

CRAIN'S CHICAGO BUSINESS

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How CAN-TV is reaching new heights

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Nearly a year ago, Chicago public access television station CAN-TV welcomed Darrious Hilmon as its new executive director. Since stepping into his position, the station has begun a livestreaming platform, built a new website and has regular programming.

Hilmon has taken pride in repurposing the 40-year-old station's mission to "create and produce public affairs programming addressing the concerns, interests, and cultures of the people of Chicago."

"We launched streaming in September when we launched signature programs," said Hilmon. [Signature programming](#) refers to half-hour series on a variety of topics that are featured Monday through Friday from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m.

The company says its live streaming component has racked up more than 650,000 cumulative views. The streaming aspect is a true turning point "as the organization didn't have Nielsen or other service subscriptions," according to a representative with Mekky Media, the Chicago-based PR firm whose clients include CAN-TV.

"The first two months of our winter season, January and February, (we have) more than 650,000 (views, so) don't tell me there wasn't an audience who needed us to reach out and find them versus the other way around." said Hilmon.

Hilmon, who took over the position last year in April that had sat vacant since October 2020, credits his experience in marketing, nonprofits and fund development with inspiring the idea for consistent programming.



"While our model, the original model, is beautiful, the same things (were) not on at the same time each week. So not only are we a community television station, we're a nonprofit, public service and public trust. And we know that when you're bringing a new opportunity, consistency is absolutely key."

As a nonprofit, Hilmon said the signature programming helps CAN-TV bring in new revenue sources, showing donors that they can provide consistent content. "You can't just say to the world, 'Give me some (money).' They'll go, 'What are you measuring this stuff (with)? What are your numbers? Who's watching? What's the consistency of your program?' So again, I keep saying to them, we're getting there."

Marsha Eaglin founder and CEO of the South Side-based nonprofit IMPACT Family Center said she understands the importance of the network's pivot and hopes it shed the light on the importance of the station.

"As a journalist, and as the CEO of a nonprofit organization that focuses on digital media education for youth, CAN-TV is a very valuable part of our community, and I wish more people understood the grassroots organizations and various actual experts in some areas who are able to bring programming via CAN-TV," said Eaglin.

Kimberly Loftis, host of "In The Money," which provides conversations around financial responsibility and is the network's most-streamed show with a total of 58,000 live views for January and February, according to Mekky Media, said she is excited for what Hilmon's pivots will do for the station.

"He's expanding some of the services to people who are already doing community access that are nonsignature shows, so I think it just raises the bar for everything I've seen and it just gives people more of a platform to talk about things," said Loftis, who said Hilmon approached her with the idea as they built a relationship at Chicago Urban League, when she served as chief financial officer.

Maintaining regular content allows the station to show they are more than just a training center, said Hilmon. He said it proves that they can produce their own shows, which in turn creates more fundraising so they can provide quality training in the television and digital space.

"Cable funding has decreased nearly 30% in the past six years and is never going back up," said Hilmon. "So now we got to think about when you're asking people to not just support you with watching, which they're showing that they're doing, but to support with dollars that allow us to launch our youth voice digital literacy and storytelling institute, which allows us to extend our programming to Saturday, which allows us to do more low- and no-cost training."

CAN-TV's latest report showed that for fiscal year 2021, total revenue for the station was \$3.1 million, with 100% of funding coming from cable revenue. Hilmon said that figure for 2022 has been cut to \$2.9 million, compared to \$3.2 million in 2020.

Data from the industry research database IBISWorld showed that cable network subscriptions are [experiencing a decline](#). "As a result of increasing competition, the number of cable TV subscribers is forecast to decrease an annualized 5.0% over the five years to 2023," the report

states. The reduction in cable subscriptions impacts the amount of funding networks like CAN-TV receive.

"The cable revenue may well be declining, but the very same companies that operate those systems are experiencing record profit," said Mike Wassenaar, president and CEO at Alliance for Community Media, a national organization that promotes media training, who also stated that its an issue of policy.

Wassenaar said states like New York, Massachusetts and Vermont are "examining different funding formulas to support local expression and local channels."

Caryn Ward, associate professor at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, which partners with CAN-TV for graduate student programming, thinks a better model for public access television would be one that free-to-air network PBS has.

"I was thinking that could be a model for CAN-TV and public access in other places. Like why wouldn't that be the same model only on a city scale, as opposed to a national scale?" Ward said. "I think it is important to all Chicago and might be something that the city should do."

A [breakdown](#) of PBS' budget shows that it receives most of its funding from individuals, 15% from the federal government, 13% from state government and 3% from local government.

Hilmon, who likened community access television to the original YouTube, said the importance of bringing such shows on is the promotion it brings to the station's original programming.

"Those are our community partners where we say to them, 'Will you allow us at cost to us to create a beautiful show opening, an animation and lower thirds for you? And will you make one commitment? Will you allow a 30-second promo for another community show to be inserted into your show's halfway (mark)?' "

Along with adding on signature programming, CAN-TV has an app, has broadcasted a mayoral debate in partnership with Chicago Women Take Action Alliance and will broadcast the Chicago Foundation for Women's 2023 Impact Awards on Wednesday.

"Public access television isn't one thing. It's many things in many different communities," said Wassenaar. "If I were to (ask) you, are people interested in something that existed in 1985? Probably not. People are interested in a service that reflects their needs, but that means you've got to build that service."