



Open Channel Berlin - Media Democracy and Education

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Overview

The Open Channel Berlin is a television and radio channel that offers an alternative in the rather one-sided media landscape and gives each citizen the opportunity to articulate himself or herself. In the last fifteen years many user groups have used the Open Channel to present themselves and to publicly state their opinion.

Recently there have unfortunately been attempts to dissolve the Open Channel by the coalition politicians in Berlin. This is not due to a lack of finance - the Open Channel is financed by a small part of the television and radio licence fee - but rather due to the fact, that another commercial television channel wants to use the transmission frequency of the Open Channel for its own activities. There is at the moment no foreseeable conclusion to this discussion.

The following article has two parts: An overview of the background and the possibilities of the Open Channel and an example of one of the many users of the Open Channel: The '23 Muskeltiere'.

Media Democracy: Non-Discriminatory Access to Radio and TV

Open Channels in Germany

Open Channels are radio and television accessible to anyone and everyone. Making use of Open Channels is making use of the right of free expression which is part of the German constitution.

Open Channels offer everyday people the opportunity to use a camera and a microphone to improve local communication, to establish dialogue between different social groups, and to be both seen and heard.

Open Channels do not compete with professional television. To do this would contradict the idea behind these Channels.

The equipment available has to be easy to handle and does not reach broadcast quality. The short training Open Channel producers receive cannot be compared with the years of training and experience at professional TV stations. Due to these restrictions Open Channel producers are making more with less. The producer has no choice but to work together with other producers. The production itself mostly establishes the first step to communication.

The restrictions at Open Channels turn out to be the advantages for the producers. One big advantage is that there is no tyranny of ratings.

The Open Channel Producer has more freedom and flexibility. He can afford to make changes and risks even to offend a few people. He does not have to sell the products of the



sponsors because there are no sponsors. He does not have to serve a broad audience. He can be strictly local and serve specific interests.

Open Channel programming is unpolished, direct and plain, truthful and rough. It is what the producer wants it to be.

There are certain regulations and rules common to all Open Channels in Germany:

1. Open Channels are first come first served channels. Irrespective of how important a producer or his program is or is not, everybody is treated equally!
2. The Open Channel staff does not influence the contents of the productions.
3. The staff does not produce the program. The staff members encourage people to use the Open Channel. They train the producer, support and motivate him.
4. There is no censorship.
5. The producer is legally responsible for the program he wants to be aired. If he breaks the law he will be prosecuted.
6. All commercial activities are forbidden.
7. Using the technical equipment, the training and assistance are free.

The first Open Channel in Germany started in 1984. Now we have almost 60 of these Channels in different parts of Germany and the number is still increasing.

The legislative basis for the Open Channels is to be found in the media laws of different states (lands) of the Federal Republic of Germany.

In Germany everybody receiving radio and television has to pay a set fee which is mainly used to finance the public service TV and radio programs. A small part of the set fee paid in the state (lands) where one or more Open Channels exist is used for funding these Channels.

Open Channel Berlin

The Open Channel Berlin was launched in August 1985 as part of the 'Pilot-Cable-Project'. A former factory site in Berlin-Wedding housed the Open Channel Berlin from the beginning. At that time the location was right next to the East-Berlin border, but due to the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is now almost in the center of town. The buildings are a real media park. Having the French and Canadian television, Deutsche Welle, Reuter TV and a considerable number of other media companies as close neighbors, the Open Channel Berlin managed to assert itself with the self-confidence of a 'fleur sauvage'.



More than 6000 producers have used the Open Channel Berlin. Everyone 18 and over who lives within the region of the German Constitution has the right to use it. Its radio and TV signals are transmitted in the Berlin cable system, which has more than 1.500.000 subscribers. The radio and TV producers use 90 % of the available time, being on cable every day from 1 p.m. to 1 a.m. A permanent staff of 13 is employed being responsible for the management, administration, equipment and public relations as well as for the consultation, support and training of the users. For production we offer three TV studios (including one portable), one radio-studio, cameras, microphones, editing facilities, etc.

