

Video and Cable: Emerging Forms of Library Service

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AFTER THE FIRST BIG push of the early 1970s, video use in libraries has entered a phase of reexamination and regrouping brought on by pressures of fiscal conservancy and mercurial technology. New attitudes toward video development place internal priorities before external pressures. The fever of initiative is yielding to more deliberate design of video service that is in agreement with perceptions of community need. This progress is based on firm knowledge of events past.¹

The emergence of video in libraries has not been a sequence of insular events, but, rather, a matter of widespread discussion involving active participants and onlookers alike. Thus, reiterating the history of library involvement in video is not a painful task. Its background can be traced clearly in current bibliographies and reports on technological developments, regulatory issues and commercial and educational application.² Its progress is documented in library-specific publications so numerous that this article can only mention a fraction of them.

An early preview of events to come can be found in a 1971 article by Kenney and Norwood outlining the possibilities which the new visual medium offered for library services.³ In the following year, *Film Library Quarterly* devoted a major part of its coverage to new media services. There the first exposition of library/community involvement in video appeared. Pioneer professionals, among them William Sloan, Emma Cohn and Walter Dale, gave insightful reports on current developments.⁴

Growing library interest in video was next underscored by the ALA resolution of January 31, 1973, which recognized the importance of in-

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corporating the new technology into the scope of library activities. A core of video librarians was forming, and that same year *CableLibraries* emerged, a monthly newsletter which continues to chronicle library experiences with video and cable throughout the country.⁵

In 1973 and 1974, video leaders in ALA offered the first practical advice and cautionary notes. *Video and Cable Communications: Guidelines for Librarians* was ALA's first major publication on the subject.⁶ George Stoney gave food for thought to librarians considering "getting into the act" by raising important questions concerning the consequences of such involvement.⁷ During that time public librarians were encountering new equipment and acquiring new skills. Some ventured outside their buildings, taking portapacks into the community; others felt the need to absorb the implications of the new phenomenon in a conceptual manner first. ALA began surveying developments in the field, finding a steady pattern of growth during 1973-74.⁸ Since then, efforts to monitor library/video involvement continue, but the most recent survey results were published in 1977.⁹ To fill their need for current information, some librarians have undertaken their own regional-scale inquiries. For example, audiovisual consultant Pat Mackey of the Monroe County Library System (New York) carried out a statewide survey in 1978.

In 1975 the Information Science and Automation Division (ISAD) of ALA formed the Video and Cable Communications Section (VCCS), maintaining the momentum generated among library professionals. VCCS continues as part of ALA, within the recently renamed Library Information and Technology Association, whose *Journal of Library Automation* should be increasingly concerned with reports relating to video, cable and upcoming technologies, such as satellites and fiber optics.

As librarians' interest in video expanded, so did the need to examine future options and relationships of new services to established ones. In 1976 Kenney discussed the future of cable communications in libraries, and Boyle drew attention to sensitive issues of priority-setting and problems video librarians were encountering in 1977.¹⁰ Then, in 1978 *Catholic Library World* devoted its spring issue to nonprint media in libraries and included an article charting the development of library video and cable involvement in the preceding years.¹¹ The slowdown in expansion of video activities in the late 1970s noted in that article continues, although it is not regressive. Rather, it is a process of judicious retrenchment in the face of definite but surmountable barriers imposed by fiscal and technological realities.

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What, then, is the nature of emerging video services today? What can be said about current activities and problems, discernible trends and future prospects for video in public libraries? Three underlying factors play a part in this discussion: (1) the efforts of public libraries to respond to community needs, (2) the effects of omnipresent fiscal constraints, and (3) the problems created by an ever-changing technology.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

Library involvement in video/cable runs the gamut from minimal in-house use of prerecorded tapes to daily cable-casting of library programs on library-leased access channels.¹² In general, the value of video as a playback medium is widely recognized, though commitment to production has been slow to take hold.

Many libraries have little in the way of equipment or software, and others have only recently embarked on limited-scale in-house projects. For example, Mercer County Library (New Jersey) owns playback equipment and a small collection of ½-inch, black and white videotapes which they use to orient new library employees and to introduce touring schoolchildren to the facility. The Rockford (Illinois) Public Library owns no equipment or tapes, but is currently participating in a local university video project which enables channeling of user feedback to the library board. In mid-1979, when the university's project ends, its portable equipment will go to one of Rockford's branch libraries, where it is earmarked for public use. Meanwhile, through workshops, information packets and displays, the library is actively informing the community about video and public access to cable.

