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ABSTRACT

Cable television's local access option may be a way for colleges and universities to expand their media offerings. For example, some institutions are using cable capabilities to broadcast direct and inservice instruction or to provide hands-on training for broadcast students. A small private liberal arts college in Iowa successfully uses cable facilities to offer an introductory course in television production. The college also uses the public access channel to broadcast an introductory survey course of the fine arts, comprised of class discussion sessions and written evaluations, and a series of videotaped programs interviewing individuals involved in the arts. Educators should keep the following recommendations in mind as they consider implementing media programs through public access television: (1) they must become more aware and more involved in the negotiations of local cable franchise agreements, (2) they must keep informed of regulations and legislation that could influence cable systems, and (3) they must increase their planning for and use of cable facilities before the technology is absorbed solely for entertainment purposes. (HTH)

MEDIA AND THE SMALL COLLEGE-TRY CABLE

by

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Abstract

Cable television's local access option may be a way for colleges and universities to expand their media offerings. Some institutions of higher education are currently using cable capabilities to offer direct instruction, instruction in television production, and in-service training. This paper describes the use of cable services at one small Midwestern college. Recommendations for implementing similar programs are also detailed.

MEDIA AND THE SMALL COLLEGE-TRY CABLE

At a time of decreasing budgets, the possibility of developing or expanding the use of media has become increasingly difficult. Particularly for small colleges and universities, the cost of state-of-the-art equipment may limit media programs. One way of overcoming this obstacle may be to draw upon the resources of the growing field of cable television. Cable companies often provide the equipment, facilities, and air-time for local access programming. Colleges and universities can benefit from an investigation of local access opportunities. The purposes of this paper are threefold. First, a general overview of cable television will be given. This will be followed by a description of a program for using public access cable television at one small college. The final segment will detail recommendations for implementing a media program in conjunction with the local cable company.

I. The Cable Potential

Cable television first developed in the early 1950s in remote regions of the country which could not receive television signals through standard transmissions means. A company would set up a large tower to receive signals, and then send these signals to individual homes, charging each subscriber for this service. In the last decade, the cable television has expanded considerably. It is estimated that by the year 1990 approximately fifty percent of the homes in this country will have access to cable television (CTIC, 1983; Smith, 1978).

To insure that citizens who received cable television were still able to keep abreast of local affairs, the FCC developed rigid regulations

especially for larger market areas. While each community negotiated its own contract with the cable company, the FCC regulations required that the company provide local access opportunities to groups and individuals within the community. Certain channels were reserved for local use, and frequently, companies also provided equipment and facilities for local program production. While a 1979 Supreme Court decision (FCC v. Midwest Video) negated many of these regulations, opportunities for local use of cable facilities were already in place.

Educational institutions have used local access in a number of ways. Some colleges and universities offer instruction on local access channels. Oregon State University, for example, through agreement with its cable system, programs over fourteen hours of instruction each day enrolling at one time or another over seventy percent of the student body (Smith, 1975; Livingston, 1974). Paducah Community College in Kentucky agreed to provide the public access capability for the cabl /stem in that area. In addition to a variety of other programs and projects, the college expands upon Kentucky Educational Television by producing "wrap arounds" for commercial productions so that course content is more pertinent to their particular curriculum (Clemens, 1981). The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater installed cable in their residence halls. Through their studio facilities, they offer mini-courses not available in the regular curriculum, review sessions, and guest lectures (Conover, 1983). Project REACH, a consortium of colleges and universities in the Xenia, Ohio, area has developed local educational programming based upon a needs assessment of the local community (Urndorff, 1974).

Other schools, colleges, and universities are using local cable capabilities to teach students about the broadcast medium. By cooperating

with local cable companies, schools can offer instruction in television production, direction, and writing. Often equipment can be borrowed, rented, or jointly purchased through the cable companies. Cable system personnel can be helpful resources to draw upon in training. Emporia State College in Kansas (Ecklund, 1980), Illinois State University in Normal (Durham, 1983), Chatham College in Pittsburgh (Cooley, 1979), and Oral Roberts University in Tulsa (Rushing, 1981) offer production courses and then use trained students to assist in presenting promotional, sports, and public affairs programming for the school and the community.

Many schools have also discovered that cable television is a viable means of offering in-service instruction to faculty members. Programs that consider local issues, feature local innovations, and concentrate on local practices are valued by instructors. Because these programs are taped, they have the capability to be shown at different times of the day. For example, child care providers in Spartanburg, South Carolina, participated in a NSF project. The staffs of sixteen child care centers in Spartanburg were able to view thirteen weeks of hour programs on topics such as teaching techniques, health, safety, nutrition, and parent relations. Some programs originated from the studio while others were produced at the various centers. (Lucas, 1978). In-service training for engineers is also being offered via cable television. The Association for Media-based Continuing Education for Engineers is a consortium of universities headquartered at Georgia Institute of Technology. In 1979, twenty-nine universities sponsored graduate level courses to engineers at their places of employment (Menashian, 1981).

Part II: Cable Television and the Small College

Obviously, the potential uses of public access capabilities are numerous. For the small college or university, public access television offers a way to provide quality media program. The following experimental program at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa, describes an attempt to use this potential.

