

COMMUNITY ACCESS

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“Public access television” usually conjures mediocre musicians and unhinged political pundits, TV color bars and bleeding type on a low-quality picture.

But based on the scene Saturday night at Open Signal, the future of public access is anything but uninspired. At the corner of Northeast MLK Jr. Boulevard and Grand Avenue, a line stretched outside the Portland Community Media building while inside artists demonstrated VR – virtual reality – technology, short films were projected on the wall, and kids posed for photos in front of the studios’ impressive green screens. Small tours exiting from equipment rooms wove in between people mingling in the lobby underneath an immersive art installation called “Annexation & Assimilation: Exploring City Archives East of 82nd Ave,” which traced systemic displacement and inequity through video, archives and striking red, white and black visuals.

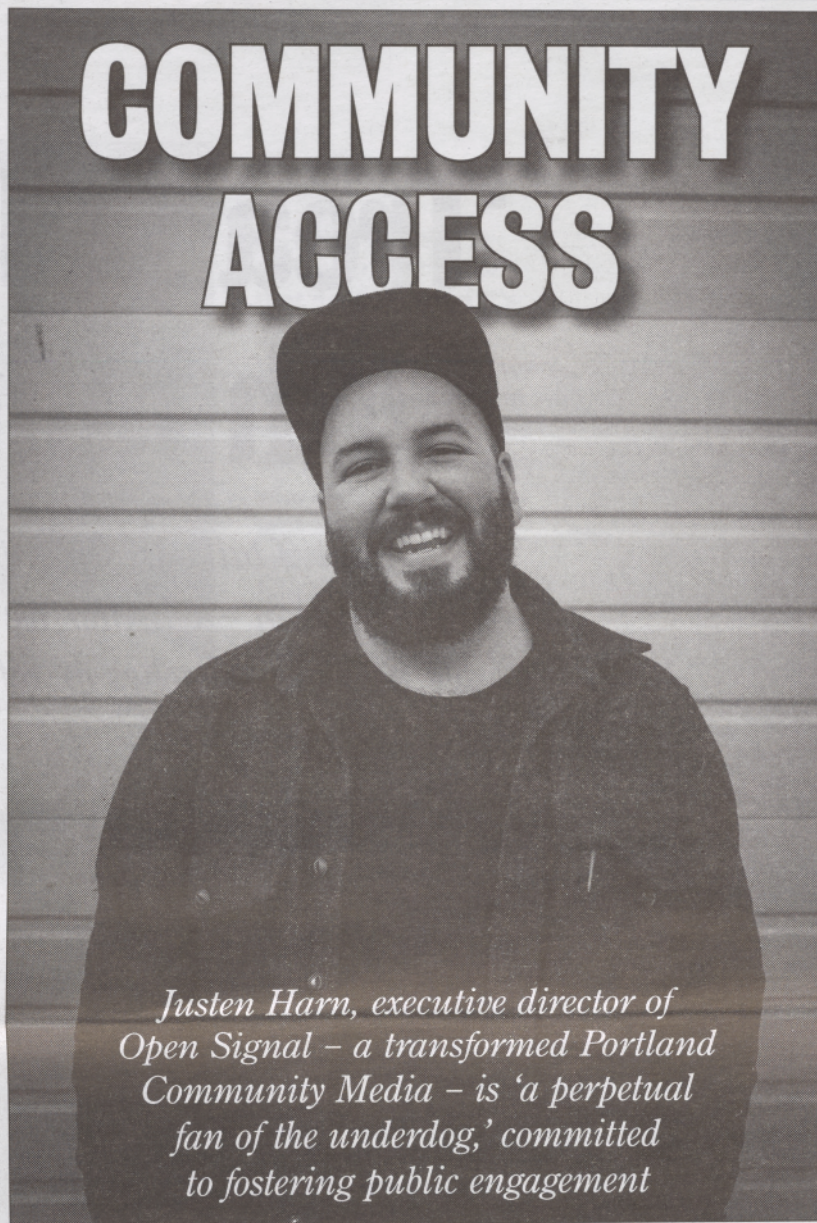
Bright and bustling, the open house announced the transformation of Portland Community Media into Open Signal. PCM is mostly known for providing public access television in the Portland metro area for 35 years. It was also known for financial troubles in 2011, which attracted news since a significant chunk of its budget comes from the city and taxpayers.

But over the past year, it has shifted gears with a renovated space, an increase in staff, and a plethora of new educational and outreach programs aimed at combining arts, digital media and social justice.

