

Gary Cocola: Keep local focus of TV airwaves

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Many Californians remember the solemn pageantry of the funeral of Hmong leader Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, the likes of which are typically reserved for heads of state. A horse-drawn carriage accompanied by a 21-gun salute and two fighter jets flying overhead marked the beginning of the six-day funeral. As far as the eye could see, mourners crowded the streets of Fresno to pay their respects.

Throughout the ceremony, our station, KJEO in Fresno, provided 24-hour coverage that helped many Hmong community members say good-bye to the beloved leader and "Father of the Hmong People" in February of 2011.

Live, local programming, intended to keep communities connected to important events such as the passing of Vang Pao, is at the heart of what broadcasters do for their TV audiences. For small, independent broadcasting companies like ours, committed to reaching niche audiences, this requires a non-traditional approach.

In 2010, Cocola Broadcasting brought the Hmong TV Network to KJEO (Channel 32.6), making it the first television outlet for the online site that brings news, information, entertainment and education programming in a culturally relevant way to the Hmong community in Fresno. And in 2011, the second Hmong network, Hmong USA, launched as KZHF (Channel 4.5).

Each year, Cocola broadcasting has televised the celebrations and cultural rituals that come along with the Hmong New Year — a worldwide event that is celebrated locally each December. The weeklong festivities have drawn upward of 100,000 people to Fresno each year. Coverage of the associated events have helped to keep the Hmong population connected to their community, and regional news organizations like Cocola Broadcasting are uniquely equipped to televise these events from a hyper-local angle.

Time and again, television broadcasting has proven an important medium for Hmong community advancement and cultural preservation in Central California. The range of programming is extensive — from Hmong history and documentaries to cultural programming of rituals at funerals and weddings to educational content for children and parents that preserve native languages.

It is our mission to provide programming that reflects the communities where we operate and to do it in new and innovative ways. For that reason, we were early adopters of DTV technology that heightens the television experience for our viewers, serves our expanding audiences and offers diverse programming on our channels. These channels include Hmong TV Network,

Hmong USA TV, Mundo FOX and Azteca America that cater to Asian and Latino viewers. We have also recently added Arabic, Punjab Indian and Armenian channels, all of which are not carried on cable or satellite locally.

The ability to respond to our changing video marketplace is something we pride ourselves in at Cocola Broadcasting. New challenges bring new opportunities.

In Washington, D.C., legislators are debating the future of access to local broadcast programming, with the reauthorization of the Satellite Television Extension and Localism Act (STELA) serving as a potential venue for reform. In a draft that is still under consideration by the U.S. Senate, broadcast channels would not be included in the "basic tier" of pay-TV bundled packages. Under this proposal, pay-TV providers would not be obligated to keep broadcast channels on the most affordably priced tiers. This could lead to subscribers losing out on the channels and networks they cherish.

I hope that our California delegation — Rep. Jim Costa, and Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer — take into account the success of our station in Fresno serving our diverse viewers, and understand the disservice that would be done to our community should our local stations be disadvantaged by rule-making in Congress.

The retransmission consent rules were originally created to allow local broadcasters to negotiate for the value of their signals, further enabling stations to invest in their communities. It is a system that continues today and supports the focus of companies like ours on what really matters: not how many people we capture in an audience, but how well that audience is served.

Gary Cocola of Fresno is owner of Cocola Broadcasting Companies, LLC, which has stations in Fresno, Bakersfield, the Central California coast, Sacramento, Redding and Boise, Idaho.