

DIY TV

By Eric Hellweg June 17, 2005

Most discussions of citizen journalism assume that the Internet is the best medium for people who want to come together to produce news stories. But a new media company has a vision that's more, well, visual: it hopes to bring the concept of citizen journalism to television.

On June 15, Toronto-based Independent World Television (IWT) announced plans to launch a television channel by late 2007 that will incorporate citizens' voices into its programming mix. The group also launched a website and began soliciting donations to fund its effort.

Unlike most television networks -- including Current, a commercial citizen journalism network with similarly styled programming being put together by former Vice President Al Gore -- IWT will not run commercials. What's more, unlike the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), the group says it will not accept government funding. Instead, IWT is asking individuals to donate \$50, preferably via the Web. According to the group's prospectus, if 500,000 people donate \$50 apiece, IWT will be able to sustain its first year of production.

IWT has recruited an impressive array of advisors, consultants, and staffers, who have been highly successful in the past at using the Internet for fundraising tool -- and as a vehicle for social change. Its Internet fundraising efforts are being led by Nicco Mele, former webmaster for Howard Dean's presidential campaign. Stephanie Schriock, Dean's national finance director, is handling IWT's large-donor fundraising campaign.

The group's money-raising efforts are off to a promising start. Contacted eight hours after the site's launched, Paul Jay, IWT's founding chairman, said the site had raised more than \$10,000.

"This was supposed to be a soft launch, but because of the attention we've received already from blogs, this whole thing is exploding," Jay said.

Of course it's a long way from \$10,000 to the \$25 million the group estimates it will need to fund its first year of broadcasting; but Jay is optimistic about the potential that the Internet offers. Jay also says the Web will be the springboard -- the community-building tool that will heighten interest in IWT, and, he hopes, pave the way for a successful launch in 2007.

So far, though, IWT has taken seed money from foundations and the Canadian Auto Workers Union. But it says this funding is a temporary solution, and it will move away from these sources when the citizen fundraising effort ramps up.

IWT plans to offer stories that today's mainstream media doesn't cover, such as the "Downing Street Memo," which alleged that the Bush administration made the facts fit its policy in the runup to the Iraq War. In most cases, according to IWT staffers, such stories aren't covered because of corporate and government pressures, direct or indirect. Even PBS, the group claims, is tainted by commercial and government interests through its corporate underwriting and government grants -- more today than ever before.

In fact, lending credence to IWT's claims, the day after their launch, the New York Times reported that investigations have begun into alleged improper disclosure of lobbying contributions by the government-funded Corporation for Public Broadcasting (which also helps fund PBS) to Republican lobbyists.

As an example of the kind of fare IWT plans to offer, the program J-Pop will feature video footage shot by citizens, uploaded to the site via a BitTorrent application, vetted by IWT editors, and aired.

"The model will be a network that's a marriage of professional and citizen journalism," says Matt Thompson, Internet director of IWT. "The time is right to apply [citizen journalism] to television."

The rest of IWT's proposed programming will feature professional content in the areas of news programs, talk shows, and documentary features.

Raising money to launch the network and cultivating a group of citizen journalists is only part of the challenge, though. As daunting will be gaining access (called "carriage") on cable and satellite networks.

"Carriage for a new network is almost impossible to get today," says Anthony Crupi, a senior editor at MediaWeek.

But Jay's team believes they have a solution. Already IWT has formed a partnership with LinkTV, a fellow progressive network that is disseminated on the two major satellite carriers, DirecTV and EchoStar. That partnership will gain the IWT station access to an estimated 25 million households in the United States, according to Kim Spencer, president of LinkTV.

"If what IWT is proposing comes together, this will be a great partnership," says Spencer.

Jay says he has met with the head of government relations for both Comcast and Time Warner, and presented a plan that would give IWT carriage as a free video-on-demand option -- essentially costing the carriers nothing to run and giving them the opportunity to possibly sell paid content around the IWT fare. Jay characterized the meetings as "positive." The arrangement would give IWT exposure and fundraising possibilities in exchange for its giving away its programming for free.

"There's not a lot of real estate left on the linear [traditional] cable networks," acknowledges Jenni Moyer, a Comcast spokeswoman. She wouldn't comment on IWT, confirm the meeting, or discuss any programming negotiations, but said that "for unique or niche content, or for a more targeted audience, video on demand is more viable."

Finally, there's the philosophical challenge facing IWT: its model upends entrenched perceptions and habits about mass media news. And doing so can be a risky business. In 2000, for example, Chicago television station WBBM abandoned the popular "if it bleeds, it leads" approach dominating local newscasts, in favor of a more sober approach that spent time examining the nuances of a story. After nine months, though, the experiment failed, with the station's ratings plummeting to an eight-percent share, according to a report in *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Indeed, one could argue that, given the success of networks such as Fox News and programs such as Lou Dobbs on CNN, people want spin in their news.

Nonetheless, Jay sticks to his argument: people are fed up with most newscasts, and the Internet's capabilities has given people the desire to participate in change. As proof, he cites the global anti-Iraq war protests in February 2003, organized largely via the Internet, and studies showing increased disdain for the news media.

"It's not just a TV network or a website," says Jay of IWT. "This isn't something to consume. It's a movement for democracy. It's something people can contribute to and build."

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