Other libraries have devised different methods of sharing what they now have or hope to acquire soon. The Wicomico County Free Library (Maryland) owns equipment, but is deferring production until completion of a new facility where studio space will be available. In the interim, the library allows local government offices and private businesses to use their video playback equipment for workshops and programs.

At the next level of development, libraries are involved in building equipment and tape collections that will enable them to meet patron requests for video materials for library or home use. In these libraries, videotape is just another type of material that has been successfully assimilated into existing library lending, interloan and in-house use patterns.

Both the Mount Prospect Public Library and members of the Bur Oak Library System (both in Illinois) lend tapes to patrons, as does the

Rochester (New York) Public Library. The Schenectady County Public Library (New York) and the Public Library of Nashville/Davidson County also loan tapes to other area libraries on request.

It is at this point of service development that two important issues are likely to surface: cost-effective methods for video collection growth, and pressure to list or catalog available tapes for better accessibility and control. Software acquisition from commercial sources assures technical quality of materials, but introduces problems of high cost and lack of local subject orientation. However, as libraries develop their own production capabilities, dependence on outside sources for quality tapes gradually diminishes. This is happening at the Tucson Public Library where the gap in locally-oriented tapes is filled by in-house production of materials (some in Spanish) about the Southwest, solar energy and desert ecology.

The point at which the size of tape collections makes cataloging necessary varies from library to library and, generally, seems associated with the extent to which a library moves beyond in-house-only use of materials. Obviously, the circulation of tapes to the public or among libraries within a system makes material accountability more necessary. Not unexpectedly, the most extensive catalogs are found in libraries which early became involved in video: Port Washington (New York) Public Library, Altoona Area (Pennsylvania) Public Library, Dorchester County (Maryland) Public Library, and Rochester Public Library, to name a few.

Another level of current activity involves libraries which function as video collection centers and community production facilities, even though they are not involved in cable. The San Jose (California) Public Library provides video support at conventions, club meetings and sessions of the local city council. A monthly video magazine and a staff development program build video competencies throughout its sixteen branches. The Mesa Public Library in Los Alamos, New Mexico, uses video as the medium for a community newsletter and to provide information and referral service to area residents. The Eau Claire (Wisconsin) Public Library, in cooperation with the local cable company, has established a public access center. It loans equipment on a 24-hour basis and also has a viewing area. The Port Washington Public Library has extensive equipment, viewing facilities and a rich tape collection, and fulfills its role as a community video center by offering continual training in video to local residents. The resulting core of skilled volunteers handles the production of all on-location tapes.

The activities of cable-casting libraries have been highly publicized

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for obvious reasons. Perhaps a useful distinction can be made here between library use of available public-access cable space and library control of a cable channel. As might be expected, the number of channel-controlling libraries is smaller than those utilizing public-access time. In addition, local cable companies are not equally amenable to allocating considerable amounts of time to public access. Thus, libraries may find themselves limited, despite internal capability to provide programming.

The Public Library of Columbus and Franklin County (Ohio) has a weekly 1-hour program on each of Columbus's three cable systems, including Warner's interactive Qube system. It is to be hoped that in the near future they can increase their use of Qube, which has been publicized as a highly innovative, community-minded system. The Everett (Washington) Public Library, coping with limited support, cable-casts three hours weekly on local Viacom Cablevision. The East Brunswick (New Jersey) Public Library cable-casts twenty-five hours a month on Middlesex Cablevision. At the high end of the scale is the Pocatello (Idaho) Public Library, which transmits five and one-half hours daily, Monday through Friday. Their programs are scheduled at half-hour intervals from 8 A.M. to 7 P.M. over the community-access channel.

There is considerable variation in the manner in which libraries exercise control over cable channels in their communities. The Monroe County Public Library in Bloomington, Indiana, operates a leased cable channel and programs up to sixty-four hours each week! They produce 300 original programs annually and estimate that 80 percent of the community's cable subscribers watch them on channel 7, whose studios are located in the library. The Albany (New York) Public Library has been the public-access facility for the local cable company since 1977 and cable-casts three nights a week. The Danbury (Connecticut) Public Library maintains that city's officially designated municipal/community information service on cable channel 6, which operates twenty-four hours a day. It produces six to eight hours of original programming each week and has earned national recognition by winning the National Cable Television Association's award for best children's access programming. Its channel enjoys 13.6 percent of the cable audience.

