

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

Learning From TV: The First Years of ETV

The instructions might sound familiar to readers of a certain age. In 1970, when an early viewer of Vermont Educational Television complained that reception in the Brattleboro area was poor, he was told to turn the switch on his TV to UHF; turn to Channel 41; and then aim his UHF (as opposed to VHF) antenna at Mt. Ascutney. The station recommended that he move the antenna within a three foot arc until he found the best reception.

Vermont Educational Television (ETV) was established by Act 23 of 1966 through an appropriation of \$2.3 million to the University of Vermont "for the construction and equipping of an educational television network for the state of Vermont." ETV went on air on October 16, 1967, broadcasting Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. to 10 p.m.

There was great, though not universal, excitement about the possibilities of using a publically-funded television station to provide not only distance learning for schools but also a forum for informing the public about government programs and initiatives.

A 1969 survey of Vermont's supervisory school districts reported that 42,000 students watched ETV either in the classroom or in the evening. A majority of the schools polled found the station "very worthwhile." Bellows Falls schools reported, for example, that 475 students watched ETV for 13 hours a week for science, social studies and history classes. In one Brattleboro school 140 students watched five hours a week in support of language, music, science, and social studies classes. Much of the programming was locally created though Sesame Street, the Civilization series, and other national programs were available.



Many of the programs were designed to inform Vermonters in general as well as school children. ETV's program director Garry Simpson and the station's governing board, featuring legislators, a representative of the governor, and representatives from UVM, the state colleges, and education worked with government agencies, schools and others to develop programs on public issues (one of the early ETV directors who remains familiar to us is Weston Cate of East Montpelier, a teacher who became the long time director of the Vermont Historical Society).

State programs used ETV to expose broader audiences to their efforts. For example, in 1970 the Alcohol Rehabilitation Services helped create such programs as "To Your Health" (13 minutes); "Alcohol and the Human Body" (15 minutes) and "A Message in Every Bottle" (20 minutes). These were shown at several different times to meet school schedules. In 1970 the Development Department granted ETV \$13,500 to help create programs on land use, zoning and planning, housing,

poverty, and air and water quality (the Archives holds several of these films). There was a monthly Governor's Press Conference as well as a series on issues before the legislature. Another series featured "Vermont School Reports." Students also contributed to the programming; a series called "Twenty Below" was the product of a two-year collaborative effort among the students at 17 Vermont high schools.

In its early years Vermont ETV was wholly funded by public money (fund raising came later) and not all citizens, or legislators, saw it as an appropriate use of taxpayer money (in 1971 the state allocation to ETV was \$542,000). One Rutland viewer called ETV a "taxpayer created monster" and proclaimed that he would "prefer my young to memorize a Beer Commercial or two than the trash on ETV." (Governor Deane C. Davis

Records, Box 1A, Folder 15). A Montreal viewer complained about the growing number of Public Broadcasting Corporation shows that were being used, even though they consisted of "cheap, cheap jazz spots and some political propaganda items which may be of interest to black left-wingers." (Davis Records, Box 7B, Folder 22) The Quechee Lakes Corporation complained about anti-development biases in a program by Vermont Natural Resources and demanded equal time. Within a year of ETV going on air Governor Davis had to fend off an attempt by some legislators to severely curtail state funding.

Some complaints and opposition were the inevitable outgrowth of concerns about government, and specific agencies, funding programs about their efforts. Could such programs be unbiased? Still, a review of the early programs shows a remarkable effort at creating an informed citizenry attuned to current issues. While many of the programs looked at the state's growing interest in land use and environmental protection, other programs such as "State Spending: Where Do We Go From Here?" sought to convey the difficult financial aspects of meeting growing expectations for services against a relatively small state budget.

What is of particular interest to me is the expectation that new technologies could be used to inform citizens, provide distance learning, and serve a host of other public services. Today we are witnessing the same expectations inspired by another new technological tool: the worldwide web. Can we learn anything from ETV's early days that might help frame our current expectations for the web? Will the same demands for slicker productions, commercial opportunities, and national programming over local productions re-shape those expectations just as they did for commercial and public television? Please stay tuned.