayne's World" hangs over the whole operation like a cloud.

"Some people make fun of public-access programming. They call it 'Wayne's World,'" says Heisler, before I even bring it up. "But it is what you make it." Similarly, Curtis Henderson, BNN's general manager, adds, "People refer to public-access television as 'Wayne's World,' and I'm trying to change that kind of image for BNN." Lovett, who's more reserved, keeps the "Wayne's World" analogies to himself.

Well, party on, Garth. Party on, Wayne. There's more to public-access television than amateur-hour programming taped in someone's basement.

Across the Commonwealth—and people who follow such things say the access picture is brighter here than in most other places—people are tuning in to watch city-council meetings, school plays, and call-in shows that deal with local issues ranging from property taxes to whether or not to build a bike path along an old railroad bed. According to the Alliance for Community Media, a national organization of access producers, more than a million volunteers are involved in making some 20,000 hours of local programming every week. And sure, you might occasionally run into Wayne and Garth wannabes; access is, after all, open to everyone. But the truth is that local access plays a crucial role in the

civic life of many communities.

"I think there's absolutely nothing that compares to access TV for local information and news. It's a really important part of our communities," says Wendy Blom, a BNN alumnus who's now executive director of Somerville Community Access Television. And it's not a matter of numbers, according to Felicia Sullivan, the program manager for new media at the University of Massachusetts–Lowell and an access producer since 1992. "If it's important information for 20 people, and those 20 people really need that information, then it should be put out there," says Sullivan.

Because Boston is the largest city in the Commonwealth, BNN is the Massachusetts giant of public access. (The access funding formula is based on the cable providers' revenues within each community. The total amount is negotiated at the local level, within limits set by the state.)

According to BNN, one-third of the city's more than 160,000 cable subscribers watch at least some of its programs. With a budget of \$1.7 million, roughly two-thirds of which is paid by the city's main cable provider (Comcast), BNN can afford to do things that other cities and towns can't.

Foremost among those is *Neighborhood Network News*, a 30-minute newscast hosted by Lovett that airs three times each weekday on Comcast's Channel 9 (RCN shows it on Channel 15), at 5:30, 9:30, and 11 p.m. A tiny operation compared with the news programs at the city's commercial stations, it is nevertheless well beyond the scope of what other access outfits in Massachusetts can offer.

By contrast, *Talk of the Neighborhoods*, hosted by Heisler and airing live on Tuesdays from 7 to 8 p.m. (it's repeated several times during the week), is not all that different from talk and call-in shows in many other cities and towns. What makes the program stand out is that it's steeped in Boston's rich political tradition—and that Heisler himself is a certified Boston politics junkie. If he didn't tell you he'd grown up on a farm in South Dakota, you'd swear he was born and raised in Dorchester. (Although it's difficult to see either show if you

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don't live in Boston, reruns of both programs are broadcast Sunday mornings on WPAX-TV, Channel 68.)

"Those are shows that appeal to hardcore city viewers," says Seth Gitell, a former press secretary to Boston mayor Tom Menino who's now a freelance journalist. "If you've got a decent city initiative that you need viewers to learn about, those are some of your only outlets for that."

LOCAL NEWS

It's mid-October, four weeks before Election Day. Joe Heisler is chatting it up with Tom Birmingham, the former state Senate president who's now practicing law with the Boston firm of Edwards Angell Palmer & Dodge. They're in BNN's studio on the second floor of the state Transportation Building, in Park Square, seated at a chrome-and-black table. The theme music, the Lovin' Spoonful's "Summer in the City," comes on, and Birmingham starts bopping his head in time.

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Deval Patrick has pulled out to a double-digit lead over his Republican rival, Lt. Gov. Kerry Healey. And Birmingham, not surprisingly, is predicting a big Patrick victory, despite surveys that show voters are closer to Healey on issues such as rolling back the income tax and cracking down on illegal immigration. "I

think sometimes we might have a tendency to attribute too much to specific issues," Birmingham tells Heisler. "Ultimately, people form judgments about the type of person who's running."

In the second half of the show, Heisler brings on Jim O'Sullivan, a reporter with State House News Service, who proves to be a challenge. He's smart and amiable but also the very definition of noncommittal. ("Want me to point out one of the delicious ironies? Journalists are some of the worst guests," Heisler tells me several weeks afterward, referring to their frequent reluctance to take a stand. To be fair, he wasn't singling out O'Sullivan.)