PROBLEMS

Whatever the apparent richness of such diverse video and cable projects nationwide, none are easy to maintain and cultivate. Some of the difficulties are familiar ones, such as lingering resistance to audio-visual (AV) development and nontraditional services among officials,

the public and even some library staff. More importantly, funding shortages in a number of vital areas continue to frustrate most video-oriented professionals.

While quality software is increasingly available and hardware options abound, prices are still not readily affordable for most. A library might be able to purchase programs for \$50 or \$100, but a price of \$300 for a single 1-hour prerecorded tape gives pause to many. Inevitable equipment damage, as well as routine maintenance and repair, are financial burdens which must somehow be borne if deterioration of the entire video program is to be avoided. Often equipment suppliers fail to provide reliable service. In the absence of steady support, some video projects soon run out of raw material and resort to recycling tapes every six to eight weeks, which in turn lowers the technical quality of productions. Finally, fundamentals such as space, staff time and hiring of new skilled staff often take a long time to materialize.

A newer problem, exacerbated by intense competition among video equipment manufacturers, is the proliferation of formats and machines and discontinuation of earlier models, which can make the purchase of videoware totally confusing, not only for newcomers but also for those with considerable experience. The fact that a few basic models are sold under a number of different brand names is not readily apparent. The lack of equipment compatibility further complicates matters. Despite the sophistication of video librarians today, there is very little they can do to correct this situation, since the factors responsible are entirely beyond their control. While this message presently seems lost on manufacturers, it can be hoped that the dictates of good business will eventually bring them around. Meanwhile, video professionals are acting to help themselves and their colleagues. With increasing frequency, video-related journals devote attention to equipment comparisons, general technology information, and analyses of AV alternatives. Two instances of recent coverage of this kind deserve mention here.

The February 1979 issue of *Video Systems* carried an article by Manfred Dorn outlining the basic differences between Beta and VHS formats in both consumer and industrial versions.¹³ It may also be of interest to examine that journal's "New Hardware" section, which gives periodic coverage to new equipment and accessories.

Another thoughtful comparison of Beta and VHS formats, aimed at facilitating selection decisions, is offered by Michael Heiss in the January 1979 issue of *Videography*. The author discusses such features as freeze-frame availability, audio dub, warranties and, of course, price.¹⁴

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Throughout the year that journal's "Home Screen" column follows developments in hardware. Yet, in light of recent trends, librarians should always expect "surprises," as vendors continue to introduce new equipment and features.

TRENDS

Increasing consumer sales of home playback units will continue to create patron demand for public library video services involving both software and hardware. The needs for good circulating video collections, provision of in-library viewing areas, and staff attention to the maintenance of equipment are already taken for granted in many libraries. Increased patron interest will suggest what kinds of programs can best address community needs and interests. Currently, children's materials, "how-to" tapes, and programs suited for adult independent learners have emerged as favorites. An 8-part TimeLife videocassette speed-reading course has proved popular with patrons of several New York State libraries, including Syracuse's Onondaga County Public Library.

Most public libraries try to build well-rounded collections, however small, in order to satisfy general audience tastes. There is evidence, however, that video facilities in libraries are most readily accepted by younger patrons and least used by senior citizens. The Texas State Library, for example, attributes to video the increased use of the library by the 18-30 age group — a segment of the public that rarely frequented the facility before. As video service improves, its use level is likely to rise correspondingly. It is also conceivable that in expanding their role in community-access programming, libraries may attract new user groups. The East Brunswick Public Library notes that live programming with call-in opportunity is popular among individuals who are traditionally nonusers of libraries.

Fiscal limitations and difficulties in obtaining grant money for video projects are giving rise to new funding patterns and methods of dollar conservation. Many libraries are beginning to look at fees as a means of achieving partial cost recovery. The Willard Library in Battle Creek, Michigan, charges a minimal fee for equipment loans to citizens and outside agencies. Others, like the Brunswick-Glynn County Regional Library (Georgia) charge for and use their own production capabilities to prepare training materials for local businesses and industries. Still others, like the Public Library of Columbus and Franklin County make their studios available to nonprofit organizations — universities, churches — at minimal cost.

