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Small - Poor - Successful? The Caribbean Story:
The Caribvision Satellite TV News Exchange

By

Sharon Marshall
SMALL-POOR-SUCCESSFUL? THE CARIBBEAN STORY

THE CARIBVISION SATELLITE TV NEWS EXCHANGE

by Sharon Marshall -- CARIBVISION News Coordinator

IIC Seminar and Conference

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THE BACKGROUND

The first efforts to establish a satellite TV news exchange in the Caribbean were made in 1986. Three stations — Trinidad and Tobago Television, the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation and the Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation in Barbados — agreed to set up a satellite news exchange.

Initially only TTT and CBC followed through on that commitment. They exchanged two to four items each three days a week. A few months later JBC joined.

At the time I was part of the staff in the News and Current Affairs Department at CBC. I can still recall my sense of excitement at the first story to come to us from Trinidad. It was about a demonstration protesting against economic measures instituted by the government. The demonstrators were very vocal in their denunciation of the measures. Trinidadian voices on a TV newscast in Barbados. Imagine!

Prior to this newscasts contained videotaped reports in the local segment, the announcer read to camera stories rewritten from wire copy about major developments in the region, and the international segment was full of taped reports supplied by the established news services.

The advent of CARIBVISION has changed all this.

THE F.E.S. COMPONENT

The telecommunications companies were very involved at this early stage of the Caribbean TV news exchange, recognizing the need to form a partnership with the broadcasters.

But because of INTELSAT's tariff policy, each participant had to book at least ten minutes of satellite time, and this cost them more than U.S. $40,000 each per year.

In January of 1987 the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung — a non-governmental foundation in what was then known as the Federal Republic of Germany or West Germany -- invited broadcasters from all over the world to attend a conference in Munich.

The CBU's representative was Jones P. Madeira, who was then Head of News and Current Affairs at Trinidad and Tobago Television. He's also a former Secretary General of the CBU.

While attending the F.E.S. conference in Munich, Jones asked the Foundation for help in improving and expanding the Caribbean TV news exchange, because of its experience with similar ventures in other parts of the world.
The F.E.S. agreed, and on October 1st that year sent TV consultant, Michael Abend, to the Caribbean on a six-month exploratory mission.

Five months later -- March 23rd 1988 -- CARIBVISION was born. Well if not born, christened. The news exchange baby which those three stations gave birth to in 1986 now had a name-CARIBVISION.

Shortly after Michael Abend's arrival in the Caribbean there was a development which would contribute significantly to that baby's survival and success. After years of struggle on the part of broadcasters, INTELSAT agreed to a new system of charging called "block booking".

This meant that participants in the exchange could book a certain amount of satellite time to be used how they choose, and they could share the costs among themselves. This is as opposed to the ten minutes they were each required to book previously.

Use of the hot switching technique would enable them to make maximum use of the time that was available.

The result was that the news exchange which was expanded to five days a week would cost less than it did when it was only three days a week.

Also TeleCuracao was able to join because of the reduction in price.

The CARIBVISION news exchange now operates Monday to Friday on INTELSAT Major Path 1, coordinates 325.5 from 18:15 to 18:30 GMT.

The four stations which regularly participate in CARIBVISION pay U.S. $35,000 or less per year, including INTELSAT charges and service charges to the telecoms. But this fee is still high for broadcasters operating in small, fragile economies like ours.

T.S.T.T. -- the telecom in Trinidad and Tobago -- took on the responsibility for technical coordination once the news exchange moved to the hot switching system.

From the very beginning the telecoms have supported the project by offering the lowest possible rates for satellite usage. This is significant because prohibitive telecom rates have delayed the start of such exchange systems in other parts of the world.

Telecoms in the Caribbean also willingly took part in workshops on improving the news exchange which have been organised by the CBU with support from F.E.S.
SMALL, POOR, SUCCESSFUL?

The four countries -- Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Curacao -- which take part regularly in the news exchange are among the few which have uplink antennas. These are directed to INTELSAT satellites.

Previously when the CBU wanted to provide programming via satellite to the 20 or more stations which are members of the union, we had to combine two satellites -- INTELSAT for the uplink and a non-INTELSAT satellite for the distribution.

Earlier this year Helen Television System -- a small privately-owned CBU member station on the island of St. Lucia-- acquired a direct uplink to Galaxay 6. HTS receives a tape of the daily CARIBVISION feed by courier, and now uplinks it to at least ten more countries as part of a 15-minute package called the Caribbean News.

So the CARIBVISION baby is now having children of its own.

Early in September we received a request from ATV in Suriname to take part in CARIBVISION. From the 6th of the month they've been accessing the feed as receivers only, and we got their first contribution on September 17th. It was a report on the inauguration of their new president.

The inclusion of Suriname means that the project now involves participants in three different time zones. Jamaica is one hour behind Eastern Caribbean Time which Barbados, Curacao and Trinidad and Tobago observe, and Suriname is one hour ahead of Eastern Caribbean Time.

This might not be too impressive to our friends from exchanges in Europe and Asia, but to us it's a sign that our project is expanding from its very modest beginnings.

CARIBVISION now links Jamaica in the western Caribbean, with Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago in the east and Curacao in South to Suriname on the northern tip of South America.

The last two -- Curacao and Suriname -- are former Dutch colonies so there's also that link between two different language groups in the region.

Suriname's participation is possible because INTELSAT has approved the CBU's proposal for a new system called a "multiple access tariff". This enables us to include more participants without having to pay additional INTELSAT charges.

The question "Small, Poor, Successful?" is certainly one which should be asked of the CARIBVISION satellite TV news exchange. Actually there's no question about the first two
elements. We are small and poor. But how do we measure success?

Let me admit that we have our problems. For the past several days we've been experiencing audio distortion from Trinidad and too-high video levels from Jamaica. Quite often Curacao doesn't communicate its offers to the coordination centre on time but feeds a story anyway.

All this despite the best efforts of the F.E.S. which has provided two trainers from Germany every year to work with representatives from our member stations on upgrading the technical quality of their output.

We've also had month-long attachments at the coordination centre for producers from these stations, but sometimes the news content isn't that impressive either.

There've been questions about whether we'll ever be able to become self-supporting without the financial assistance of donors like the F.E.S. While we're grateful that their assistance has been extended for another two years, we're also pleased that the project is beginning to pay for itself through generating revenues from some of the services we provide.

While I was in Senegal in July of 1990 participating in a workshop that was instrumental in the launch of AFROVISION, I told my counterparts from other regions which offer much more exciting news developments than my part of the world that apart from the occasional hurricane nothing of international note happens in the Caribbean.

On my way back to the region from Senegal I learned that there'd been an attempted coup in Trinidad and Tobago. The Prime Minister and members of his cabinet were being held hostage in the parliament buildings, and some of our colleagues at Trinidad and Tobago Television were also being held hostage by the same group of militant Moslems.

So much for the occasional hurricane.

And earlier this year when Nelson and Winnie Mandela visited Jamaica viewers from throughout the Caribbean were able to share in all the excitement and emotion of that event.

On days when the technical quality is poor and the news content leaves something to be desired the question of whether or not we're successful is uppermost in my mind.

But after my initial frustration I recall my excitement at those first Trinidadian voices that came to us in that report about the demonstration and what we've achieved since then, and I think "Yes. We're successful because Caribbean people are talking to each other through us."