Later that week, in a third-floor studio at Boston University's College of Communication, Chris Lovett reads the city news of the day from the anchor desk, then interviews two elderly men from Veterans for Peace. They're advocating an advisory question on the ballot in some state Senate districts calling for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. "Our men are subject to a turkey shoot. It's going to get worse," says Anthony Flaherty, who served in Vietnam. Adds Hamer Lacey, an octogenarian who fought in World War II: "If there is a draft for this kind of a war, there's going to be a revolution."

Next up for an in-studio interview is Lee Matsueda, a

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For *Talk of the Neighborhoods*' Joe Heisler, local access is a labor of love.

young man wearing a T-shirt labeled TRU, for the T Riders Union. He's come to denounce a proposed fare increase by the MBTA. Lovett challenges him: "Can you really ask the rest of the state to ease the T's debt burden? Politically, that doesn't sound like an easy thing to do."

Finally Bill Forry, managing editor of the weekly *Dorchester Reporter* and three other community papers, comes on to deliver the "Dorchester Report," something he does every other Thursday. "For folks like me, at the community-journalism level, it's a place where we can get neighborhood-news stories out that are pretty much not going to see the light of day on television otherwise," says Forry of *Neighborhood Network News*. And Dorchester's not the only neighborhood that gets air time. Other contributors report on the Asian community, South Boston, the Fenway, Allston-Brighton, Roslindale, and Hyde Park.

Heisler and Lovett are hardly media revolutionaries, but they've succeeded in positioning themselves as effective alternatives, or at least supplements, to the mainstream, covering local stories and discussing neighborhood issues in ways that the city's daily papers and television newscasts, which appeal to regional markets, never get around to.

The two are also a study in contrasts. Heisler, a manager for the state Department of Transitional Assistance, is ex-

pansive and effusive, with a tendency to fawn over his guests, though he'll ask tough questions, too. *Talk of the Neighborhoods* was an unpaid gig until the past few years; now he receives a small stipend. For Heisler, local access is a labor of love—and a reflection of his enthusiasms, whether for politics (he calls an unsuccessful 1992 run for state representative "one of the greatest experiences of my life") or journalism.

It's a labor of love for Lovett, too, but he's also a full-time employee of BNN, and one of three at *Neighborhood Network News*. (As part of the arrangement BNN has with Boston University, Lovett is also paid as an adjunct professor.) Cool and cerebral, Lovett keeps some distance from the people he's interviewing. Unlike Heisler, Lovett really is a Dorchester boy who's lived in several other Boston neighborhoods as well. Lovett's late father, William, was a district chief in the Boston Fire Department from the late 1960s until 1980. He was assigned to the fire station on Meeting House Hill, a block from the three-decker where he'd been raised, during a time when that neighborhood was wracked by arson. Chris Lovett recalls watching one such fire while he was at a party (a "Bronx is burning" moment, as he describes it). Still, Chris was interested in other things. A graduate of Boston Latin, he got his degree from Columbia University in comparative literature—a long way from the streets of Dorchester, and

a long way from the voice of the neighborhoods that he would later become.

"I looked down at journalism," he recalls. "I was a real snotty kind of guy."

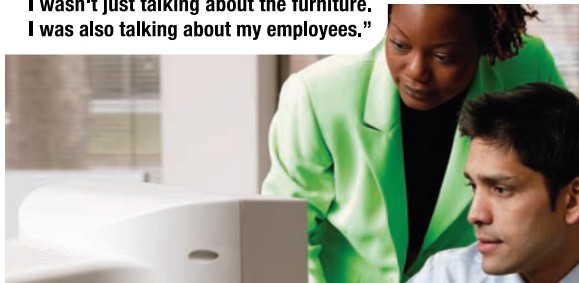
Heisler and Lovett do share certain qualities: They're both white, fiftysomething suburbanites (they each moved out of the city about a decade ago, Heisler to Dedham, Lovett to North Quincy) in a city that is rapidly becoming younger and more ethnically diverse. But no one in Boston politics seems to hold that against them. Suffolk County sheriff Andrea Cabral, an African-American whose 2005 victory over Boston City Councilor Stephen Murphy was seen by many as a triumph of New Boston over Old, credits a debate on *Talk of the Neighborhoods* with helping to put her over the top.

"It sounds funny," Cabral says with a laugh. "But I don't think either Joe or Chris is held back by the fact that they're both middle-aged white guys." After all, she adds: "I got a lot of votes from middle-aged white guys, too."

And there's nothing white-bread about their shows. "The diversity of the characters they have on is pretty incredible," says *Boston Globe Magazine* columnist Tom Keane, a former city councilor.

