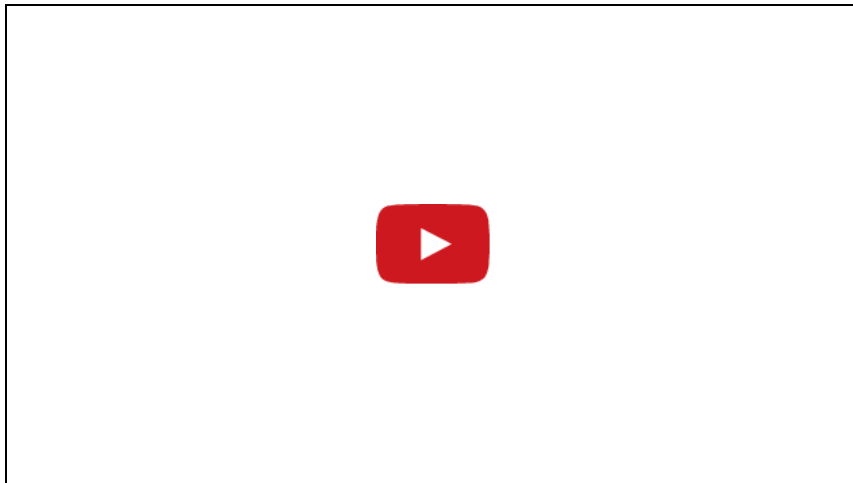


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## Tales of the weird: Public Access TV's greatest triumphs

July 16, 2014 Melissa Zimdars Arts & Entertainment, The Tube No comments

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I recently came across the public access program *Beyond Vaudeville*, which aired on the Manhattan Neighborhood Network from 1987-1996. This odd talk show featured New York City artists, musicians and other "weird characters," including a rapping grandma and whistling postal worker. This low budget public access show became so popular it actually turned into a "real" TV program in 1997, becoming *Oddball*, MTV. Watching this program, plus my recently renewed obsession with the saddest public access cooking show—and by cooking I mean microwaving Rice-A-Roni and jars of Cheez Whiz—of all time, *Weber Cooks*, got me thinking about all of the awesome, borderline insane, public access programs flying under our viewing radars.

Public or community access television spread throughout the U.S. in tandem with the development of cable's infrastructure during the '80s. Cable companies offered everyday citizens access to channels at first because the federal government required them to, but they were later offered to help monopolistic companies win over local municipalities. With increasingly nationalized or standardized television content distribution, government officials and citizens worried about people feeling disconnected from their neighbors or from place-specific happenings. Public access channels were designed to serve as forums for local issue discussion and to foster feelings of community connection.

However, not all public access shows foster feelings of togetherness, in fact, some can be quite alienating or even scary. For example, *Jerry-Jer aka Tampon Man* (Fairfield County, Conn.) is an incredibly racist, sexist and vulgar late-night program featuring a menstrual pad as a character, incessant discussions of his "big dick" and a disclaimer prior to each program: "The Following Program is Offensive to Everyone in the Known Universe." Woah! Thanks for the warning, Jerry-Jer!





There are also a large number of public access shows about Satan, including Son of the Satanic Tent Revival's *The Satanic Monkey* (Austin, Texas), a worship sermon featuring a man in a monkey (Chewbacca?) costume and a woman encouraging us to let Satan into our vaginas and penises! Additionally, *The Great Satan at Large* (Tuscon, Ariz.) features a devil-costume-wearing host mechanically banging his devil's fork and yelling about righteousness while Nazi imagery projects behind him. Fun fact: *Great Satan* actually aired during dinner time on a Christian-themed public access channel, and, not surprisingly, the under-age strippers and body excrement close-ups lead to accusations of obscenity and cancellation after only one episode. But before you think public access is reserved only for worshipers of Satan, there is