The University of Dubuque is a private liberal arts college with an enrollment of approximately nine hundred students. Currently, it does not employ a media specialist nor does it possess extensive or sophisticated media equipment. Speech is a one person department. In the past, students have not had the opportunity to participate in a media program. Two projects are underway to explore the use of cable television in developing a media program.

Cable television has been a part of the Dubuque community for many years. Over eighty-five percent of the community subscribes to the cable system. Currently, the community is serviced by Group W. Cable, a subsidary of the Westinghouse Corporation. Under a new franchise agreement, Group W provides one cable for public distribution and second cable interconnecting community institutions and agencies. The public cable has three channels allocated for local access. The franchise also requires that community residents have access to studio production facilities, portable video equipment, and editing units. A technical support staff provides training in the use of the aforementioned.

These cable facilities are currently being used by the University of Dubuque to offer an introductory course in television production. The course begins with an overview of program planning and development. This is followed by work with portable equipment (1/2 inch and 3/4 inch VTR's

and cameras) that is checked out from the cable company. Students then meet at the cable company to learn to use the editing equipment (assembly and insert editing) to polish their videotapes. The final portion of the course is focused upon using studio facilities. Students have the opportunity to operate larger production cameras, to set lighting equipment, and to work under a director. In the control room, students use the character generator, audio boa , and switching board in producing television programs. By the end of the semester, students have completed programs using both the portable and studio facilities which are then aired on the access channels.

Reactions to this course have been very positive. It is popular with students majoring in many different fields. Student demand for the course is greater than can be accommodated. The administration has been supportive and sees courses like this as a means of expanding the curriculum without significant outlays of money. The cable company does not charge for using the facilities, but an agreement between the company and the University allows the company to offer two scholarships for this course to individuals in the community.

The second project which relies upon coordinated efforts between the cable company and the institution is the use of public access channels for instruction. A course which is an introductory survey of the fine arts was developed to experiment with this mode of instructional delivery. The course has three components. The first component is a series of on-campus class sessions (three to four) to allow for discussion. The second component is a series of five videotaped programs which interview local individuals who are involved in theater, dance, music, and art. These interviews were taped using equipment borrowed from the cable company. The programs are

aired on the public access channels at prearranged times. The only cost to the school is for the videotapes. The third course component is required attendance and written evaluation of six arts events.

The primary purpose of this course, in addition to offering students an introductory arts experience, was to explore and demonstrate this alternative instructional delivery system. At a small college where it is sometimes difficult to offer a wide range of courses, videotaped instruction may be a solution. With a ready base of student producers, hopefully more and more faculty will begin to develop instructional modules using television. Again cooperation between the University and the cable company is essential for this undertaking.

Part III: Recommendations for getting started

The review of literature and personal experiences suggested several recommendations that educators should keep in mind as they consider implementing media programs via public access television. First, educators must become more aware and more involved in the negotiations of local cable franchise agreements. Current laws and regulations governing cable television encourage local involvement in prescribing services of the cable system. Localities negotiate their franchise with cable companies. Educational institutions may insure their presence in a community cable system by participating in negotiations for local access. As University of Toledo media specialist David Block (1981) suggested,

> Get a copy of the franchise, either from the local government or at the library, and read it. Pay special attention to the sections on services. Reading the franchise, you may be sur-

> prised at services you could have just by asking for them. When you read the franchise, make note of the renewal date. Right now you should be actively urging local officials to compare the franchise with those in other communities. (p. 25)

Second, it is important to keep informed of regulations and legislation that could influence cable systems. It is apparent from serveral sources (LeDuc, 1974; Shooshan, 1976; Krugman, 1979) that no clear federal policy has been established to govern the cable industry. As a result, Congress is currently considering legislation that will deregulate the cable industry. While such deregulation may benefit the public in many ways, educators should work to protect some degree of local access.

Finally, educators should take the plunge and begin planning and using available cable services. While the potential is tremendous, the reality is not. Few institutions are taking advantage of the cable opportunities that are available (Durham, 1982). Condon (1982) noted,

> All the great benefits that the education sector can derive from cable television won't happen just by wishing...Education could definitely be the big winner in cable television if educators are willing to work to develop its potential, produce high quality education programming, and persuade the cable industry that subscribers will value educational offerings. (p. 20)

It is important for educators to increase their use of cable facilities before this technology is absorbed for solely entertainment purposes.

While the viewing public is accustomed to sophisticated television production, this sophistication does not transfer to access programming. Indiana University Professor Eileen Bender (1978) explains that, "Telecommunications research reveals that both children and adults will watch themselves, their neighbors, and the world of their own community with great excitement and interest: local programming depends upon content

rather than finish" (p. 52). Even if initial efforts are not technically perfect, they may be highly successful and will serve as a basis for future developments in the field.

The public access feature of the cable television industry has a great deal to offer the educational community. For the small college, it provides a way to develop quality media training for students with minimal expense. The potential to draw upon this media training to expand the curriculum is also apparent. Speech educators should certainly investigate this possibility.

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