

CHANNEL 28/VIDEO SERVICES Year One Review/Year Two Preview

Brief Background/History

Until recently, television coverage of the Seattle City Council looked like something from a 7-11 surveillance video. One camera. Grainy picture. No graphics. And, at the same time, a few city departments had video specialists whom they used primarily to tape events, workshops, speeches and forums. Some of these in-house productions were seen by a handful of employees; some were put on a shelf and forgotten; and some were well done, useful and utilized.

In January, 1997, the city created a new unit within the Executive Services Division--Channel 28/Video Services--and housed it in room 109 of the Municipal Building. A wide variety of video equipment was consolidated in one place. In addition, cable franchise fee revenues were used to supplement the inherited equipment. This new unit, consisting of individuals with different experiences, most of whom had worked alone and with a great deal of personal autonomy, began the challenging process of learning to work together as a team and learning to operate a great deal of new equipment.

This new unit was charged with the responsibility to both provide video services to city departments and to improve the quality and content of programming on the city's municipal cable channel.

Nick Cirelli mastered the intricacies of our Smart Cart playback system. (The system was so new that no manual existed; Nick developed his own manual for our staff and completed it about the same time that Panasonic finally sent us one.) Nick has also taken charge of our studio. Jerome Gates and Marie LaRoque spent many hours learning the capabilities of our new graphics system. Peggy Lycette's professionalism, shooting and editing skills inspired others to higher standards. Tony Hopkins continued his excellent work for City Light out of our offices and shared with us both his professional knowledge about video techniques and his intuitive intelligence about equipment problems. Rose Smith has been attending video classes at Bellevue Community College and applying her newly acquired skills to productions both in the field and in the control room. Peter Watson, once a one-man-band for the Council programs when it was housed with the library, enjoyed a half year leave of absence to experience being a new parent, but now he's back with us, offering insights and taking care of program details.

The Citizens Technology and Telecommunications Advisory Board (CTTAB) created a Channel 28 Subcommittee to help shape expectations for the new channel and to have a role in hiring a station manager.

In April, I came on board as station manager and worked part time (commuting back and forth to Ashland, Oregon) until September, when my family moved here and I started work full time.

Channel 28

Audience, Channel Surfers and Accidental Viewers

Channel 28 is available in every home that receives cable television in the city and is also seen in many areas outside the city limits. We come into approximately 200,000 living rooms!

Many viewers regularly turn to Channel 28 to see what's airing; we have a solid core of viewers who rely on us for information. But we believe that the majority of our viewers watch us more or less unintentionally!

These are the channel surfers who stop at 28 on their way up or down the channel line-up; if they see someone they know or something that looks local or interesting, they stay with us awhile. Channel surfing is an important reality; it's how most people watch television. So we don't take umbrage that many of our viewers are accidental. Our challenge is to engage these channel surfing viewers, to keep them informed about what they are watching, what the issue is that is being discussed, to make the meetings as visually and graphically interesting as we can.

Window on Open Government

Channel 28 is a valuable resource for both the City and the citizens of Seattle. No matter how many people come to a City Council meeting because they care passionately one way or the other about an issue being discussed, many times more people watch that council meeting on Channel 28.

Channel 28 is really the only way for most citizens to get an unbiased and complete grasp of what's happening in their city government. We show meetings from gavel to gavel, unedited. Newspapers may cover one aspect of a particular meeting; local TV and radio news may dedicate a few minutes of coverage to these issues each week, with a few seconds of "sound bites" tossed in. But we are there from start to finish. Day in and day out. For the controversial and the mundane.

To cover these meetings for television, we now utilize four state of the art robotic cameras fixed to the ceiling of the Council Chambers. From our control room on the first floor of the Municipal Building, we coordinate these cameras, and rely on digital recording decks, a sophisticated graphics system similar to what is used in the Kingdome, and a playback system that relies on bar codes to determine what programs are replayed in what order (think of it as a video jukebox).

Covering almost every meeting of the City Council (we missed less than a handful because of short notice, technical failures, and staffing conflicts), we also pick up programs from the State's government channel (TVW) and from the School District and air them on Channel 28.