The same is true of the rest of the BNN lineup. *Neigh-*

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borhood Network News and *Talk of the Neighborhoods* are his signature shows, but general manager Curtis Henderson points out that the schedule is filled with programming produced in conjunction with various nonprofit agencies, some of it aimed at foreign-language minorities and ethnic groups. Cabral herself hosts one such show, *Common Ground*, which focuses on the business of the sheriff’s office.

For BNN—and for Lovett and Heisler—the real challenge isn’t New Boston versus Old Boston. Rather, it’s the civic-engagement ethos they personify, and what may happen to that ethos in a world that’s rapidly being changed by technology and the clash of giant media corporations. It’s a world that’s very different from the one that gave birth to BNN a generation ago.

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

Chris Lovett was there at the beginning. *Neighborhood Network News* made its debut in 1984, not long after the city had been wired for cable. And Lovett, the editor of the *Dorchester Argus Citizen*, was recruited along with several other community journalists to report for the fledgling newscast. In one memorable early report, Lovett tracked down, *60 Minutes*-style, state Rep. James “Jimmy” Craven, a longtime Jamaica Plain lawmaker known for campaign trickery, to answer questions about two apparent “straw” candidates (named MacDonald and McLaughlin) in the 1984 Democratic primary eventually won by John McDonough, now executive director of Health Care for All. Craven refused to talk with Lovett, who instructed his videographer to film Craven as he walked away—fair play, in Lovett’s view, since Craven had already declined to respond to at least one earlier request for an interview.

“I later realized this made the difference between an ambush and the fairness of showing what Jimmy Craven could have avoided,” Lovett said in an e-mail follow-up. Three years later, Lovett became anchor and news director, the position he continues to hold.

Rory O’Connor, the first news director and now the president of Globalvision, a New York City-based production company, says his goal was to build an “intensively local” newscast as an alternative to what was available elsewhere on the dial. “Chris was one of the first people I brought into the mix,” O’Connor says. “He’s the perfect example of what I’m talking about. He was an outstanding local—and ‘local’ is a badge of honor—print reporter who had never done any television.”

Right from the start, *Neighborhood Network News* set up shop at Boston University, an arrangement that has proved beneficial both to the newscast and to journalism students, who help with the production and editing of the show. “It gives them the opportunity to work on a daily news product,” says Jim Thistle, director of the broadcast-journalism



Chris Lovett has helped guide *Neighborhood Network News* into the New Boston era.

program at BU and a former news director at Channels 4, 5, and 7.

Joe Heisler came along in 1995, following more than a decade of reporting for and editing community newspapers, working as the chief aide to Democratic state Rep. Angelo Scaccia of Boston's Readville section, and either running for office (he unsuccessfully challenged state Rep. Shirley Owens-Hicks in 1992) or thinking about it (he considered running for Tom Menino's City Council seat in 1993, after Menino became mayor).

So how did Heisler come to BNN? "I talked to them, and I guess they were desperate for hosts at the time," Heisler says. His original idea was to interview the editors of neighborhood newspapers. It worked—for a while. "As you can imagine, we quickly ran out of neighborhoods," he says. It was then that he turned to political figures, and discovered that the phones would light up. His avocation as a talk-show host was off and running.

Now, though, there are threats to these kinds of programs—over the horizon at the moment, but sure to become more visible in the years ahead. In the past, cable companies had to negotiate with local officials for the right to wire a city or town. As part of what was, at least initially, an exclusive franchise arrangement, they agreed to pay a certain amount of money to fund access operations such as BNN. (In a few communities, a second cable provider has come to town, such as RCN in Boston, and paid a portion of the access funds.) If the amount of money isn't huge—and, in most communities, it certainly isn't—at least it's reliable.

Technology could soon change that. At both the state and federal levels, two telephone companies, Verizon and AT&T,

want to offer television through a new fiber-optic cable that also carries phone service. Verizon is currently pursuing the town-by-town process of cracking into the Boston suburbs, but the two telecom giants are also seeking a stripped-down process that would allow them to negotiate with state and federal regulators rather than local officials. The cable companies are fighting the change (after all, they've profited enormously from the current regulatory regime), but if the local franchising system disappears, what happens to access funds is unclear.

"Local access is the counterbalance to media consolidation," says Chuck Sherwood, a veteran media activist based on Cape Cod and a principal in Community Media Visioning Partners. He fears the loss of that counterbalance in years to come. Adds Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy and the author of the new book *Digital Destiny: New Media and the Future of Democracy*, "There's a digital gold rush going on by the largest players."