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-  **Art 21: Season 1, Episode 2**  
Cedar Rapids Museum Of Art 6:30 PM
-  **Open Mic**  
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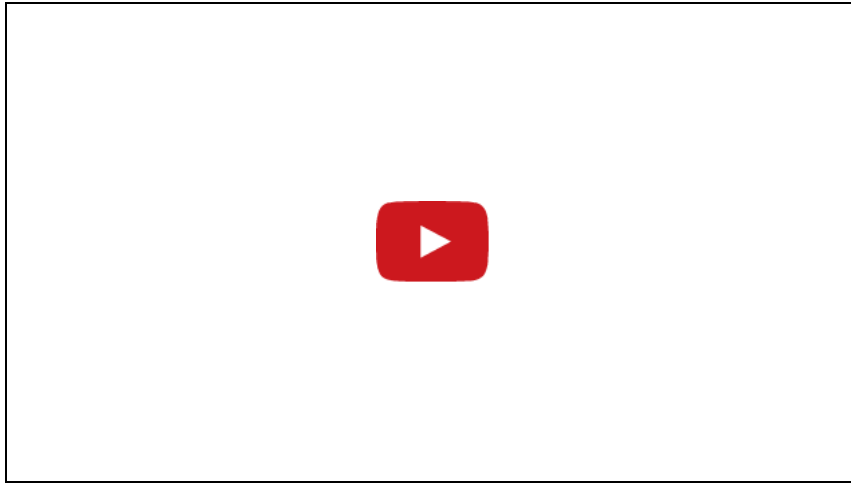
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also a Christian metal show fighting the good fight out of Texas: *Hatin' Satan*.

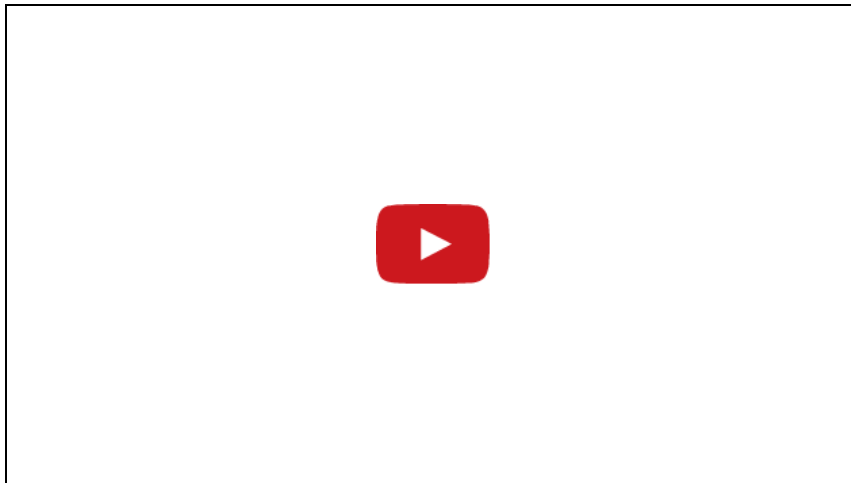
There are tons of other non-Satan-themed, public access programs that are just as weird, awkward and worth watching, even if just for the prank callers trolling each program's host. Here are some of my top public access program picks (although it should be noted that they are my top picks not because they are high quality, but rather because they are absolutely insane):

**Let's Paint TV (Los Angeles)**



This show's host, John Kilduff, is the king of multitasking. While painting and running on a treadmill, he takes calls from viewers, makes smoothies and cooks other foods, and sometimes plays ping pong or shaves his face. This frantic parody of Bob Ross's painting program is meant, according to Kilduff, to inspire creativity in others, but most of the show's callers make fun of his paintings, call him a wuss for not running fast enough or yell gang affiliations and expletives.


**Flaccid Ego: Psychic Reading Call-in Show (New York City)**



This program features host Clarence Baynard "CB" Walker, who gives free psychic energy advice to callers while wearing a pink turban, pink glasses and a pink scarf. While a lot of the calls he receives are just people yelling, "Your Mother!" and hanging up on him, when he isn't being pranked, it seems like he's actually the one pranking viewers. For instance, when one caller asks, "Hi, can I get a psychic reading?," CB responds, "You don't call here asking for stuff like that! This isn't a bodega!" To another caller he says before she even has a chance to ask her question, "Get your life together! Get the hell off my phone!"

**The Robin Byrd Show (New York City)**

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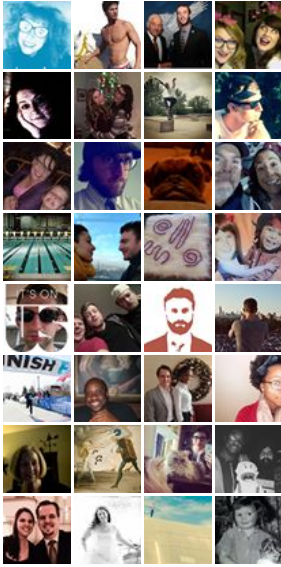


