Penn Video Network

*Education, business, entertainment via satellite*

*BY CHRIS COOK AND MICHAEL PALLADINO*

The world has been radically changed by the development of satellite technologies. World events—both the geography-altering and the trivial—now unfold in real time before our eyes. And, the current population of university students has come of age largely regarding cable television the way previous generations regarded plumbed water—a necessary utility for living in the contemporary world. At Penn, this expectation is met by the Penn Video Network, which offers entertainment, international videoconferencing, and special event programming, as well as programming to supplement coursework.

**Satellite programming**

At first glance, the Penn Video Network’s offerings look like any well-stocked selection that one expects from a competitive cable company serving the home market. The network channels feature the best in news and public affairs (CNN, The Weather Channel, C-SPAN, Court TV), entertainment and recreation (MTV, ESPN, USA Network), culture and fine arts (Bravo, A&E, American Movie Classics), as well as high-quality reception of the region’s off-air channels (network and PBS affiliates, local independent stations).

But, as a video network serving academia, programming is distinct in several ways. For example, reflecting the international composition of the Penn community, the network features 7 channels of foreign-language programming, including SCOLA, a non-profit service providing 24-hour TV news from more than 30 countries in 20 languages. Similarly, The International Channel Network provides a wide variety of entertainment and dramatic broadcasts in 22 different languages. International programming not only interests viewers wishing to see programs from their country of origin or those curious about other cultures, it is often used to supplement traditional classroom language instruction.

**Penn programming**

The network also provides three channels unique to Penn: UTV13, The Video Bulletin Board, and the ResNet Movie Channel. UTV13, the Emmy-award-winning student-run TV station, offers Penn news, sports coverage, and talk shows. According to Todd Donovan (EAS ’95), UTV13’s President and General Manager, “UTV13 has two equally important missions: to produce Penn-oriented programming and to provide the only campus facility where Penn students can acquire and develop the practical skills necessary to work in television.”

The Video Bulletin Board, featuring continuous information about campus events, student services, job opportunities, public safety tips, Philadelphia-area attractions, and more, has become a convenient place to find out what’s going on around campus. The channel typically runs a 30-minute loop of messages, with audio provided by student-run WQHS.

The ResNet Movie Channel features more than 30 new films each month, 24 hours a day. Movies are selected based largely on viewer feedback and suggestions made by a student advisory panel; a typical line-up includes recent blockbuster, international, documentary, classic, and avant-garde cinema. Consistently rated among the most-watched channels by students in the ResNet-wired residence halls, the Movie Channel has become more than just an amenity to some students. “I think the Movie Channel is pretty much a necessity at 4 am,” says Paul Levin, a sophomore living in High Rise North. “I need a good two-hour distraction whenever my workload becomes unbearable and my studies jail me in my High Rise room.”

While the Movie Channel clearly has a recreational function, the channel has supplemented education efforts in interesting ways. One recent example was the “Reel Health” series, in which six movies were shown to encourage discussion about health issues. Discussion questions were posted on the upenn.resnet.video newsgroup, and peer health facilitators were available to coordinate group programs. “The Reel Health series allowed us to present common student health concerns (sexual health, alcohol use, and body image) in the context of popular films about interesting characters,” said Kurt Conklin, a health educator with Student Health Services.
Teleconferencing

At any given moment, videoconferences covering every imaginable topic, which originate from both far-flung and nearby locations, are soaring through the skies. If people are talking about astrophysics or zoology, or any academic stop in between, someone is presenting a videoconference on it. In most cases, bringing a program down from the skies—or “downlinking” it—to the University is achieved easily.

Recent topics at Penn have ranged from the very specific, such as “NCAA Basketball Officiating” hosted by the Athletic Department, to those with more general appeal, such as “Exploring the Internet” hosted by Data Communications and Computing Services (DCCS) and “People and the Planet” hosted by Penn’s Institute for Environmental Studies on behalf of the Sierra Club and the National Wildlife Federation.

The Office of the Vice Provost for University Life recently hosted the “Look Who’s Coming to College” teleconference of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, bringing together Penn student development professionals and representatives from neighboring universities. “Access to the NASPA video conference enabled VPUL to engage as a team in a staff development exercise designed to raise our awareness of contemporary issues affecting students,” said Dr. Larry Moneta, Associate Vice Provost for University Life. “Our hosting the teleconference created several opportunities for staff collaboration both within Penn and between neighboring institutions.”

Special video events and beyond

The Penn Video Network also provides the technical infrastructure for inter-campus video communication and special events, such as the recent broadcast of the inauguration ceremony of President Judith Rodin. Recent design improvements dramatically expanding the system’s ability to accommodate true “two-way” transmission, along with video wiring of Irvine Auditorium, permitted wide participation in this event. Similarly, last year’s high-profile Penn Town Meeting Project, produced in three installments, helped further Penn’s “One University” concept by facilitating discourse among the campus’s large and geographically disparate segments.

As the University’s video demands evolve, the Penn Video Network works to satisfy newfound needs, such as the planned spring semester launch of a channel with programming provided by the School of Arts and Sciences to supplement coursework. Other project possibilities include development of a satellite link to allow UTV13’s affiliation with CNN and distribution of audio signals of Radio France Internationale, which will ultimately be digitized and posted on the World-Wide Web. And, of course, Phase 3 of the ResNet project, pending a final approval process, is being planned to wire five additional residence halls: Mayer Hall, Stouffer College House, Van Pelt Manor, DuBois College House (Low Rise North), and Hill House.

If you have questions about the video network, contact the Penn Video Network by phone (898-4336 or “V-IDEO” on campus), fax (573-3996), or e-mail (video@dccs.upenn.edu). You can also check PennInfo (keyword “penn video”) or the ResNet Video newsgroup (upenn.resnet.video).

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History

In 1991 the Annenberg School for Communication installed a satellite dish on its roof and DCCS began managing the installation of the Academic Video Network (AVN), which distributed 15 educational channels to 32 non-residential buildings. Because of legal considerations, lasers were used to cross public rights-of-way (streets) instead of coaxial wire. In 1993, again for legal reasons, Penn’s General Counsel advised ResNet’s Steering Committee to design and install a separate residential video network instead of just extending the AVN. This ResNet Video Network had 30 channels and connected the five Phase One ResNet buildings to Annenberg’s dish for satellite reception and to Graduate Tower B for off-air channels. The network used both lasers and microwave technology to cross public streets.

For Phase 2 of ResNet, a partnership was forged with Wade CableVision for installation and programming. Since Wade CableVision would operate Penn’s Video Network, many previous legal restrictions went away: The network could now cross streets using coaxial cable (allowing a more reliable signal and two-way transmission capability) and the distinction between the residential and non-residential systems was no longer necessary. Therefore, the summer of 1994 was spent upgrading, expanding, and combining the Academic Video Network with the ResNet Video Network. Penn currently has 39 buildings (seven residential) on its newly combined Penn Video Network. The network reaches 3,150 students in seven of 16 residential buildings, and 300 other locations in 32 non-residential buildings.