

TV STUDIO ORIGINATION: THE PROFESSIONAL APPROACH

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They have been calling some of our industry's televised staging effects "slap stick", our equipment "toys", and our attempts at television production, "Mickey Mouse!" A current user of video recording equipment has taken the statement literally by labeling his recorders MM-1 and MM-2. To season the wound, a printed source of information states that present day software within the industry leaves much to be desired; that material is much too boring; and that producers of videotape programming should consult first with educators before developing packages that are designed to entertain, educate, communicate.

"Quick and dirty" is the common reference they make to the method employed by most producers of videotape programming. They are so confident that cablecasters and manufacturers are oblivious to the "need to communicate" that one of them has predicted that a new method of displaying audio/visual material through a picture tube will wipe out CATV in the next decade.

Who "they" are is important if we find justification in their claims. It is equally important that they recognize the fact that CATV is here to stay, that cablecasters have established far-reaching goals, and that manufacturers of communications equipment are equally aware of the need to communicate and are constantly improving the state of the art.

We attempted to contact one of the publications that had referred to this industry's efforts as cartoonish, requesting equal space or time to explain what was being done within the industry to promote the concept of a professional approach to TV production origination. Our correspondence remains unanswered. We went a step further. We learned that Mickey Mouse was the most famous movie star of all time; that he made more successful motion pictures than any other star; and that his has been the most requested autograph of any figure displayed across the screens and television tubes of the world. Proven facts!

In answer to the accusation that our industry is producing boring software: we agree, with the exception that only one side of the picture is presented in the remark. Not everyone is producing sleep-generating material in this field, and much is being done

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to correct the problems that exist. As to the statement that CATV will be eliminated from the scene within the next ten years by a new product, we accept that remark as an ordinary challenge we expect will be met head-on, simply by nature of the fact that there is a definite need and place for film in this field, for slides and still photographs; for videotape and live camera presentations; and for cablecasters in the field to utilize the tools of today and the improvements of tomorrow.

As Americans, we're great for establishing statistics: some true, some false, some with tongue-in-cheek. Like Rowan (or was it Martin?) who stated on one of their programs last year: "by the time we are laid to rest we will have spent nineteen years of our lives watching television, four of them adjusting the horizontal hold control!" Or by the nameless statistician who claims there are 100,000 helical videotape recorders in use throughout the world in one-inch and half-inch formats. Using that figure, we can estimate that approximately 500,000 individuals are physically operating those machines. But from that total, fewer than 5,000 operators have been trained in TV production basics: less than 1.25% of VTR users. There is where the problem lies. More frightening, the majority of these operators have each been charged with a total job classification of writer/producer/director/camera operator/stage director/lighting and audio technician/video switcher; and sometimes talent.

We like to feel we're deeply involved in promoting a solution to the problem. The statements and statistics of the types presented here established the basis for an extensive lecture tour last year for members of the Ampex Video Institute. Four staff members of the AVI's Teleproduction Workshops (three with a broadcast background totaling 50 years) visited 104 cities presenting 94 road show work shops, training 4,000 students and seminar attendees, completing 16 speaking engagements, 17 remote videotape productions, and participation in 19 conventions and meetings. Two staff members established an Ampex Video Institute in Kowloon, Hong Kong; another in Stuttgart, Germany, and presented seminar segments in London, England. These projects were completed in addition to a regular calendar schedule of CCTV Workshops maintained in Elk

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Grove, Illinois, plus the videotaping of 47 studio assignments for the year. Similar activity by staff members is expected to double this year.

Our findings, analyzed through travel reports made by AVI personnel, as well as on-site critiques of individual system's equipment, personnel and operation, justified our belief that the majority of problems exist through a lack of knowledge and experience with the equipment employed within the individual facilities. Through misconception, VTR operators were quick to blame equipment for lost program segments, poor quality reproduction, and equipment malfunction. Upon inspection of equipment and prerecorded segments by our road show teams, we found the majority of trouble areas had been created by what has been commonly expressed throughout the industry in slang form as "cockpit error", operational problems by the uninitiated, inexperienced, uninformed operator.

