

Ready, Set, PAN

As newspapers close their capitol bureaus, the value of public affairs networks increases.

BY STEVEN WALTERS

Move over Survivor!, The Bachelor and The Amazing Race. There's a different kind of reality TV available for the more discriminating viewer. Public affairs networks provide real-time and taped coverage of the sometimes messy, but always fascinating, art of lawmaking in state legislatures.

Networks and broadcast systems began offering real-time and archived coverage of state legislatures in the 1990s. If time and resources allow, they also cover the executive and judicial branches of state governments. The trend has exploded in recent years, as many newspapers closed their capitol bureaus.

"As newspapers have pulled back on statehouse coverage, it is arguably more important than ever that the basic proceeding of state government be televised, just as the U.S. Congress is on C-SPAN," says a 2011 Federal Communications Commission report.

Lights, Camera, Action!

Almost every state has some type of network or broadcast system providing legislative coverage—although the landscape of organizations that do so varies widely, according to a survey by NCSL. The largest, most sophisticated and independent organizations belong to the National Association of Public Affairs Networks (NAPAN). The association's president, Paul Giguere, who runs CT-N, The Connecticut Network, estimates that about 24 states have public affairs networks (PANs), most of which rely on tax or public funds to varying degrees.

Some of the larger networks include Connecticut, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Washington and Wisconsin. They broadcast real-time and archived legislative coverage, produce Emmy-award winning programs on complex issues and trends, travel around their states to cover cultural and historical events, and offer regular news updates.

WisconsinEye, for example, taped 147 face-to-face interviews with candidates for Congress and the Legislature before the Nov. 6 election. It also rebroadcast and archived dozens of candidates' debates, forums and news conferences.

The Pennsylvania Cable Network, with 37 employees and

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a \$4.5 million budget, "helps bring perspective to major issues by interviewing lawmakers one-on-one and hosting call-in programs with lawmakers, various commentators and analysts," says Pennsylvania Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi (R).



Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi (R) Pennsylvania

A second tier of capitol coverage networks has survived by blending public funds and other fund-raising partnerships, including with public broadcasting channels. These networks turn to whatever broadcasting systems are available—including public, educational and government (PEG) channels—to stay afloat. In other states, legislative coverage is provided by employees who work directly for legislative leaders, or for their public information offices.

Some state networks, such as Hawaii's, cover the legislature only during session. Others, like the Minnesota Channel, borrow legislative staff to get the job done.

How coverage of state affairs is produced and distributed varies by state. Viewers can watch their government in action via livestreaming over the Internet, or on cable channels, public TV networks and PEG channels.

A Fine Line

Large or small, most public affairs network professionals strive for independence in determining what and how they cover government activities. State employees who make capitol coverage decisions can walk a fine line, since their budgets often depend on the lawmakers they must cover.

In states like Arizona, New York and Michigan, coverage is



determined by legislative leaders and taped by their employees.

Tom Posey, public media director for the South Carolina ETW Channel and a NAPAN board member, says it's a balancing act to decide what to cover while working for a state agency the legislature funds. He was asked to start livecasting Senate Finance Committee meetings, for example, even though his agency has been downsized in recent years. He assigned a camera operator to those meetings.

"Each state has a political challenge" of how their house and senate want to be covered, says Posey. "We have evolved to the point where we balance our political relationships with our role as a state agency. At the end of the day, we govern ourselves by our editorial standards."

In an effort to help its members navigate the tricky waters of political reporting, NAPAN developed a set of "best practices"—standards to follow in order to operate as independently as possible. They include:

- ◆ Cover of all three branches of state government.
- ◆ Keep coverage decisions free from political influence.
- ◆ Engage citizens by offering real-time debates, as well as archives.

It is possible for public affairs networks and lawmakers to coexist peacefully. Wisconsin Senator Fred Risser (D), the longest-serving legislator in the nation, says he's received "positive feedback" from citizens about WisconsinEye, and that state lawmakers act no differently when cameras are present. "Quite honestly, WisconsinEye has had a minimal impact on legislative



*Senator
Fred Risser (D)
Wisconsin*

activity. The Legislature functions as if it did not exist," he says.

