

# Are community access programs competitive against commercial shows?

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## What examining "ratings" and "share" of commercial programs teaches us about the value of community programming

You've heard it before: No one watches public access channels.

I think this is an unfair and misinformed comparison.

Compared to which channel or which program?

In reality, even the most popular cable programs don't get many viewers.

People often ask if there's a Nielsen Rating for community television. The Nielsen Company measures viewers as a tool for selling advertising on commercial television. Community channels don't sell ads the same way, so there's no demand for accurate statistics of their viewership.

Nielsen measures "ratings" and "share". One rating point equals one percent of the television households in the US. Nielsen says there's 114.2 million households and 290 million viewers in the US. In 2012, a single ratings point meant about 1.14 million households. "Share" is different. It only considers televisions that are on. "Share" is the percent of households watching a show at a given moment in a specific market.

In Christmas week in 2012, the top prime broadcast TV program was NBC Sunday Night Football with a 17 rating. The first non-football program, at number five in the list, was "The Big Bang Theory" (TBBT) with a 7.4 rating. In the Nielsen cable TV ranking that week, the top program was an ESPN college football game at a rating of 4.1, followed by two more ESPN football programs. At number four was TNT's "Rizzoli & Isles", rating 2.8. The number ten program, "NCIS", had a 2.5.

Let's look at "share." On Thursday January 10, 2013 at 8 p.m., TBBT's broadcast TV rating was 6.4 and its share was 19 percent. Among all TVs on that moment, one in five was watching Penny and Sheldon. The fifth most popular program, the "Critic's Choice Movie Awards", had only a 0.6 rating and a 2 percent share. We're already down in the weeds after the top five. Sum the share of the top five, and you see that seventy percent of televisions were watching something else.

When you plot ratings or shares on a curve, it's a classic "long tail." There are a few very popular shows or channels on the left, then a long drawn-out tail to the right of all the channels that don't have as many viewers by comparison. They all have some viewers. They're nearly the same in their unpopularity. In reality, very few people are watching any particular channel at any given time. Some channels rarely achieve high ratings. The Golf Channel sends out a "best ever ratings!" press release when they get a 0.9 during the U.S. Open.

Cable ratings are lower than broadcast ratings. The national ratings of the top 100 cable programs on January 10 range only from 1.4 to 0.3. The top six entries in the list were TBBT and "Family Guy" among their different time slots. Seventh was the Disney Channel's broadcast of "Tangled" at 8 p.m., earning an even 1.0 rating.

Do you consider the Disney Channel to be a popular channel? Let's extrapolate Disney's rating to real numbers in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin - population 11,621 in 4,760 homes. Charter Cable typically serves 60-70% of homes in their coverage area. Using 60% we can conservatively estimate 2,856 Charter households. The 1.0 rating for "Tangled" means 29 homes. To estimate viewers, multiply by 2.5 people per home: that's 74 viewers, or 0.64% of the population in Fort Atkinson.

Would you say that "nobody" watched "Tangled"? By industry standards, it was the third most popular show that day.

The Disney Channel may not play "Tangled" very often. Your community channel, lacking the resources of Disney, may replay programs over and over. Each airing of a City Council meeting may only have a few viewers, but over time, many people will have seen it that month.

## Community programs have the advantage of local appeal.

Channel-flippers will stop to see a face, a scene, a sound they recognize. Community channels represent the diversity and details of your city. There is great value in recording, preserving - and yes, replaying - your community's history as it unfolds.