The trend toward development of cooperative library consortia continues, and groups, old and new, are beginning to implement coordinated purchasing and shared use of video resources. In a recent article, Boyle made astute note of such "networking" and described the efforts of the California Video Circuit, the Texas State Library Video Network and the South Central Research Library Council in Ithaca, New York.¹⁵ On behalf of twelve libraries, the California State Audiovisual Consultant negotiated an agreement with vendors for volume purchases of software and hardware at reduced cost. It is anticipated that a 555-title collection, in packages of twenty-two tapes — eleven titles each in Beta and VHS — will circulate for one month at each of the twelve participating libraries. A catalog will be developed to facilitate interlibrary loan.

From the Texas State Library a core of 400 titles, circulated for 2 months in packets of 25 tapes each, will move among 31 libraries involved in the video network. In Ithaca the approach is different: individual libraries in the 14-county region purchase tapes on their own, but maintain common listings to facilitate exchange and interloan.

Two main variations in cooperative patterns are developing: cooperation among libraries themselves and cooperation between libraries and other agencies. Notable examples of each are worth describing here.

The Los Angeles County Public Library Project MOST (Media Outreach Service and Training) circulates seven video packets in six regions of the county, according to a predetermined schedule. Each packet contains subject-related videotapes on sports, home economics, art, management, travel, science, etc. Project director Joan Livingston feels that a 3- to 5-year projection of video use, provided by independent consultants, would aid in future planning and help determine the proper balance between expansion of their in-house training mode and outreach efforts. The Boulder Public Library is currently establishing a video clearinghouse that will list the video resources of all Colorado libraries. It is intended to facilitate statewide resource sharing. Director of Media and Programming Richard Varnes notes that information collected in the process will also be the basis for future in-depth cataloging, which could easily be entered into a statewide data base, LC MARC II, OCLC or individual library cataloging systems.

In Georgia, public libraries involved in video have formed the Georgia Public Library Video Association in order to exert greater influence on government decision-makers and to help each other. An extensive volunteer program is planned, as well as increased video services publicity. Patterson (New Jersey) Public Library AV Supervisor Sylvia

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Jaroslow is planning to open a community production studio during 1979. It will serve as regional video center for several area libraries as well as community groups and governmental agencies.

Emphasis on cooperation with organizations outside the library sphere is also evident. Future plans of Joe Shinnick, video department head at Brunswick-Glynn County Regional Library, include establishment of an alternative distribution system whereby library video will serve as a cooperative resource for the local business community. The Wicomico County Library is working out a taping agreement with the city museum and the local arts council. AV Librarian Judy Parsons also intends to pursue mutually advantageous ways of working with the local chamber of commerce. In the Kern County (California) Public Library, Information Officer Linda Culberson predicts increasing cooperation with government agencies, school districts, and the local museum and arts council as these agencies and the library attempt to function in post-Proposition 13 times.

PLANS IN PROGRESS

No matter where on the video-use continuum libraries stand today, the collective outlook is clearly a forward one. Plans to inaugurate video services are being made by libraries of all sizes. At the Chicago Public Library cost data have been gathered and decisions concerning circulation of tapes and equipment and location of in-library viewing and production areas are well underway. In Mt. Clemens, Michigan, the Macomb County Library is looking forward to a new building that will contain facilities for viewing ½-inch and ¾-inch tapes and permit some in-house production.

Libraries planning to expand existing services have a variety of community-related projects in mind. The Boulder Public Library plans a video hook-up with a senior citizen center being constructed next door. In Pocatello, the library will attempt to set up limited interactive video with several neighborhood centers. It also intends to involve the public in program production.

Among libraries now planning for cable use is Maryland's Baltimore County Public Library, where a small, 2-camera color studio is under construction in one of the system's branches. Barbara Weiss, head of programming services, indicates that staff will be trained in production techniques and, thereafter, the library will focus on making public service spots, using its dedicated-access channel and reaching out to help older adults and other user groups make their own tapes. By the summer of

1980, that library expects narrow-casting to reach the point where programming is regularly scheduled.

Other libraries that already offer access programming see the need to expand it. The Scranton (Pennsylvania) Public Library currently provides weekly gavel-to-gavel coverage of city council meetings, cable-cast on 24-hour delay. Media Librarian John Finnerty would like to see these meetings cable-cast live in the near future. Live coverage of school board meetings is also contemplated.

The stress of providing quality video services does not diminish at libraries which have already gained recognition for their ability to use the full potential of the medium. At Everett, Washington, extensive community productions have been cable-cast since March 1976. Library programs are seen weekly and are also rebroadcast on local radio. The Tompkins County Public Library in Ithaca, New York, has produced a popular community information service program for two years. It is a forum for local talent and presents news of community interest. Despite these achievements, both libraries indicate an acute need for improved financing to stabilize day-to-day operations and facilitate future planning.

