

NETWORKS FOLLOWING CONUS INTO SATELLITE NEWS COVERAGE

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ST. PAUL, MINN. ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) _ Stanley S. Hubbard says the news industry laughed in 1984 when he deployed an experimental truck for KSTP-TV that he said could do live broadcasts at the drop of a hat from anywhere in the nation.

But he says laughter at the major networks was replaced by gasps from executives when the experiment proved successful.

And while engineers scrambled to match the satellite technology developed at the Twin Cities station, Hubbard formed Conus Communications, a cooperative of television stations across the country sharing news via satellite.

The arrangement increases stations' ability to provide live coverage of events - and makes them less dependent on networks for national news coverage.

TV news watchers don't have to look far to see Conus's impact.

When Northwest Flight 255 crashed in the Detroit area last August, Conus member WTVT in Tampa, Fla., cut live to the scene during its evening news for a report from WXYZ-TV in Detroit, another Conus member. The 66 other members of Conus had the same opportunity, giving local television news stations more immediacy than ever, said Tom Rosenbaum, WXYZ's news director.

"We've gone live from the middle of a hurricane," said Frank Graham, news director at WBAL-TV in Baltimore, another Conus member. "This is stuff that was unheard of three or four years ago."

Jim Boyer, news director at KOMO-TV in Seattle, said his delight with Conus included live coverage from Oklahoma City the day All-America linebacker Brian Bosworth signed with the National Football League's Seattle Seahawks. The live video and audio feed was provided by Conus member KWTW.

"It allows us to cover the news better," Boyer said of the Conus news cooperative.

The key to Conus is the use of Ku-band satellite transmission, a method used by remote Canadian broadcasters that skeptics believed would fail in rain or snow. Engineers hired by Conus developed an agile Ku-band van as an alternative to the more costly C-band transmissions, which require the use of a semi-trailer to cover live events, said Hubbard's son, Stanley E. Hubbard.

Both methods use satellites to bounce video and audio signals from the vans to the stations.

A control center in St. Paul coordinates transmissions for all Conus members, granting van stations access to satellite transponders owned or leased by Conus.

"Before satellites, we were all tethered to our towers in a 30- to 40-mile radius" in covering live events, the elder Hubbard said.

Charles H. Dutcher III, general manager of Conus, said all three networks have followed Conus into the business of distributing news collected from vans equipped with Ku-band equipment.

Conus makes money in its venture by charging a \$15-a-minute user fee for satellite time; by charging a monthly membership fee for a daily national news package arranged from member contributions; by selling live coverage of special events to its members; and by renting satellite time, camera crews and equipment to non-members.

Presidential candidates, including Sen. Albert Gore, D-Tenn., have used the equipment to produce campaign footage and offered it to stations free of charge as a means of increasing media exposure.

"Conus pioneered the area and we're very grateful for them," said Tedy Newhall, director of NewsOne in New York City, ABC's answer to Conus. "We feel that we'll be in the field fully and ahead of Conus very soon. At least by 1988.

"We ran into this business and we're still running," she said. "We like it."

Ms. Newhall said ABC has used Ku-band technology to feed its affiliates daily with regional and national news packages. Started in July 1986, NewsOne will add another 20 Ku-band vans within the next month, giving the network a total of about 30 vans at affiliated stations around the country.

To build fleets of the vans, ABC, NBC and CBS have offered to reimburse local affiliates for part of the purchase price - which can be as much as \$450,000, Ms. Newhall said. A company owned by Hubbard is one of the makers of the vans.

Dutcher said Conus is projected to generate a positive cash flow on its core business in 1987 with revenues of about \$4.2 million and expenses of about \$3.5 million. That doesn't include debt service on the \$8.5 million purchase of a satellite transponder that Dutcher says in retrospect the company may have been better off leasing.

Attracting more members is the key to becoming more profitable because most operating costs are fixed, he said. Conus (an acronym for Continental U.S.), is a limited partnership with Stanley S. Hubbard controlling about 80 percent as general partner. It took an investment of between \$10 million and \$12 million to get the company rolling, Dutcher said.

George Mills, general manager for NBC's Skycom in New York, said Hubbard "is a visionary in this thing."

"He really made it a viable newsgathering tool with his Conus," said Mills, whose Skycom division was more than six months behind Conus in developing a satellite news gathering network. "But I think the competition will be good for everyone."

Since forming in 1984, Conus has announced several spin-off operations using Ku-band technology. In August 1986, Conus formed a joint venture with The Associated Press to provide television news coverage of Washington events and AP news photos in video format to local stations.

Then in July, Conus and The Christian Science Monitor Syndicate Inc., announced the creation of a service providing on-location coverage from abroad to local stations in the U.S.



Called "Monitor World View," the service is scheduled to be launched Oct. 12.
For now, about 80 percent of Conus revenue comes from its news cooperative, Dutcher said.
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