I sat down with Open Signal’s new executive director, Justen Harn, the night before the open house. It was clear a lot of work had gone down not just in the past week, but in the past year. Hired in January 2016, Harn has overseen the transformation of the organization. From building community partners – artists in residence with the Regional Arts and Culture Council, podcasting with Stream PDX, and interactive storytelling with Vanport Mosaic, to name a few – to refurbishing the space itself (he was very excited about even the slightest increase in natural light). It was also apparent how excited he was not just for seeing everything he and his staff worked on come together, but for everything that would come next.

Kjerstin Johnson: *Thanks again for meeting. I know it’s probably been a super busy week for you.*

Justen Harn: It’s been a crazy week, but it’s been really fun. It’s been exciting to see this all come to fruition. We just presented



Justen Harn, executive director of Open Signal – a transformed Portland Community Media – is ‘a perpetual fan of the underdog,’ committed to fostering public engagement

PHOTO COURTESY OF OPEN SIGNAL

Justen Harn is the executive director of Open Signal, which provides public access TV and educational and outreach programs combining arts, digital media and social justice.

at City Hall on (Feb.) 22nd. Our entire staff was there. We testified and presented all about the improvements that have been made and our plans for the future. One of our new media residents (spoke): Khalimah Abioto, who next week is debuting her work at Night Lights, which is very exciting. We also had our board president, who is second-generation Cuban American, telling the story of what her family experienced under Castro in terms of access to media, access to communication technology; it was very cool and powerful.

K.J.: *Was that the City Hall meeting that was interrupted by protesters? (Protesters criticized the mayor’s handling of the homeless crisis, as well as police response to recent protests.)*

J.H.: Yes, yes it was. We were locked in City Hall for a moment. So just as I was getting ready to get up actually, protesters took over the meeting, which was – great!

It demonstrated to us that we need to be doing more to reach out to this community. My entire staff and myself, we were all just kind of like, “How do we help? How do we help these folks tell their story? How (can we) encourage them to use our platform,

and why don’t they know about us already?”

So it was an interesting kind of parallel, where we are this resource, this amplifier, this microphone to yell into that just hasn’t been as well utilized as it could have been. The energy was palpable, and the power of the voices in that room were – the energy was amazing. I think it reminded us all why we’re doing this.

K.J.: *You were director of programs and community engagement at the Hollywood Theatre as for many years. What brought you here?*

J.H.: The Hollywood Theatre was a great experience, and I’m grateful for it, but it got to a point where I needed a new challenge. I am a perpetual fan of the underdog. Can’t help it. It’s just part of my DNA.

Seeing what a challenge PCM was was extremely compelling. Coupled with coming through the space and seeing it in person, I couldn’t believe that this existed. I was kind of embarrassed for not knowing more about it. I’ve been in the film and media community for a very long time. Just the scale of the space, the sheer scale. Studio A, our larger production facility, was just unbelievable – walking in and seeing this

gigantic green screen wall. It immediately struck me: “Why is this place not full of people?”

K.J.: *What is the difference between Open Signal and PCM?*

J.H.: Portland Community Media is still the 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and nothing about that has changed. We’re building on the legacy of Portland Community Media. But we realized the work that we were doing, the new programs that we brought over from the Hollywood Theatre, that we were a fundamentally different organization with an expanded scope of service.

The exhibition programming in our lobby and main space is all new. The artist residency programs are new initiatives of the organization. We’re doing a lot more education programming and a lot more community engagement. More events, more touch points within the community in order for folks to engage with us, to participate in our services and workshops. So our approach has transformed.

We still run all of our cable access channels. We still have all of our studios, all of our gear, and we still offer traditional public access benefits, where anyone can come in from off the street and can take a class, engage with us in some fashion, and have access to our equipment library or our studios.

K.J.: *How relevant is public access television now? Not just because we have YouTube and the internet, but even regular cable TV now competes with on-demand services like Netflix, Hulu, etc.*

J.H.: We are at a place now where we have alignment and recognition – board, staff, city government and those that we serve – that television is not the be all, end all. Television is not the technology of the future that is going to unite and connect us.

The success of public access and community media was limited by a couple things. One being that projects had to be noncommercial. So communities that were supposed to be served by this public benefit, those that would benefit from monetizing productions weren’t allowed to do so. And I think that we saw with the radical success that YouTube has had, that it wasn’t necessarily the model, it was rather the inability for makers to be compensated.

Another issue was this marriage to television. I think that access, at its core, is always meant to utilize the prevalent communication medium of the time. Unfortunately, for too long that was television, and there hadn’t been ample consideration of other communication