As in all Open Channels, there is a broad range of topics. One of Berlin's specialities is the fact that the producers of the television programs come from 30 different countries and 40% of the productions are in a foreign language; on radio 10 countries and 10% of the productions. The great need for foreign groups to broadcast in their native language strongly illustrates the idea of Open Channels. All those having no voice in the other media get a chance to speak here.

You are me - A Model for Integration

Introduction

Since August 1985, programs produced by women and Turks, the unemployed and students, homosexuals and artists, Iranians and teachers, homeless persons and pupils, have been transmitted on the Open Channel Berlin. During the blueprint stage preceding the beginning of broadcast activities of the Open Channel Berlin, there were many discussions whether certain fringe groups should be offered a privileged access to the channel. In these discussions German fringe groups took precedence. At this time the opportunity to provide access to cultural and ethnic minority groups was secondary. In spite of this or maybe exactly for this reason, cultural and ethnic minority groups have pretty soon discovered the channel for their own purposes. Special efforts to rouse this' interest in the Open Channel Berlin would possibly have had a counterproductive effect or might only have attracted certain interest groups and in this respect would have undermined integration.

Functional Integration

In the following reflection, the term integration need not be understood by the meaning attributed to it by policies which address the social relations with cultural and ethnic minorities. The Open Channel Berlin is itself a social system in which integration can be seen to result from interdependencies, even where there are quite divergent attitudes toward basic social values.

Interdependence No. 1: You transmit because I transmit.

No matter how antidemocratic, radical or fundamentalist a program producer may be, if he



crosses the threshold of the Open Channel Berlin, he becomes subject to its rules and regulations. The producer accepts the fact that he is only allowed to transmit because others with quite different views are also allowed to transmit. Each producer claims a democratic and constitutional right - the freedom of speech - and he can exercise this right by observing the equality of this constitutional right enabling all to have the same right of access.. By way of his activities at the Open Channel Berlin, the producer demonstrates his participation in the society that is based on equality and freedom for all citizens.

Interdependence No. 2: You transmit because I watch.

Program producers are concerned that their programs are watched or listened to by as many people as possible. Regarding programs made by minority producers there is a large demand among the viewers in their target groups. For these viewers, the programs transmitted by the Open Channel Berlin are often the only means by which to receive transmissions in their mother tongue. Thus, it is no wonder that as early as 1989 the Open Channel Berlin was known to 43 per cent of the immigrant and minority population, and that Turkish programs in particular were well received, scoring audience ratings of 17 per cent (cf. Roters: - Audience without Programs?).

The willingness to produce and transmit programs by producers and the willingness of viewers to watch and listen form the preconditions for an intense exchange to take place between these two groups. By way of their engagement in the Open Channel Berlin the minority producer can move from the fringes of society into its centre. Producers quickly become public institutions whose views and opinions soon become part of the wider public domain. The public react, and the producers realise that they are not alone with their views and understand that others have different views thus, through exercising freedom of expression the producers learn and contribute to the political exchange in a democratic society.

Final remarks or the hopeful social integration

In the Open Channel Berlin producers coming from over 30 nations have transmitted their programs; in television a daily average of 4 hours of programs are transmitted in foreign languages, by radio a further 1.5 hours. Equal treatment and access by all persons has been the basis for the largely conflict free development of the Open Channel Berlin and the high percentage of foreign and minority producers who feel comfortable using this channel.

Berlin's Municipal Government Representative on behalf of Immigrant Minorities, Mrs. Barbara John, believes 'that an important part of the successful integration can indeed be attributed to the fact that many non-German groups have seized their opportunities in the Open Channel'.



In the Open Channel Berlin, basic democratic values are a practical experience for the producers which they daily address through their own activities - and this is regardless of whether they are non-German or German. This experience unifies: You are me.

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Media Education: School News in the Open Channel

The media project '23 Muskeltiere' (a play on the word 'musketeers' invented by a school class) is one example of how the opportunities afforded by the Open Channel Berlin can be used to bring the medium 'Television' nearer to primary school children. Television is still the most popular form of leisure for the young generation. The entertainment industry showers children with an endless number of messages. The children themselves, however, receive little help in how to deal with them. They are not told, that they can analyse and discuss these messages, or even produce their own media messages, and how to do this. It is these intentions, that are the central goals of our media project.

