



Tower Block Pensioners Empowered and Skilled by Internet TV

It has to be one of Britain's most unique TV stations. *tenantspin* is managed and run by some of the 300 residents, most of them pensioners, of five high-rise blocks of flats in the Sefton Park area of Liverpool. The programmes are electronically transmitted via the cable TV system, and on broadband. They are accompanied by a live chat room, which allows all participants to see the messages sent to each other, and enables each viewer to participate in and influence the show that they are watching. Every *tenantspin* show is archived on its web site.

Reducing social exclusion of the elderly

The project grew out of a partnership between FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), Liverpool Housing Action Trust and Arena Housing Association. FACT hosts the station's studio, which contains state of the art editing, production, and cable and broadband transmission equipment. Programme manager Alan Dunn explains that the channel "is exploring and giving voice to the concerns, ideas and wishes of social housing tenants, many of whom feel excluded from Liverpool life. FACT bring to the table an intensive programme of creative projects that see residents working closely with local and international artists, film-makers, thinkers, architects and writers." His comments are echoed by one resident, who "loves coming down to the studio. The alternative for me would be to sit in the house."

Many residents had never previously used a computer or the Internet. Through *tenantspin* they



Kath Healy films tenants Kate and Dolly Lloyd questioning candidates in the 2005 General Election.

Image courtesy of Leila Romaya.

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Key Facts

- **A community Internet TV channel which is produced and managed by tenants, mostly pensioners, of Sefton Park tower blocks**
- **Broadband connection planned for every resident**
- **Engaged pensioners are not only learning media skills but passing them on to young people.**



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have been introduced to new skills such as studio management, programme production and research. Everything seen on the channel is presented, filmed and recorded by residents.

Strengthening community networks - including those spanning generations

Alan Dunn observes that “people love the station because it’s about them. It also gives residents access to information they would not easily find elsewhere. The community production brings people together, and reduces the feelings of isolation which many tenants experience. One particularly impressive outcome is the way that some pensioners really got involved, and are now passing on what they’ve learnt to the younger people.”

The examples of Kath Healy and John McGuirk, both 74 year old residents, are typical. Through *tenantspin*, they have learned media and information technology skills, and become more involved in community activities. Kath is now an accomplished video editor, and has produced several commissioned films on Liverpool life, including one on the city’s skateboarding community. One of her films was shown at the “Shrinking Cities” festival in Berlin. She celebrated by buying herself an iMac computer so that she can continue building her expertise at home. As one of her neighbours comments, “in every single block there is somebody who you don’t realise has got some kind of skill. It’s amazing what *tenantspin* has uncovered.”

A new lease of life

John McGuirk was out of work for five years before retiring, and he thought his active years were finished. He says, “*tenantspin* has given me a new lease of life. In the last couple of years I’ve interviewed some fascinating people for the channel and even been

able to visit Denmark to see a similar project there.”

Alan Dunn has ambitions for *tenantspin*’s future. A studio within the tower blocks opened in September 2005 and should, he says, “bring the channel even closer to the residents and therefore draw more people in. And we want a broadband connection into every flat - it’s a basic utility these days, just like gas and electricity.” This is planned to be in place by 2007. These developments will allow the channel to broadcast for more hours, and make better use of the over 300 hours of material the project had already accumulated by summer 2005. This includes interviews with well-known figures such as Lords Birt and Puttnam.

There are also plans to replicate the project in other parts of the city. After all, says Alan, “Tower block TV shows the potential for Internet technology to be used in ways that truly changes lives.”

Further Information

The Northwest Regional Development Agency wants the region’s people and businesses to benefit from the new opportunities created by the digital revolution. It has worked with partners to establish Digital Development Agencies in Cheshire and Warrington, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Greater Merseyside and Lancashire to achieve this at local level. The agencies help identify ICT priorities for their areas, work with local organisations to identify projects to address them, and secure the resources to make these projects happen.