On the other hand, strong initial funding is reported by the Arlington (Virginia) Public Library, which is receiving financial support from its local cable company, along with a channel assigned to its exclusive use. Each of the library's six branches will soon have an incoming outlet, while the central library will have two incoming and one cable-casting outlet. The library's contract with the cable operator gives it five years to demonstrate worthy use of the cable channel. Staff led by Ed Epstein and Lois Kane thus have an opportunity to demonstrate that libraries can, indeed, make video/cable work — for themselves and for the community.

THE FUTURE

How will new technologies change the characteristics of libraries and their users? With this question in mind, Eugene Garfield took a provocative look at upcoming innovations and their impact on libraries and urged librarians to consider how space, policy and personnel requirements must change to meet the future.¹⁶ Will display and copying agreements grow easier to negotiate, thus enabling libraries to assemble large collections of video programs, both general and specialized? Will acquisition policies move some libraries toward purchase of mainly family-oriented material? Would a tape-rating system, similar to those used by movies and television, be useful to libraries with diverse collections, so

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that selection and circulation policies can be streamlined and freed from controversy and censorship disputes?

How will reference and information services expand by combining on-line retrieval with the home television set? Currently, the British Post Office is experimenting with Project Viewdata, a telephone information service. Subscribers call to request the display of specific information on their home television sets. Then, by sequentially pressing buttons on a key pad, they can gradually narrow their choice of subjects and topics to retrieve one page out of a million. It should be noted that video reference service at the Natrona County Public Library in Casper, Wyoming, can be viewed as a forerunner of this type of service. Early in the 1970s its patrons were able to phone in requests for visual information, tune their television sets to the appropriate channel, and see material relevant to their queries.

At present there is great library interest in the video disk. Pre-recorded disk programs and players cost less than their videocassette counterparts. In addition, laser-read video disks are durable, offer superior picture quality, and allow random access to specific content items. Yet, despite these attractive features, the video disk is a playback-only tool that cannot match the portability, production, erasure and recycling attributes of videotape formats. It is likely, therefore, that librarians will put the best features of both to work in providing library video services; that is, they will capitalize on video's portability and live programming capabilities and, at the same time, take advantage of the storage, selective information retrieval and archival strengths of video disks.

Prospects of interconnecting libraries through cable are just beginning to be explored, but many professionals are already aware of the possibilities offered by satellites. Instantaneous satellite transmission is here; point-to-point connection, using a library's own small earth-receiving station (dish), could be feasible before the turn of the century. The procedural and service applications of such technology will become increasingly evident as media-conscious librarians and administrators rise to the challenge.

The Great Plains National ITV Library is exploring the cost-effectiveness of previewing programs by satellite. Current methods depend on physical shipment from distributor to potential buyer and back. Early in 1979, the PBS satellite network with its 149 ground-receiving terminals was used by Great Plains to transmit several new instructional program series. Potential buyers could preview the material at the time of transmission or record it for viewing at a later, more convenient time.¹⁷

The importance and complexity of the issues raised by existing and emerging technologies have not been lost on the library profession. Keen awareness of the issues was evident in last year's ALA statement to the House Communications Subcommittee, presented in connection with the revision of the Communications Act of 1934. It addressed the urgent need to restore localism as the focus for community programming and to assure ever-improving service to rural areas. It also asserted the role of librarians in shaping national communication policies and practice and in providing access to information.¹⁸ However, perhaps the most significant statement made, from the perspective of this writer, was that "cable represents but one of the many telecommunications devices or systems which may be used to carry information . . . over distance."¹⁹ This thought carries one's attention beyond present involvement with video and cable toward the advent of "mixed technology networks."

These networks will likely result from a combination of multiple technologies that seek optimal solutions to burgeoning information delivery needs. Providing service to the public through such networks will bring back to library doorsteps many of the same issues and problems germane to video/cable today. To the extent that some of these difficulties will echo past experiences in handling new technology, libraries will be well prepared to deal with them.

There will, however, be totally new challenges created by innovations only now on the drawing boards. These challenges will demand the attention of personnel as conversant in computer technology and systems design as staff today are with videotaping and post-production.

It is the responsibility of practitioners and educators alike to anticipate the competencies implied by such evolution. When this is done, the profession can look to the future with some confidence that a new generation of "mixed technology specialists" will be prepared to carry on library community service traditions.

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