The Open Channel is an ideal partner for putting our project into practice. Its structures offer unique opportunities in the area of active media work. Children can use the technical equipment of the Open Channel, they can record programmes in two different studios. And above all the Open Channel has the exciting possibility of the children being able to watch their own programmes on television.

The '23 Muskeltiere' have been active in ten primary schools in south east Berlin over the last six years. The target group are children aged 9 to 12, in Berlin that is grades 4 to 6. We have done around 50 projects since we started and are supported by the organisation Kulturring in Berlin e.V.. More recently we have concentrated on the subject of television news. The following describes the ideas and the development of the news projects.

The world of news

In the last 5 years the amount of news coverage generated by each television channel has greatly increased. Most channels have, in addition to the main news, frequently occurring news updates, which provide the public with the very newest news. Special news channels provide a 24 hour constant flow of news (ironically one such channel is trying to take over the Open Channel's transmission frequency).

This abundance of news does not escape the children's attention. News is not their favourite programme, but they still hear the information and can name individual news programmes and channels. Even the children find it important, to know what is happening in the 'world'. But when they are asked about it, it becomes clear that the context is often missing and that they have only fragments of information (after all news programmes are not designed for children). During the war in Kosovo for example they became familiar with pictures of children and women fleeing from their homes and houses that were destroyed, but had little idea of the causes.

The term 'news' is also very diverse. News programmes include not only the traditional daily news but also everything in the range of more entertaining magazine shows and tabloid news. This is obvious in the children's productions. Here it is noticeable that the children when presenting use a style of speaking and presentation more similar to a magazine



programme than to a traditional news programme.

On the way to our own production

What is a piece of news? What news items do we see in television? Why is there no news about schools or about where we live? We collect ideas or categories of news and the children keep an account of news programmes that they watch. We then evaluate this and find that the categories correspond to ideas we collected (national politics, international politics, catastrophes, accidents, stars, sport and weather). In the main news there are no items about our school.

From the millions of news items every day why are always these few chosen? 'News about school is boring', some children say. Why is that? Why do we prefer sensational news above more everyday news about our environment? Why is a lot of news so negative? These questions often lead to interesting discussions in the classroom.

The prospect of making our own news programme motivates the whole class. Something like this hasn't happened before - our own class production will be broadcast in television. And so we get into groups (usually four children form a production team) and collect ideas: What could we report about our school? Common items were our school subjects and activities during the school year. The next step is to draft the first scripts and images for the background. Teams of reporters interview other pupils and teachers and choose the best material. We are now ready to go to the studio.

In Studio 2 of the Open Channel

The class trip to the Open Channel was the highlight of the whole project for most of the pupils. The groups go in turn into the studio to record the presentations they have prepared. In each group the pupils have different tasks: two pupils for camera, one for sound and the main person, the news presenter. The order is rehearsed once more and then either broadcast live (with this there are short breaks when the groups changeover) or recorded onto tape. Recording the programme gives more possibilities for the design: The best takes are chosen, previously produced material can be edited in.

The programme is now ready for transmission. Most of the pupils have cable connection at home (in Berlin 1.5 million are now connected) and can watch their own news programme together with their family and friends. The programme is obviously not a professional production. The camera wobbles or the sound is too quiet. During the evaluation the pupils also notice other mistakes that they would do better a second time (unfortunately there is no second time).



School news in the Open Channel?

A news project has great educational potential. For example the pupil's ability to express himself, teamwork and it offers a glimpse into news production. Through the involvement of the Open Channel this potential is increased. The studios offer the chance to produce a real news programme which is possible nowhere else. The pupils can try out the studio cameras, can mix the images with a vision mixer and learn to control sound. As well as this they are shown lighting, recording technology and transmission procedures.

The children are motivated by the production and are more open for theoretical questions about news and television in general. Such a media project however can only be a first impulse in this subject. It is important to continue regularly engaging with media related subjects. Only in this way can young people learn to cope in our modern media world.

The Open Channel Berlin (or indeed any public access channel) can play an important role in active media education. It would be a great loss to our project (and to Berlin) if the Berlin politicians would close the Open Channel down.

From the school year 1999/2000 the project also has partners in Spain and England. More information can be found at the internet site. Teachers who are interested can take part in the project and can register at the internet site.

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