In addition, there's little doubt that we're moving toward a time when television and the Internet will merge. And when you're getting all of your programming from the Internet, there's no need for traditional cable—and, thus, no clear notion of who, if anyone, should pay for public access.

"We've got to realize that if we're going to continue to provide services to communities, to provide this First Amendment forum, then the money isn't all going to come from cable companies anymore, because technology is changing," says Nancy Richard, national vice chair of the Alliance for Community Media and the executive director of Plymouth Area Community Television. "We've got to look at other revenue streams."

Still, she says, local-access activists have time. “I don’t think the shift is going to happen overnight,” Richard says. “The technology may change quickly, but you’ve still got generations of people who do not anticipate getting their information over the Internet.”

BNN head Henderson says he’s trying to prepare for that change. Later this year, BNN will close its studios at the Transportation Building and in Roxbury, and will consolidate in an old MBTA power station in Egleston Square. (Chris Lovett and company will remain at Boston University.) Henderson also wants to move toward financial self-sufficiency by lining up underwriting for BNN’s programs—not through large foundations and companies, but through “people and businesses that are close to the ground in the community.”

It’s an intriguing vision, and one that might become essential in the years to come.

MEETING A NEED

On February 26, 2006, Joe Heisler commemorated 10 years on the air with an hour-and-a-half special from Doyle’s, the legendary political tavern in Jamaica Plain—a favored

eating place for Boston mayors John F. “Honey Fitz” Fitzgerald, James Michael Curley, and, now, Tom Menino, as Heisler noted in a promo that aired several times during the evening.

While Heisler held forth at a table in the Fitzgerald Room, Chris Lovett interviewed guests at the front of the restaurant. It was a celebration of Old Boston (retired state treasurer Bob Crane, retired mayor Ray Flynn) and New (City Coun-

BNN is trying to move toward financial self-sufficiency.

cilor Sam Yoon, state representatives Marie St. Fleur and Linda Dorcena Forry, and Sheriff Cabral). St. Fleur had just withdrawn her one-day candidacy for lieutenant governor following revelations about her family’s tangled personal finances, and was back to campaigning for reelection to the House.

“I have to say that I’m glad you’re running again,” Heisler told her, touching her hand. He then proceeded to tell both women that people think of them as “leaders,” adding, “It doesn’t have anything to do with your color. It has to do with your ideas, with your energy.”



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It was an awkward moment. But it was real.

Heisler admits that there have been moments when he's considered giving up the show, but says the anniversary broadcast "re-energized" him. His view of himself is modest. "I don't have any notes. I go in there with the idea that it's a blank slate. Sometimes, unfortunately, it's blanker than others," he says. But there's genuine pride, too.

"There is still this love affair with politics here in Boston, and if there weren't, I wouldn't be on the air. I'm not suggesting that it's the crispest, most scintillating stuff in the market, but it fills a void," Heisler says. "People can say what they want about my show, but I'm fair. I think that's why people trust me enough to appear on the show. I don't carry water for anybody, you know what I mean?"

Sitting in his tiny, ramshackle office at Boston University, Chris Lovett voices the same kind of modest pride in serving a community in all its dimensions. "In a show like this, you avoid the tyranny of the majority, but you also avoid the tyranny of the niche," he says. "We're not serving a particular ethnic or other self-identified group. We serve all types of people."

Lovett is no raconteur, though he does mention the time a spark fell from the studio lights and ignited a guest's hair. "A grad student put it out, but I was thinking how long we could go and finish the interview before it really got going," he recalls. "She took it very well. If I were the guest, I would have been outraged."

More than anything, Lovett talks about the satisfaction that comes from serving his viewers in small but important ways. For instance, he remembers announcing a clinic to screen men for prostate cancer in Mattapan, and then having someone come up to him to tell him he'd gotten a check-up after learning about it on TV.

"That makes my day," Lovett says. "Some people might say that's not hard-hitting journalism, that's just a community bulletin board. I can't argue with that. But it's about making the community better, and I'm just happy to see that in the mix of the show."

Indeed, it's that kind of hyperlocalism that gives Heisler's and Lovett's shows their strength, and differentiates them from the mainstream. "There's no way that I'm going to get down to that level of local neighborhood stuff. It's just not going to happen," says Jon Keller, who covers politics for WBZ-TV (Channel 4). "They're meeting a desperate need, I think."

So party on, Joe. Party on, Chris. You deserve it. The city — and the civic life of the people who live there — would be poorer without you. **CW**

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