More Than Meetings

Both as a staff and in our clear direction from CTTAB, we are very interested in developing more interesting and varied programming for our station. While it is important to use the channel to let the public know what's happening in city government, it's also important to develop programming that is more than meetings!

Much of our focus as a staff, and with our citizens advisory group (the Channel 28 Subcommittee of CTTAB-- the Citizens Technology and Television Advisory Board) has been devoted to finding ways to use the television medium effectively to enhance citizen-government communication. During the past few months we've begun to move ahead with some new programming, learning as we go forward.

For Domestic Violence Awareness month (October), we produced a live call-in program from our studio. Police Chief Norm Stamper, Judith Shoshana of the City Attorney's Office, and Domestic Violence Advocate Sheila Hargesheimer addressed and answered viewers' questions.

Working in conjunction with King County's government television channel, we produced and aired Video Voters' Guides for both the primary and general elections. Almost every candidate for local public office came into our studio and taped his or her message to the voters.

On election night, we tapped into King County's election results site on the web and posted updated election results for city offices on Channel 28 noticeably earlier and more frequently than all other TV stations!

We produced one video that explored the range of emotions and rationales over the off leash area policy, featuring dogs and their owners, and also those opposed to the use of parks in this way. A staff video on the SODO Urban Art Corridor premiered at a fund raiser at the Frye Art Museum and then aired on Channel 28. The SMA Awards Luncheon, the Delridge "OnRamp" Computer Center, the opening of the Garfield Teen Center and the Human Rights Day Celebration are examples of other events we taped and aired on Channel 28.

When the four finalists for the City Librarian made presentations and responded to questions from the public, we were there, taping the interviews and airing them on Channel 28, and then we re-aired Deborah Jacobs' presentation and interview several times after her selection.

Not only did we cablecast the 1998 Budget Public Hearing live, but we also produced "Budget Basics," a studio program with Martha Choe and Judy Bunnell that explained the 1998 City Budget—where the money comes from, where it goes, etc.

We also sent Tina Podlodowski's November Neighborhoods meeting from the Council Chambers out live to viewers, and then in December we went live again and had viewers calling in to ask questions. This "experiment" was to test the technology because we hope to have the City Council do some live, call-in public hearing during 1998, encouraging the viewers at home to offer their input on proposed policies. Those who come to public hearings to testify almost always have their minds made up in advance and their testimony prepared. The tenor and quality of viewers' responses to issues won't be orchestrated; in fact, it may well be much more responsive to the content presented and will certainly be "interactive."

In December we successfully presented a live town hall meeting sponsored by Seattle City Light on the impact of deregulation. We have already scheduled a follow-up live, call-in studio program for City Light in early February.

Other studio programs are being completed. The first program in a public affairs series called Seattle Citizen airs this Friday, December 19th. We are working with independent producers Gary Davis and CR Douglas to jointly develop this program series on a trial basis.

The Neighborhood Planning Office produced their first studio program, Neighborhood Stories, which should also air on December 19th. And we are putting the finishing touches on another studio program, for SPU, Community Reports, which will make three new programs premiering on December 19th!

A great deal of time and planning has gone into work with the Seattle Police Department on an exciting regular live hour-long call-in program from our studio, Beyond The Badge, which we hope to begin in February. Included in the regular program format is a segment for the Chief to answer viewer calls.

We've outlined a staff-produced magazine format program for Channel 28. As currently envisioned, it would include regular segments that allow various departments and elected officials to fit into an existing structure, solicit citizen input on topical concerns via a *vox populi* segment, and have other clearly defined components.

And we've earmarked some funds for implementing video on the city's web site.

The Future of Channel 28—Communication is a Two Way Street

Those of us working here at Channel 28 and our CTTAB subcommittee realize what an incredible resource this station is for the city and its citizens. We've worked hard to improve the quality and content of our coverage of Council Meetings, but it's the other programs that we've tried and are planning that will move the channel toward its full potential.

