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Once More with Feeling

No matter how one may regard the general content of commercial television, this medium does have one important lesson for educational television. The lesson is that the use of a videotape recorder is the simplest way to improve the *quality* of a performance, whatever the subject matter. Immediately upon the completion of a scene, the 2-inch wide tape, carrying both picture and sound, can be played back on the instrument and, if necessary, the tape erased and the scene done over. No time-consuming development process is necessary before the performance can be viewed. The drawback to the use of videotape recorders in educational TV is that they are as hard on the pocketbook as they are easy to operate. An instrument costs in the neighborhood of \$50,000.

Last month the Ford Foundation eliminated this drawback by giving \$2.7 million to the National Educational Television and Radio Center, located in New York City. The Center will equip with recorders most of its 43 affiliated stations now on the air throughout the country. The Center will also supply stations with tape for the first year of operation and will purchase for its own use machines for copying outstanding programs.

In the two years the new invention has been in use commercially, it has demonstrated advantages over both filmed and live shows which should apply equally well to educational TV. Besides the advantage of improving performance by making possible immediate editing, tape has all the flexibility in programming of film together with the high fidelity of a live show. As with film, programs can be recorded at hours to suit the convenience of performers and studio workers and then presented on the air at hours to suit the convenience of viewers. And, like film, tapes can be reproduced rapidly or stored indefinitely. But where with film the process of development and projection means some loss in light values and detail, a taped show is practically indistinguishable from a live show.

Up till now, a lecturer in educational TV might spend hours studying notes and preparing demonstrations, and then make a single live appearance, with the show possibly being recorded for reruns on a low-fidelity film device. How much better the opportunity for developing the viewing side of television if the lecturer spends some of this time in actual presentation and editing. He could try a demonstration, watch it on the monitoring screen, and then do it again with improvements. In demonstrating centrifugal force, for example, he might choose to do again the bit where he twirls a pail of water about his head, but this time faster.

We have been more enthusiastic in the past about the use of private and government funds for the support of research than for the procurement of hardware, but we are glad on this occasion to reverse the familiar stand. To be sure, good research in educational TV is needed, for according to some observers, much of present research is not tapping any real variables, except that groups of students with TV teachers are compared with groups without such teachers. Good research is needed, but the time is also ripe for a substantial investment in hardware. By underwriting the cost of videotape recorders, the Ford Foundation has taken a step that should result in an immediate and general improvement in the effectiveness of educational TV.—J.T.