

SCIENCE IS EVERYWHERE—ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE

background paper for workshop on proposed science channel on Edusat

Background

The Government of India is planning to launch a satellite exclusively for educational transmissions called EDUSAT. The EDUSAT transmissions would be aimed at: primary education, literacy education, adult education, vocational education, continuing education, and distance education sectors. Some part of the transmission capacity of the satellite will be reserved for science education programming.

Co-ordination and management of the science communication component of EDUSAT will be the responsibility of Development and Educational Communication Unit (DECU) of Department of Space, ISRO. DECU has been engaged in the activity of using TV as a medium of communication for development and education for almost 30 years. These include the pioneering Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) conducted during 1975-76; the Kheda Communications Project (KCP) started as a part of SITE, which continued till 1989; the Jhabua Development Communications Project (JDCCP) undertaken during 1996-2000; and the Training and Development Communication Channel (TDCC) on INSAT (providing 1-way video & 2-way audio interactive teleconferencing network) operational since 1995, providing satcom-based distance education.

This paper pertains to the development of an action plan for involvement and participation of NGOs, academic institutions, civil society collectives and individuals, in the production of programmes for the National Science Channel.

- The first phase of this process will be to create a wide-ranging working alliance of those working to take science to the people. The members of this coalition will work together to develop briefs, enter into production, facilitate pre-testing at the field level, provide feedback on programmes, find financial and facilitative resources for programmes, etc. in short, cooperate with DECU in planning the National Science Channel. This phase will be launched with a workshop to be held at Mumbai in January 2003.
- The second phase will be a controlled experiment to create a channel based on this alliance. Learning from past experiences, this channel will aim to be on par with other competing channels, sustained by an understanding of viewing habits and expectations of viewers. It will commence with the commissioning of programmes in order to develop a bank of materials before the launch of the channel. These will be pre-tested with the involvement of the partners working in various sections of society and their feedback will be used to develop further programming.
- This will culminate in a third phase: actual on-air transmission and the operation of a responsive mechanism of audience feedback, to run a pioneering channel committed to enhancing the public understanding of science and technology issues.

During the last thirty years, television viewing and reception has become a widespread social phenomenon involving every age group in this country. Where we started with

only one national channel for a limited daily transmission, today we have an endless choice of channels at least in satellite-and-cable households. Some years back, people with TVs switched on their sets every evening and kept them going till they went to bed, watching whatever came on the single channel with relative absorption. Today we have the tyranny of the remote control device enabling viewers to scan the channels continuously. It has completely changed the viewing behaviour of audiences, leaving the TV industry, advertisers and researchers who depend on consistent viewer behaviour extremely hard-pressed, constantly gambling to stay in place. The new science channel will have to face this challenge.

Today it is very difficult to make audiences sit through a programme of any duration from beginning to end with attention—they just have to cut to see what they are missing on the other channels. Nor do audiences remain attached to specific niches of programming—no child will solely watch cartoons, nor a senior citizen stick to bhajans as had been assumed earlier. There is a coming together of entertainment, infotainment, current affairs, in-depth analysis and news in every household with a TV set, whether satellite-and-cable or not.¹

It is an eclectic and composite audience, constantly evolving its preferences. Fads such as the huge success and eclipse of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* come and go in waves. Apart from saying that the viewer is loyal to viewing, researchers are unable to explain and predict what programming holds which segment of viewer and why.²

¹ Even if a home maker who is at home most of the day says she primarily watches soaps, we might find quite a bit of news and National Geographic in her viewing. Deeper probing may find her equating news to a soap opera—a real life dramatic story that she is following in daily doses “Did they find the people behind that bomb blast in the market place?” “Will the bandit in the forest who kidnaped the politician get caught?” etc.

According to a CFAR study, this is a burgeoning phenomenon after 11th September 2001, when an unprecedented piece of news seized peoples' imaginations, and audiences which had hitherto shunned news—children, teenagers, women—suddenly started watching and developing a taste for it. Perhaps realising this, newscasters have made their matter more accessible, with more anecdotes and descriptive stories. Even group discussions on TV today have a clear function—building the audience's background knowledge on an issue. Active people from relevant fields interpret the implications of events for viewers, revealing their methods of analysis, and in that way passing them on to the viewer as tools. The boring elderly male intellectuals impressing only each other during TV discussion shows are gone.

Similarly channels like Discovery and National Geographic which were perceived earlier as being for the elites only, have, with their language dubs, developed sizable followings among home-based senior citizens, housewives, and through them children. Possibly these viewers have discovered that they enjoy learning about natural and human phenomena, even if they are reluctant to admit that, and they justify it by saying it's necessary to watch these to build the competitive edge of the children in the family.

² Could anyone have imagined a decade ago that channels like Fashion TV, Discovery and National Geographic would get a devoted viewership in India? And at the same time, channels like Astha and Sanskar would blossom, with the gurus that appear on them actually buying the time slots, freeing the channel owners of any production and programme generation responsibility?

It is in this context of eclectic TV viewership that we are going on to hold this workshop, designed towards planning and implementation of programming and transmission in science communication for the EDUSAT system. We enter this meeting with the presupposition that the channel cannot have a producer-content expert-social scientist generated agenda. Unlike the supply-driven attempts at ETV in the past, this effort has to depend on the momentum dictated by demand. Our approach to programming, and the very character of the channel has to be rooted in studies of the fluid, dynamic, ever-changing audience context, and appropriate mechanisms to fine-tune the programming with constant audience feedback must be in place from the start.