Communication is a two way street. While it is important for elected officials and city departments to utilize the channel to inform the public about what they are doing, we also want to find ways to provide citizens the opportunity to offer their opinions, to question, challenge and help refine and define what happens in municipal government, to make the channel truly interactive. There needs to be a clear commitment for open communication between citizens and public officials.

We've laid the foundation and tested our capacity for call-in programs from the studio and for opportunities for viewers to call in to the Council in the Chambers. We've experimented with small pieces that frame both sides of an issue. We've developed several different studio programs, some that are labor-intensive, some that have a quicker turn-around time, some that provide the city's view on information and policy and others that balance city presentations with citizen perspective and questions.

The guidelines we operate under also permit us to cover city-sponsored art and cultural events.

Once the new Council and Mayor are comfortable in their jobs, we hope to establish regular opportunities for them to talk to and hear from constituents by utilizing the phone-in potential of a live studio setting. Other programs that clearly frame both sides of an issue are important. As are live call-in public hearings.

All of us working here at Channel 28 are proud our progress, but also know we can do better. We are truly excited about the future of Channel 28, about what it will become, both in the next few months and in the next few years.

Video Services For City Departments

If all our equipment and personnel and budget could be totally dedicated to programming Channel 28, we'd be presenting a different picture. As it now exists, we have to balance demands for staff time and resources between competing demands. Three positions within our unit are actually funded by other city departments (2 by City Light and one through SPU). We sometimes refer to those employees as indentured servants because they are more or less on call for those departments and their work is often booked a month or more ahead.

Taping an event or producing a labor-intensive video for a city department is important, but we often want to know: Who will watch it? And how often? (Frequently departments assume that "video is the answer" but no one seems to know the question.) As an example, one request we received earlier in the year would have required more than a week of work and would have been seen probably once a year by a total of 6-10 employees!

Part of our “education” focus is to help departments learn how to effectively use our services; we’ve worked with departments to sometimes reshape their video plans so that the end product is something that has relevance to the broader potential audience of 200,000 homes on Channel 28 and is not so narrow in scope that it is geared only to a few city employees.

Even when departments are willing to pay for our services, we can’t comply with every request. When possible, we’ve hired TES video specialists to help satisfy their requests. We are thinking about having a low-end video set up available for departments to borrow at a modest fee so that they have the option to tape their own non-channel 28 events.

Other Issues, Concerns, Improvements

One important concern that we are already addressing is improving our signal quality. Currently our signal leaves our building via a microwave link. By the end of February, we are hoping to have a direct fiber optic connection to the head-end. This will dramatically improve the audio and video signal of our channel, particularly for those living farthest “downstream” from the head-end, (residents of the “old Viacom” area and Summit Cable subscribers).

We know that we have to improve the turn-around time for everything that requires extensive editing. Part of that improvement will come from increased familiarity with our new equipment and part should happen from more staff specialization.

Improvements in our studio work will come in a similar fashion. We are experiencing an exciting learning curve. Soon we will have “flats” and a “riser” for our studio. Each time we tape a program, we learn more about how to do the next one better and more efficiently.

When the new Council has developed its committee structure, we will implement standard openings that highlight each committee, detailing the work they are responsible for and the members who serve on the committee.

We want to regularly develop PSAs and promo tapes for our channel in general and for upcoming programs. And, once we develop a more regular program format, we will want to consider a coordinated media plan to promote the channel to the public.

The same video cameras and control panel and recording deck we use in the studio comprises our remote multi-camera video unit. Use of this equipment in the field is definitely one area in which we can improve. We have covered many events successfully with one camera, but if an event requires two camera views, then the multi-camera remote unit should be used. The first several times we used it we ran into a variety of problems. We need to know that we can use it to cover important events in a professional manner. We aren’t there yet.

We are experiencing a significant increase in demand for our services. It's evident that we need to develop some well defined guidelines for accepting, declining and prioritizing requests both for Channel 28 and for the video services component. We have developed a standardized form for all who request our services but need to be more consistent in demanding that it be completed before initiating work.

In a similar vein, there may be a need to improve clarity about issues of autonomy and decision-making.

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