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Using Television in Public Policy Extension Work

By Wallace E. Ogg

Television is especially well adapted to teaching technical skills. It is much more difficult to use this tool for teaching abstract ideas such as public affairs. But difficult as it is to use television for teaching in our field, we cannot afford to ignore this important new tool.

Traditionally a great deal of the extension work in Iowa—and this is probably true of the rest of the United States—is done by direct teaching with farm people in meetings, training schools, and demonstrations. As many of you know, for our public affairs education we often use training meetings with groups of about sixty leaders. The state is often covered in a series of, say, thirty meetings reaching perhaps 1,500 to 2,000 people in a period of two months.

In a series of eleven public affairs programs on television, it was conservatively estimated from actual telephone surveys that 150,000 people were reached with each of the eleven programs originally broadcasted from WOI-TV. Then in addition to the WOI-TV audience the whole series was put on film and was rebroadcasted by four commercial stations. One of the programs was rebroadcasted five times.

The contrast is obvious. But let us hasten to say that soon after WOI-TV went on the air four years ago the typical comment from county agents was that it interfered with the local county extension program; it made it more difficult to get people out to meetings. Because this was a typical and valid reaction, I want to stress one aspect of educational television—the integration of local county extension programs with television programs.

One of the unique things about the Cooperative Agricultural Extension Service in the United States as an adult education agency is that it marshals local educational resources, all the resources of the state land-grant college, and the resources of the United States Department of Agriculture and puts them at the disposal of the local people through the county agricultural extension system. This means that an educational television program integrated with county extension programs has contact with local people through the county extension program as well as the direct contact through the television program itself. By integrating a television program with county extension programs, a much greater impact is possible in educational television than in the absence of this contact with people at the local level.

Several recent attempts at integration of television programs with county extension programs will be of interest. Let us consider the educational process and the place that educational television can have in this process. The steps in the educational process for agricultural extension have been described as: (1) interest, (2) acceptance, (3) understanding, (4) trial, and (5) adoption. Television can be used to play a part in at least the first three steps and can encourage the last two. Keep these steps in mind as several programs which have been integrated with the county extension program are described.

The first experiment, about three years ago, was in home economics. A series of programs called "Make a Dress TV" was planned in cooperation with the county extension home economists. Women were enrolled by the county extension staff to watch the television program and actually make a dress. In this case, the county extension staff promoted interest in the program and secured acceptance of the idea. Understanding had to come wholly from the television program. Trial on one dress and home sewing as a general practice was a decision of the individual homemaker, promoted by both the effort of the county staff and the actual program.

The next experiment was in the 4-H program for older boys about two years ago. It came about through an interesting chain of events. A thirteen-week series of educational programs called the "Whole Town's Talking" was produced and broadcasted. This was a series of programs on public issues in the local community, such as school district reorganization. People were intensely interested, but nothing seemed to happen. The whole town did talk, but interest soon died down without any action. To study this problem, a workshop on educational television was set up by a group of resident teachers, extension workers, and TV producers. Out of this workshop came a proposal to produce one program where all the resources of teaching and research, and all the county extension resources would be combined to make the greatest total educational impact. A committee was appointed and went to work with producers.

A topic was chosen that was already recognized as a problem by local people in their county programs—youth and military service. The State Boys' 4-H Convention was being devoted to this subject. County extension staff members were contacted and their support enlisted. A questionnaire on the attitudes of youth as they faced military service was sent to all the local 4-H Clubs who were sending delegates to the state convention. The boys were made to feel that they were helping plan the TV program. Meetings were called by county extension people to get reactions from boys facing service, from parents, and from girl friends of boys faced with enlistment.

At the State 4-H Convention the boys were trained in subject matter and in how to lead their local clubs in a viewing discussion group, and sent home with the responsibility of organizing a meeting of older boys from their 4-H Club and their parents to view the program and have a discussion following it.

There were 350 meetings, with about 5,000 people in attendance, in addition to the 70,000 or more people who viewed the program at home. In the winter of 1953 this technique was modified somewhat and used for a series of four programs called "100-Bushel Corn, a Reality."

During the past winter the series of eleven programs mentioned earlier, was held. This series was planned in the summer with the county extension staff. A work committee spent considerable time in October, November, and December developing objectives, deciding on subject-matter content, and planning and trying out the format of the show. Reference material and discussion guides for local leaders were developed, and the county staff was trained so that they, in turn, could train local leaders to conduct local viewing and discussion groups. The format was tried out three times—once with a rural group, once with a city group from Des Moines, and once before cameras on film in what is called a "closed circuit show." Then the series was put on the air in January, February, and March.

How did it work? Successfully enough to say that this technique of integration greatly increases the contribution of television to the total educational process.

Pre-program publicity in most counties was excellent. Good viewing and discussion was spotted. People, to participate, have to feel that this is worth doing. In the most successful single county effort, 48 leaders were trained for one rebroadcast from a commercial station, and forty meetings with about 500 people were held. Some counties had no viewing and discussion groups. Probably somewhere in the neighborhood of 500 viewing and discussion meetings were held.

Counties were encouraged to choose from the eleven shows certain ones for group viewing. A few groups, however, met as a study group for all eleven shows and, where they did, they were very enthusiastic about the idea.

Important as this system of integration is, we must not forget that, while 5,000 or so of the people we typically work with in extension watched these programs and discussed them, our total audience for the original broadcasts was 150,000 people. Probably half these people have no other contact whatsoever with extension.

Another point to remember is that in educational television, if you want an audience, you are faced with an inevitable conflict between subject matter content and interest. You are competing with commercial programs with professional performers, and your audience did not ask for the educational program. They will probably stay with you if it is mildly interesting.

What generalizations can we draw from our experiences?

1. Teaching with this new tool requires much more imagination and an enormous amount of hard work. It is more difficult, but it is vastly more effective.

2. A television program is different from a radio program or a local meeting. The difference must be exploited. Things that are interesting on radio or in a meeting can be deady dull on television.

3. The format for the show does not have to be original, but it must be adapted to the subject matter. The format must be a framework which is flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances, audience reaction, and available resources and people.

4. Even with an elaborate system of integration with county programs, educational television is not complete in itself but only contributes to the educational process.

5. This system of integration cannot be used too often. It involves too much work and organization. The decision regarding where it is to be used must be carefully considered.

6. Educational television often must compromise between high interest, to hold as much of a universal audience as possible, and subject matter content. Some sacrifice in audience will have to be made if very much ground is to be covered.

7. Objectives must be clearly defined. The educational objective and the objective of what audience to try to reach are both important.