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Don't Expect Any Federal Grants

■ It was scoop at first sight. In autumn 1978, viewers of a new public-access news show in Austin, Texas, heard—weeks before it broke on national news—inside reports of turmoil in Iran and of the imminent overthrow of Nicaraguan strongman Anastasio Somoza.

That was the first program of *Alternative Views*, which six years later is still staying a jump or two ahead of the headlines and now is considering going national on a satellite feed to public-access cable stations around the country.

The weekly hour-long program comes to viewers from a frankly leftist slant. It was started by a group of self-styled "video activists" led by Douglas Kellner, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*, and Frank Morrow, whose Ph.D. thesis analyzes conglomerate control of TV networks.

You might say they have an ax to grind. And they cheerfully admit it. "The whole point of this show," says Kellner, "is that the networks never let in alternative views. That's the gap we're trying to fill." Over the last two years, show hosts Kellner and Morrow have conducted interviews with experts on Central America, international debt, alternative nutrition, and urban development. They have shown footage smuggled out of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps the day after the massacre there, and also of the invasion of Lebanon. They have aired movies such as *On Company Business*, a documentary sharply critical of the CIA. And they have conducted the only longform video interview that Dr. Benjamin Spock recalls granting.

The show garners wide praise from local viewers, many of whom seem to appreciate its offbeat, gritty quality. And the show also nets the respect of professionals like Screen Actors Guild president Ed Asner and TV personality John Henry Faulk, who called his experience with the show "the most exciting thing I've ever done on the media."

Of course, the show also raises some hackles. Its hosts received typed death threats after coverage of Latin American affairs, and a local paper labeled Kellner and Morrow Soviet apologists. One guest, Professor Tom Philpott, who linked child prostitution with organized crime, later was shot and wounded. Although the crime went unsolved, some thought the shooting was a calculated warning.

But the worst problem for *Alternative Views* producers is not controversy or even the rare violent incident. It's the terrible reputation of public access. "People do have a negative image of it," grants Kellner, "and in some places they're justified—it can be pathetic. That's why we think *Alternative Views* is an important model." The show already gets peddled in cassette form among public-access cable stations in six cities, and deals are being negotiated with five more.

If local public access has limited visibility, it also has some special advantages. The show sometimes tackles local issues, such as rate hikes by the telephone company and plans of local peace activists to plug into a national Emergency Response Network in the event of a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua. It can respond to local constituencies, such as groups of Palestinian and Iranian students attending the University of Texas. And it can draw on local experts, such as frequent guest John Stockwell, an ex-CIA agent who draws on personal experience and recent travels to comment on the U.S. role in Nicaragua, Grenada, and Jamaica.

A *60 Minutes* producer would blanch at the budget for these sixty-minute news programs. For the first two years, the show was produced on a budget of zero. Not zero-based; zero. Volunteer time and college studio facilities made it possible. Now the show is produced on an annual budget of $2,000, much of which is spent making the show available for nonprofit groups that can't afford the $100 purchase price.

Having recently won a fight for survival in the city council, *Alternative Views* is moving up in the world. It will now be produced in the studio of the cable company, giving it three cameras instead of one and putting carpet under the guests' feet. But the focus will stay the same. Upcoming subjects include the political and social upheaval in South Africa and Central America, the growth of the peace movements in the U.S. and the USSR, and the problems of aging.

If *Alternative Views* can work out negotiations with some seven other video groups to jointly rent satellite time, viewers across the country may soon be sampling the program. But British viewers may be ahead of them. Britain's Fourth Channel recently purchased several of the programs for inclusion in a special on American public-access TV.

Alternative Views can be reached by writing Alternative Information Network, P.O. Box 7279, Austin, Texas 78713.

—*P.A.*