As a result of our findings, the Ampex Video Institute's road show team is totally involved in promoting concept as it relates to television production procedures. The program was developed to aid the potential user of video recording equipment by first establishing his needs through a basic understanding of the capabilities of a variety of video recording systems, as well as their limitations. The plan also serves current users. Through a series of road show seminars, consultation services, two- and five-day teleproduction workshops, the AVI team is devoted full time to serving on an international basis, those in need of guidance in the selection and proper operation of video equipment, and the duplication and distribution of recorded material.

Seminar attendees and workshop participants last year learned how a most involved program can be recorded professionally with a minimum of knowledge and equipment by applying that "basic understanding" technique to the total capabilities of their present equipment. They learned how their material, properly pre-planned and committed to tape, could result in recorded segments that compete with, and meet broadcast production standards.

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We do not mold network producer/director types through our brief presentations. Our capsule courses have been referred to as "crash courses", which we admit is a logical assumption. The material presented in a five-day workshop is a condensation of approximately four weeks of seminar and live studio participation. "Crammed" or "crashed", the sessions have proven that the "need to know" exists, and that studio involvement with the material covered in classroom lectures arms the participant with the understanding and experience he needs to return to his facility and produce the type of recorded package which will hold his audience's attention, convey a message, communicate!

Training is important; capable personnel to properly man selected systems are important. Engineers should be assigned technical positions, not a mis-matched combination that includes producing, directing, lighting, staging. We would not consider for a moment asking a producer/director to wire a control room, repair a video recorder or design a new camera circuit. Let us not -- in all fairness to the man, the facility and the end result -- expect an engineering type to reverse his position simply by assignment. Having the man trained in the basics of TV production as a supplemental add-on to his technical skills should definitely present a different picture (no comedy intended); an individual doubly trained and experienced should also realize a sizeably heftier pay check than one commonly issued to an individual assigned to the ordinary, everyday process of a single job function.

They (our challengers), should have realized a yesterday long ago that cablecasters are not interested in program packages that entertained televiewers in the late 40's and throughout the 50's; especially those packages that should have been sealed away in some sort of time capsule in the very early 60's. We must bestow multiple kudos upon cablecasters who refuse to be contracted into worm and torn emulsionized packages of yesterday.

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We must not be shocked however, if in the process of producing our own packages, "live" or on videotape, a lack of TV production knowledge within our own facility generates a visual monster that might enhance one of yesterday's oldies on another channel. A dim lit, out of focus ball game, shot with one camera in a constant state of "zoomerama" may activate the automatic channel-switching device within a veteran televiewer's nerve center. And let us not mistake who the veterans are. If we have heard the statement before, let us mentally retain it, have it etched on the face plates of our video consoles, and flashing on and off at the entrance to our TV studios: "The youngster entering kindergarten has already witnessed 4,000 hours of broadcast television". That makes him an expert! He may know nothing of the technical aspects of tilting up a camera, trimming focus, panning left or right to properly compose a picture. But he is aware of a certain level of quality and content in a visual presentation fed through his TV monitor/receiver. As he ages, he obviously becomes more selective, until finally he joins us as armchair veterans.

The Ampex Video Institute maintains a no-charge referral service to help place AVI alumni in search of teleproduction jobs. We invite cablecasters in need of experienced personnel to contact us. We also invite cablecasters who are interested in having personnel trained to more proficient depths, to inquire of our teleproduction workshops, our consultation services, and our technical training courses; obviously without obligation. Let us know where we can help, regardless of the origin of, or the label on your present teleproduction equipment.

As for "they": our peers, critics, experts (?), may they continue to refer to our efforts as "Mickey Mouse!" We should be so famous, so successful!