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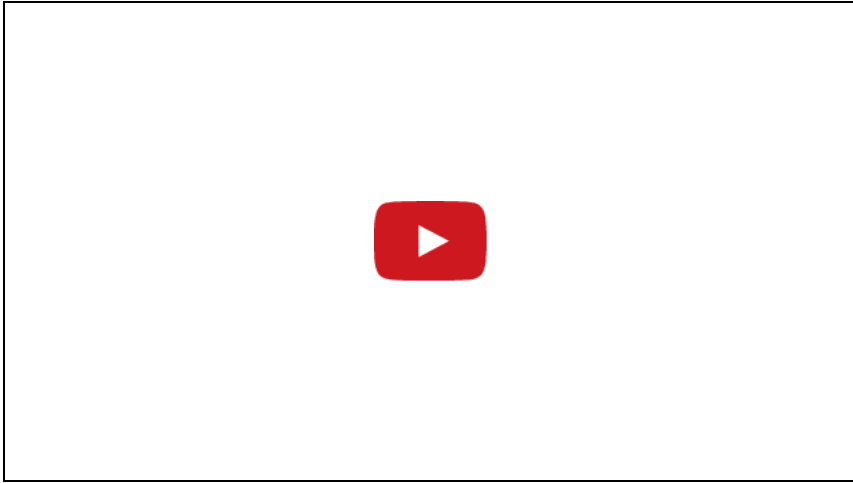
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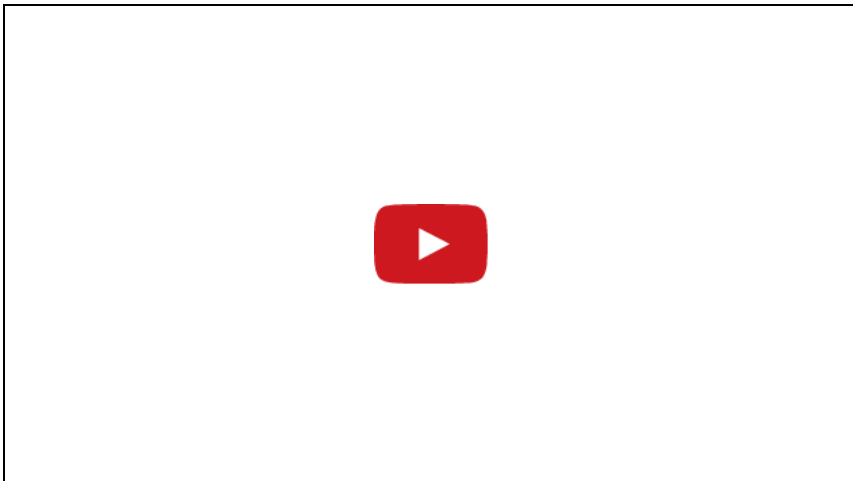
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Robin Byrd (Robin Cohen) is a former pornographic actress and host of this adult-themed public access show, which has been running and rerunning with only minor legal issues since 1977. The show features her in a crochet bikini while discussing the importance of dental dams and other sex topics. Pornographic actors and strippers make up a majority of the show's guests, so of course, each episode progresses from dancers on rollerskates wearing pasties to nudity, sex play and all of the guests singing "Baby, Let Me Bang Your Box."

If you really want to get deep into some public access TV, you can also go on a non-conformist "Hell Ride" with *Goth Public Access* (Columbus, Ohio) or watch "Dr. Jerry Cantor, Ph.D." incoherently mumble answers to caller questions while wearing a horned hat on *Insanity Defense* (Tampa Bay, FL). And if you have the stomach for it, check out the *Rail Talk* episode "The Dog Food Whisperer with Manfred Kibbles" (Proctor, MN). It's basically a dude sampling numerous brands of dog food and discussing one, in particular, that simultaneously looks like Salisbury steak, smells like Captain Crunch and taste like barley and tuna despite being labeled "chicken flavor."



While the heyday of public access, and most of these programs, existed in an early cable TV, pre-YouTube era, many of them are now available there for your viewing pleasure. And, of course, Iowa City isn't without its own public access tradition. PATV, channel 18, regularly offers its own cool programming, including *Smartest Iowan* (a trivia quiz show), *Lord of the Rings Review* (a discussion of the movies) and *Rap Iowa City* (rap videos by local hip-hop artists). To take in some public access goodness in our area, [check out the programming schedule](#).

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**About Melissa Zimdars**

*Melissa Zimdars is a doctoral student in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa,*

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