

LOCAL ORIGINATION: LAYING IT ON THE LINE

by OLIVER BERLINER
President,

Telaudio Centre
Burbank, California

The ability of the cableman's local originations to compete with the slick productions carried on other channels of his own system, is controlled by economic, legal and personal factors. Here are thoughts about getting into origination as inexpensively and effectively as possible, while minimizing the differences in budget and showmanship between your originations and the retransmissions.

The furor created by an article of mine which appeared in the March - 1973 BM/E Magazine under the title, "The Hell With Helicals," has prompted this further review of the entire subject of the technical capabilities... and limitations... with respect to the CATV operator who dives into origination because the FCC said he must, because he wants to keep community bigwigs (and pressure groups) "off his back", through a desire to be a showman either via his own creations or thru the airing of programs produced elsewhere, or finally... for commercial revenue.

Whatever your motivations are, unless you're a Teleprompter, a Theta, a Sterling or one of the few other "monster" MSO's, you have little chance of competing with the artistically and technically superior programming from Hollywood carried on your very own system. I am not here to tell you of any solution to this dilemma... because at present there is none. The Los Angeles -- Orange County area is, however, unique in that there are a number of cable companies located relatively near each other. Months ago I recommended to all of them that they make no origination-equipment

investment of any consequence, but instead utilize my studio on a contract basis. In this way they would all have access to production personnel and equipment superior to anything they could provide individually. Not a single one of them was interested. Later on I shall show you what they missed; something which I believe exquisitely points-up the addage that if you don't hang together, you will all hang separately.

One of the questions I'm often asked is, "With my limited budget, should I invest in lavish monochrome equipment or modest color facilities?" The answer is that I know of one California community where a network affiliate with old, out-moded monochrome facilities is now being "killed" by an independent UHF transmitting in color. Even the color network feeds are unable to sustain him. Clients are no longer willing to buy time on his local black-and-white originations... even network "adjacencies"... because the viewers in the area will no longer settle for less than color -- and there isn't enough revenue for him on the network feeds alone (as all "affils." will testify).

Luckily, when the FCC required certain CATV systems to originate, they simultaneously encouraged them to sell commercial time. In view of this, and because live color video equipment is costly, you might consider the purchase of a film chain, color -- of course, incorporating a good 16mm projector with both optical and magnetic audio, plus a 2 X 2 slide projector. 16mm prints of major entertainment productions may be rented; there is a wealth of brilliantly produced educational film available at little or no cost; you can shoot 35mm color slides of local events while simultaneously recording audio on a good home recorder. You then run your local news via these slides with sound, plus local voiceover, if desired. There are innumerable fine amateur photographers who would be thrilled to shoot your slides for you in return for on-the-air credit and a "press card" in their pockets. Later, you may even afford to shoot single-system super-8 film with synchronous sound... and get a sponsor to pay for it.

You'll notice that I've avoided mention of live cameras and video tape. The reason is that film combined with an inexpensive but FCC-approved sync generator gives you broadcast-grade transmission... something you cannot get from your

video tape recorder unless you wish to spend some twelve to thirty thousand dollars on it alone, to say nothing of color cameras, monitors, tripods, lighting, support equipment and crews to run it. All this is the raison d'etere for film and slides. When your local origination prospers you can augment your optics with teleproduction equipment, yet your film chain will continue to get plenty of use ... never fear... for film is so well-established as to be very indispensable. Furthermore, why not provide a film-to-tape transfer service available to all who wish to pay for it? Advertise the availability of your service by way of spot announcements on your own cable system, and elsewhere.

I have pointed out that optics may be your best way of getting into origination -- all things considered. When the time comes for live video, you are faced with problems in video tape playback... problems not present in film. You could avoid these problems by doing everything live, but this would soon prove unwieldly. Herein lies the rub, because no inexpensive video tape recorder, even when augmented by a helical processor, can deliver the time-base stability needed to synchronize the sweep circuits of your viewers' receivers to your video tape recorder's playback. Now, much ado has been made over this bugaboo called "time base". In essence, this instability is caused by irregularities in tape motion and helical-scan motion further aggravated by tape stretch and shrinkage. Quadruplex recorders avoid this problem by using high tape speed, expensive transport mechanisms, correction circuitry and a transverse scan system.

But what of these cablemen who are laying video cassette playback on the line? Well, simply, they're "getting away with it"... for the time being. But since most home receivers don't have the fast AFC time constant to accomodate helical VTR transmissions, you can expect that viewer indifference will not long last. At one time a viewer was content to marvel at a test pattern of dubious resolution. Perhaps cable originations are in this stage at present. But eventually you'll be "tuned out", with all the reception difficulties blamed on you -- including some that aren't your fault. There is no question in my mind that eventually the FCC will be as tough on you as it is on commercial broadcasters as far as sync specifications are concerned; and then I guess we'll see thousands of used video tape recorders up for sale across the country. But for the time being, the decision in this area is left to you. I might venture to offer this rule of thumb: Let your video tape recorder cost at least as much as your best tv camera.

In conclusion, let me take a moment to show you some views of a sophisticated color television production center incorporating the least-expensive broadcast-grade equipment available... although we did splurge in a few areas, as you will see.