Washington House Speaker Pro Tem Jim Moeller (D) supports his state's network, TVW, because it provides transparency, which leads to "a better government, a better democracy." And even though TVW has had to absorb \$2.5 million in state aid cuts since 2008, the network's subsidy remains a "very bipartisan appropriation. It's pretty much looked at as a 'hands-off' sort of thing," Moeller says.



*House Speaker
Pro Tem
Jim Moeller (D)
Washington*

And... Cut!

Many networks struggle with funding since state legislative allocations have been cut in recent years. Added to that are the high costs of keeping up with the constantly changing technologies that come with every new model of smartphone, tablet and other high-tech toy.

The only network that receives no public funding, the non-profit WisconsinEye, has relied on cable fees, donations and loans for its \$1.2 million operating budget. But the 10-employee network, which fed coverage of collective bargaining protests at the state Capitol in 2011 around the world, has accumulated more than \$2 million in debt. Even so, WisconsinEye's governing board turned down a state loan offer from lawmakers, fearing it could compromise its independence. Network president Jon Henkes is working to find new financial backers and develop a long-term development approach.

In Ohio, the network has been "flat-funded for 10 years, which has begun taking its toll," says Executive Director Daniel Shellenbarger. The Ohio Channel creates its own programming and does contract work, in addition to covering government. It also gathers and replays programs about the state's history and public affairs.

The Florida Channel has lost about 25 percent of its staff since the recession hit, forcing it to reorganize and cut back its coverage of legislative committees. But things are looking up, says Executive Director Beth Switzer, since there have been no new cuts in public funding in the last two annual budgets. She's even been hiring new staff. With a current budget of \$3.5 million, the channel prides itself on enterprising shows like "Capitol Update," "Florida Crossroads" documentaries, "Face to Face" interviews and a new "News Brief" show that recaps daily state government news.

Other state networks have experienced cuts as well. Michigan Government TV had to cut staff hours, its operating budget

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and out-of-town productions. CT-N in Connecticut, which gets 99 percent of its budget from public funds, has postponed growth because of the recession but has avoided layoffs.

In North Carolina, Ivy Hoffman retired last April, after a cash-flow problem shut down the Agency for Public Telecommunications (APT), which she ran for decades. She is looking for \$2 million to start a new network, and says she has interest—although no cash yet—from North Carolina's cable industry. "I think people agree that we need a PAN, but getting folks together to start detailing out what needs to be done just takes time," she says.

Giguere says the slow progress in North Carolina is not unusual. "In any state that's ever launched a network, the groundswell of interest and support has taken time to build," he says.

It's a Wrap

Constantly evolving technology provides opportunities—as well as obstacles—in the effort to offer full-time coverage in all states. Network executives worry about the future of cable, the cost of maintaining and replacing equipment, and whether they must provide closed-caption and Spanish translation programming, for example.

Giguere says public affairs networks must forge ahead in the face of changing technology, and continue to sell their message—that what they do is essential. "It's about cultivating a philosophy ... that these networks are important, valuable to viewers and worth the bandwidth or 'shelf space' needed to include them in their offerings," he says.

Pennsylvania's Pileggi agrees, pointing out that such coverage is important because citizens can watch their government, and are often prompted to weigh in on the debates. "The programming is invaluable, both in terms of being able to explain the work we're doing in the Capitol in greater depth, and in hearing directly from residents across Pennsylvania."

In Washington, Moeller says viewers enjoy following the "high drama" of state budget debates, and did not hesitate to make their opinions known during the controversy over legalizing same-sex marriages.

Those who are passionate about making sure citizens can watch their government in action are not likely to give up the good fight, says Giguere. Public affairs networks introduce citizens to the capitol, where they can watch everyday decisions being made that affect their lives, he says, and learn how to participate in that process.

"That is incredibly empowering."



SL ONLINE

To see a chart of states that offer broadcasts and webcasts of legislatures in action, go to www.ncsl.org/magazine.