OUR SO-CAL LIFE

Bus-see TV

Transit TV: what you're forced to watch while riding the bus.
Tim Cavanaugh

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RIDING A BUS, especially in an auto-centric city such as Los Angeles, can be a grind, replete with 45-minute waits, urine-soaked street theater, surly drivers and constant reminders that if you were one of the city's winners, you'd already be wherever you're going. But the bus has always offered one compensation: the chance to zone out in a state of placid unhappiness.

No more. Say hello to the Transit Television Network, a collection of 4,782 screens installed over the last couple of years on more than 2,200 Los Angeles buses. Throughout the transit day, TTN keeps riders entertained with an hourlong loop of short programs and advertisements.

With two screens and six speakers on an average-sized bus, Transit TV is an impressive technical achievement. Twice a day, city buses download fresh programming from wireless hotspots across town, so there's a timely program of text news, La Opinion reports, X-treme sports shows, cooking tips from the Clever Cleaver Brothers and a GPS map that tracks your snail-like progress.

TTN is easy to watch. It's also impossible to ignore, with a sound volume that seems to have no settings between one and 10. Transit TV's sonic stream drops out whenever the bus' robot voice announces upcoming stops, and the audio can go mute for blocks at a time. The result is somewhat like the old Kurt Vonnegut story in which people deemed too clever are wired with a shrill beeper that sounds every minute or so to break their concentration.

Robert Bridge, Transit TV's vice president of marketing, acknowledges that there have been some problems with the service's volume, but he notes that TTN technology can adjust the sound depending on the bus' ambient noise level. (That is, the louder the bus, the louder Transit TV gets — though there is allegedly an upper limit.)

With an advertising lineup suspiciously heavy on bad-credit pitches, cures for primary pulmonary hypertension and house ads, this doesn't seem to be a service aimed at the city's elite. Still, about half of Transit TV's viewers are between the ages of 18 and 34 — prime demographics. "These people tend not to have high overhead in terms of mortgages and big car payments," Bridge observes hopefully. "So they've got more disposable income."

And the nature of the format and technology create some interesting future possibilities in targeted marketing: alternating the language and lineup depending on bus line and destination, or timing certain ads as you pass through specific areas.
Transit TV, which currently operates in seven cities (L.A. is the crown jewel), prides itself on the precision with which it can gauge its captive audience — a level of specificity that may make up for the less-than-stellar purchasing power of the audience members. It's an intriguing experiment, and if your budget is low enough, you won't be able to miss it.

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