For, it is not enough to say that you tried, and that you put up a channel with respectable content. It has to be watched and seen to be making waves, and popular demand has to be created. Cable operators, media, educational authorities and others have to see us as serving out what society needs and wants. Until the channel develops a groundswell and a break-even point (not necessarily a commercial benchmark, but one set by us) is reached, we will have to also take up all kinds of promotional activities to make audiences focused on it, to sustain viewership and to keep it growing.

All this points the way to a new hybrid form, never seen before on Indian TV—rigorous in content, but friendly and joyful in form. Deep thinking and resources must be set aside to ensure that this happens, and its basis has to be collaboration amongst a wide range of partners.

Participants

- NGOs involved in producing development/educational communication materials, especially science education
- Public/non-profit institutions in the field of education with particular emphasis on science education programmes
- NGOs active in the field of communication media and development
- Communication experts from academic institutions involved in mass communications, particularly electronic media
- Content experts in the field of education, science and communication
- DECU, ISRO & Comet Media Foundation, the joint organisers of the workshop

Potential audience groups

Participants should come with suggested audience segmentation patterns with profiles of the segments with respect to content.

Just to start the ball rolling, some suggestions:

Students

- Primary school students
- Middle school students
- High school students
- University students

Non-students

- Those who follow technology developments as consumers and out of interest
- Young working adults
- Home makers
- Science and technology professionals
- Senior citizens

Stated objectives or credo

Everyone is invited to come to the meeting with her/his suggestions for a credo for this new channel.

Once again, to get our thoughts moving, the SITE credo could be taken as a starting point:

- *To make children realise that science is everywhere; that their immediate environment can be questioned, understood, explained and manipulated by them, using the scientific method.*
- *To emphasise the learning of the scientific method more than mere transfer of information.*

Framework of discussion

This framework covers four aspects, each contributing towards programme generation and the conducting of an operational science education transmission activity for the achievement of the stated objectives with respect to identified audience groups.

The four aspects are:

1. Technology feasibilities and how they shape programme design
2. Programme generation strategy and methodology
3. Alliances/partnerships for programme production, audience research, organisation of structured reception and marketing
4. Operations management design

Questions with respect to these aspects will be discussed at the workshop and recommendations made on each.

1. Technology feasibilities and how they shape programme design

This session will open with a presentation by DECU outlining the envisioned transmission configuration and how this relates to the possible content and approaches to programme-making.

Subsequently, the gathering could go on to discuss issues such as:

- How much scope does the technology gives to interactivity?
- How does it relate to the convergence of technologies which is already becoming a part of our reality?

- Will the transmissions be region-specific, that is, addressing major language groups in the different beam coverage areas of the satellite?
- Or should they be organised state-wise, encouraging greater proportion of local programming generation?
- The phasing of the transmissions—how many hours a day, how much original programming, what proportion repeats—should be also be issues covered in this session.

2. Programme Generation Strategy and Methodology

This would form the contents of an open forum on the first day. Ideas on content or 'curriculum' should be brought to the meeting by participants, specifying audiences they have in mind and related focus themes. We urge participants to generate these ideas in interactive public fora with potential audiences before the meeting, and to present their findings in this regard to the group.

This could be followed with a presentation and critical assessment of producer-researcher-content expert team methodology by DECU.

Subsequently, the gathering could go on to discuss issues such as:

- Which audience groups need to be identified and addressed?
- What are their knowledge seeking habits and behaviour, and how do these audience groups assess the knowledge facilities available to them?
- What are our objectives of science communication with respect to each of the identified audience groups?
- What are the broad programming content categories for each identified audience group?
- How will the 'curriculum' for programming be designed?
- How will briefs be generated and prioritised, proposals examined and assessed?
- Shall we iterate seasonal/year-wise focus themes for the transmissions, so that there is a certain consistency and continuity in what the viewers see?
- How will programming be decentralised to each region/language group? What will be the appropriate organisational structure?
- How will audience response, demands and expectations be factored into the programming? Once on air, what will be the mechanisms of response enabling us to reshape and redetermine the contents of programmes?

3. Alliances/Partnerships

This session will examine the potential alliances the National Science Channel will need to be a success. These include:

- production agencies: independent, government-owned and corporate, to make programmes
- all kinds of agencies and institutions for funding and other resources (intellectual and physical) going into programme production

How and by whom will the 'curriculum' for programming be designed, including choice of focus themes? Ideas on 'curriculum'

How will programming be decentralised to each region/language group? What will be the appropriate organisational structure?

Will the EDUSAT authority set up common production facilities for in-house production as well as outsourced programming by NGOs/public institutions? What will be the modality of such usage by outside agencies?

How will briefs be generated and prioritised, proposals examined and assessed?

What will be the mechanism and facilities for quality control - technical and qualitative, for both in-house and outsourced programming?

Hybrid character - rigorous content but friendly package
What are the sources of 'bought-out' programming for science education? What will be mechanism for selecting and procuring such programming? For doing subtitling/dubbing into different languages?

X How will audience response/demands/expectations be factored into the programming?

3. Alliances/Partnerships

Potential alliances with Multi-System Operators, Institutions, and NGOs for organising structured reception

Potential partnerships with South Asian, Asian and international broadcast production agencies for sourcing suitable programme material

Potential partnership with educational institutions and public/independent production agencies for programme production

Intra-country partnerships for programme exchange between regions/language groups

4. Operations Management Design

This pertains to how the transmission design, programme generation strategy and alliances/partnership strategy as evolved above can be developed into an overall plan for the whole system, with pre-commencement and operational phases. This is essentially an organisation and management issue, with DECU/ISRO providing the leadership. The Workshop participants' views would be sought on various issues potentially affecting them.

Finally: launch a channel that is a success

- committed viewers
- public response
- many stakeholders linked to clearly formulated program strategy

Some pre-studies - even meetings - what do you watch, what do like in who motivates you, interpretation & colleges