No Word From the Sponsors

Public TV’s notorious funding problems are compounded by cable.

Mary Ellen Mengucci is a staff writer and editor.

Roughly 55 percent of the homes in this country now have cable service, almost twice the amount that received it at the start of the 1980s. Those figures are as high as 65 and 70 percent in households with incomes of more than $20,000 a year. Experts predict the numbers will continue to increase.

That means a lot of channels are competing for viewers. And the odds are against PTV’s innate non-commercial structure. Nevertheless, according to SU alumni in key PTV positions, there is an undying spirit to beat the odds. Increased competition, they say, is only the latest calamity for the system. Things will keep getting better while they’re getting worse—business as usual for the nation’s public television stations.

PUBLIC TELEVISION IS A billion-dollar entity that reaches approximately 98 percent of the homes in this country. Much of its programming is heralded as the best on television today, but the ratings don’t reflect that. PTV rarely receives more than three percent of the television viewing audience. And cable, with its multi-viewing options, is undoubtedly part of PTV’s problem.

“We are really beginning to feel the crunch,” says Linda Taggart ’78, an associate producer at Maryland Public Television. “At one time, if you wanted the cultural shows, the British shows, the nature shows, public television was the one place you could get them.”

Today, she says, cable services such as Arts and Entertainment and the Discovery Channel are offering similar programming. Increasingly, audiences are perceiving the look-alike cable shows as substitutes for PTV. This is especially true when programs that once aired solely on PTV begin popping up on other cable channels. “There is feeling that PTV is losing its exclusivity,” says Michael Ambrosino ’52, G’55, president and founder of Public Broadcasting Associates and creator of such acclaimed PTV programs as Nova and Odyssey.

The popular All Creatures Great and Small series, for instance, was exclusive to PTV at one time. But Arts and Entertainment, a commercial cable service, recently outbid the Public Broadcasting Service for new episodes. The program’s dedicated viewers will now turn away from PTV to see the show.

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MID ALL of this new competition, though, there are some bright spots for PTV. A growing contingent of PTV folks believe competition will actually enable public broadcasting to reach new heights. Raymond Ho '73, president of Maryland Public Television, is one of them. Ho admits a multichannel environment makes it more difficult for PTV to maintain its audience, but he says the competition forces PTV to be more creative and efficient, and therefore strive to improve its operations.

And without cable, Ho says, some PTV stations could even lose viewers. The cable programs may create additional competition for PTV, but the cable distribution services allow PTV stations to broadcast their signals farther, and therefore pick up additional viewers. You can’t have one without the other.

So across the country PTV stations are learning to adapt to the growing competition and discover its hidden benefits. Virtually every PTV station, for instance, is studying ways to maintain the viewers they already have and expand their audience.

“We are trying to program to younger viewers without offending our older audience,” says Taggart. “It’s going to be very hard because that 18 to 35 age group has not been programed to watch public television. They see us in elementary and high school and after that they leave us.”

Audrey Jones ’83, an associate producer at WNET in New York City, says her station is also trying to reach a younger audience without alienating their diehard viewers. WNET, she says, has begun to air rock programs and documentaries, as well as additional public affairs programs and specials about the 1960s.

The good news for PTV is that while commercial television has lost considerable viewership since the early 1980s and the inundation of multiple viewing choices, PTV’s current audience has remained stable. It hasn’t risen any, but PTV executives are encouraged that it hasn’t dropped, either.

And, says James Fellows ’55, president of the Central Educational Network in Chicago, PTV has several inherent quality standards that automatically make it competitive with other television options. PTV programing, he says, is generally superior to that on cable stations. “Very little of that programing is ever produced in the United States by the cable systems. It’s almost entirely acquired by them. Public television, in comparison, produces a lot of its own material.”

Much of PTV’s programing, at least before and after prime time, has a local focus. That, says Fellows, enables PTV to create strong ties with its community and audience—something cable television rarely has the opportunity to do.

In addition, Fellows says viewers can’t depend on cable in the same way they can rely on PTV. The cable systems will air programs as long as they make a profit with them. “Public television,” he says, “will do it because it’s part of the public service definition of its responsibility.”

SHERE WE HAVE THIS non-commercial television system trying to stay afloat in a commercial world without substantial support from, among others, the federal government—the very entity that created it.

“All of us in the field are monitoring the temptation and even the encouragement we receive now and then to become more popular and to seek larger audiences in the name of greater support,” says Frederick Breitenfeld ’60, president of WHYY in Philadelphia. “I think that attracting new viewers is always a good thing. I don’t want to put on lady wrestling to do it.”

PTV has never pretended that its programing will appeal to the largest possible audience. “PTV,” says Porter, “is more like a public library. You have a selection of programs based on individual interest...Its programing is not mass appeal.

“What we try to do is produce programing that is worthwhile in some fashion,” says John Cosgrove ’70, vice president at WQED in Pittsburgh. “It’s thought-provoking, or it teaches you something, or it expands your view of the world in some way. And at the same time, it is entertaining enough so that you’re going to enjoy the experience of watching it.”

Most PTV administrators seem to agree that if American public television is to beat the increased competition, and continue to offer quality programing without losing its unique non-commercial characteristics, the federal government must provide greater funding. “To me, [PTV] is like the national parks system,” says Fellows. “It’s just one of those things we need to have in public life...and we need to have stronger support at the federal level.”

More than 20 years ago, E.B. White called for PTV to “address itself to the ideal of excellence, not to the idea of acceptability.” Despite its problems, PTV still endeavors to do that. One wonders what advice White would have for public television today if he were here, remote control in hand, flipping through the stations.

Mick Jagger is singing and gyrating on MTV. Click. Analysts are describing the fluctuations in the Dow Jones on the Financial News Network. Click. The Movie of the Week is airing on ABC. Click. An hourly news update is on CNN. Click. And PTV is still looking for support. Click. Click.