

Potential for Communicating Through Cable TV in Texas*

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AS WE BEGAN to think of the potential for using Texas cable television (CATV) systems in communicating extension educational and news information on a statewide basis, we felt we first needed some reactions from the cable systems. It seems only logical to learn what interest a potential user has of a product or service before it is mass-produced. In the business world, market studies are conducted for that purpose. Perhaps our study more or less falls in that category. We were exploring the demand for a regular CATV program service before spending extra funds, purchasing additional equipment and hiring new personnel to produce such a service. We also wanted to involve individual cable system personnel in developing the program so that it would better suit their needs.

We identified 112 cable television systems in Texas listed as operating systems in the *1971-72 Television Factbook*, which is published by Television Digest, Inc. We sent those systems a short, one-page questionnaire and provided a postage-paid return envelope. In our initial survey, we received 49 replies. Through a follow-up survey using the same questionnaire, we stimulated another 34 replies from those who had not responded to the first survey. This gave us a total of 83 replies from the 112 cable systems, or a 74 percent return.

The questions included were designed to determine such things as how many CATV systems are originating programming or when they plan to start, to check their interest in receiving regular pro-

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gramming, to learn the time length and frequency desired in such a service, and to get an idea of equipment being used for program origination.

Let's look at the questionnaire and see how Texas CATV systems responded. The first question was, "Are you presently originating any programming?" Thirty-one of 83 respondents or 37 percent, said "yes" they are. Fifty-two systems said they were not originating programs. Five indicated they were cablecasting color and 27 indicated black and white programming. Three systems checked both color and black and white, and two systems did not indicate which was being used.

In our first survey, 25 of the 49 replies said they were originating. However, in the follow-up survey, only six of the 34 replies indicated program origination. It seems reasonable then that a high percentage of the 29 unreturned questionnaires were in the hands of systems not originating programming.

Question 2 was, "If not (originating), do you intend to in the future?" Fourteen systems said "yes," and 30 indicated they had no intentions of doing so. Many of the "yes" replies commented that origination might begin in 1972. Since this study was made in late 1971, some of these systems may be in operation by now. We will be doing additional research in 1972 to bring our data up-to-date. Four systems were uncertain as to future plans. Thirty-five did not respond to this question. Non-respondents were, for the most part, those who indicated they were already originating programming.

In Question 3 we asked, "Would you be interested in using regular filmed or taped programs on agricultural, consumer, youth development or home economics subjects?" Thirty-nine of the 83 (or 47 percent) responded that they were interested in such a program. Seventy-seven percent, or 24, of the 31 systems identified as originating programming said "yes" to the program idea. Thirteen CATV systems said "no," and eight systems would like to discuss this with us further. Two of those eight did not indicate a "yes" or "no."

In the "film," "tape," or "either" part of Question 3, 17 checked "film," 20 marked "tape," and 11 indicated "either." In

reviewing their responses, however, I observed that several systems checked both "film" and "tape" instead of indicating "either." In adjusting the responses, it appeared that six could use only "film," 10 could use only "tape," and 16 could use "either." Twenty-nine systems did not respond to this question. Many of the non-respondents had no capability for playing such a program.

Question 4 was, "How often would you like to receive this service?" Twenty-one systems preferred a weekly service, seven marked monthly service and five wanted a daily service. Two indicated "other" because they were unsure how often they would like to receive the service. Forty-nine systems did not respond to this question.

In Question 5 we asked, "What would you consider an ideal length for such a program?" The highest preference was for 12 minutes, with nine choosing five minutes and one choosing three minutes. Fifteen chose to indicate "other." Nine of those specified the 30-minute range, two the 15-minute length, one simply said "longer" and three did not indicate a specific preference. Fifty systems did not respond to Question 5.

In an attempt to ascertain which medium in which to prepare a regular CATV program, we asked in Question 6 to "Please check the recording mediums which you can play." Some systems checked more than one type. Twenty-one systems can use 16mm film with optical sound, 12 can play Ampex standard one-inch video-tape, six can use Sony standard one-inch tape, four can use the IVC standard one-inch tape, four can use type 1 standard ½-inch video-tape, and two have 2-inch video-tape systems. Fifty-two systems made no entries in item 6.

Item 7 simply gave respondents a place to add any additional comments. Here are some of the responses we obtained:

"Excellent idea!"

"We'll be pleased to consider any shows you offer in this general category."

"Can use a short subject as a break in regular programming or a feature 30-minute program."

"We have facilities only for live programs. We have no projector nor VTR at present."

"We cannot show film or tape. We only use cards on weather channel."

"We can only do limited live origination at present time."

Still other remarks include:

"Will not be originating any programs in the near future."

"We operate 10 small systems and do not plan local origination; however, there is a definite need for your programming."

"We do not feel that this type of program could be justified by our system."

"Sounds like a good program to institute with cable systems that can handle it."

"We are only doing local high school sports at this time. We might be interested at a later date!"

"We do not have any equipment for programming, but we do plan to program sometime in the future and would definitely be interested in this program."

"System is too small at this time, but would be interested in the future."

"The system is too small to afford the origination equipment."

And finally this comment:

"I think you have a good idea. At this time we are not equipped to originate but if we were to do so we would probably be interested in your service."

For future planning purposes, we included item 8. We asked the cable systems for a contact person, address and phone number. From this we can devise a mailing list of those interested in a CATV program service.

What does all of this mean? I think it does indicate a positive interest by CATV systems in a regular program service including the kind of information usually generated by extension services and experiment stations. Yet, I think it is also clear that it could be quite costly in terms of tape duplication or preparation of materials in a medium useable by any number of systems. Since one-inch video-tapes are not interchangeable, Ampex, Sony and IVC copies would be required. Black and white film might be a possibility, but that too would be expensive in maintaining, say, a weekly 12-, 15- or 30-minute program used by several systems.

And who knows, if cable really catches on, how much black and white programming will remain?

In Texas we have a one-inch color RCA system with two IVC video-tape recorders. We could produce a program now for those four systems having IVC setups. Our best opportunity may be in having master IVC tapes duplicated into Sony and Ampex formats, but we would still not be serving those having film capability. Our video-tape setup has a film chain for use of slides and film in video-tape production and has special effects capability. It does not produce adequate color to meet the FCC's broadcast color standards, but it would be sufficient for cablecasting purposes.

Another aspect to ponder as we consider CATV for communicating information is the relatively few viewers in relation to "chance" viewers of commercial broadcast television. I suppose our home community is one of the few which not only has two competing cable systems serving it, but they both are originating live programming. I, personally, have not chosen to watch their programming over regular TV programs often. This situation, however, may change in years ahead. Effective promotion of programs on cable for the present will be the key, as I see it, in getting maximum viewing. To give a specific example, the four systems I mentioned that we could presently serve with IVC tapes have only a subscriber total of 17,870. As CATV moves into the metropolitan markets, however, the numbers of potential viewers will surge upward.

This preliminary study has helped us take a more educated look into what will be involved in realizing the potential of CATV systems in communicating our information on a statewide basis. We hope this information will serve to help you as you initiate organized CATV efforts in your state.