

CIVIL SERVICE

TELEVISION

Small budget, modest infrastructure, daily learning curve, broad opportunity for self-starters. Sounds like city government. Just add video.

BY TREVOR BOYER

The summer of 2003 was certainly memorable, if that's the right word, for the government of the city of New York. On July 23, Othniel Askew, a sometimes political rival of city councilman James Davis of Brooklyn, carried a .40-caliber Smith & Wesson pistol into City Hall. Davis himself escorted Askew into the building, and Davis' status as a city council member allowed him to usher Askew around metal detectors without passing through. In a crowded city council chambers 24 minutes later, Askew shot and killed Davis before being gunned down by a city policeman.

A few weeks later, Aug. 14 became The Day the Lights Went Out for a whole new generation of New Yorkers, as the city became one of the thousands from Michigan to Montreal that were crippled by an historic blackout.

NYC TV, channel 74 on New York's Time Warner cable system, was near the center of both storms. NYC TV, as part of the city government's Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT), has a permanent live feed from the Blue Room of City Hall, where Mayor Michael Bloomberg gives press conferences. On the afternoon of the assassination, the mayor addressed the public about the assassination and NYC TV aired the press conference live.

In the late afternoon hours of Aug. 14, as the city shut down literally and figuratively and subway-dependent workers started a pedestrian diaspora, an NYC TV production crew was in Central Park. They were getting ready to shoot an Indigo Girls concert for a new series called *Cultural Corners*, using Sony Betacam SP DXC-327, Panasonic AJ-D410 and AJ-D610 camcorders and switching the show live in the field. A couple hours after lights went out citywide, the duo acceded to the insistent pleas from the crowd and went on with the show a little after its scheduled starting time of 6 p.m.

Seth Unger, director of creative development for NYC TV, was downtown shooting the mayor's 6:15 p.m. press conference because the regular cameramen were in Central Park shooting for *Cultural Corners*.

Because City Hall has a generator that can power the building for a week, NYC TV was again in a position to make sure that the

Clockwise from top left: Shooting \$9.99 at Belvedere Castle in Central Park; screen grab from the open for *Access Mayor*; NYC TV graphics artist Roland Le Breton; screen grab from the promo package for the fall lineup; NYC TV editor Andrew Donohue; Mayor Michael Bloomberg holding a press conference during the August blackout.



Outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue, an NYC TV production crew shoots stand-ups for an episode of *\$9.99* hosted by Julie Laipply (below left).

mayor could hold a press conference and that the press conference could be aired live—even though almost all of New York City had no means by which to view it. Time Warner Cable was able to keep itself going until its generator at 23rd Street failed later that night, even as its 1.8 million subscribing households, of course, couldn't turn on their television sets.

NYC TV, with an annual tax-levied budget that has recently dropped to \$1.5 million from \$1.9 million, was simply doing its primary job: providing a window into the city government and the Bloomberg administration.

On June 24, NYC TV made its official debut. For the 11 years before then, NYC TV 74, the flagship channel of the five channels that make up NYC TV, was known as Crosswalks Television. (The other four channels range from NYC TV 71, which broadcasts Off-Track Betting programming, to CUNY TV 75, which serves the City University of New York.) Despite having a home on every Time Warner cable box thanks to its must-carry status, Crosswalks by all accounts could boast only a very limited following of city-government junkies.

"Crosswalks was 24/7 government stuff, and it was not programmed—there was no schedule," says Arick Wierson, general manager of NYC TV. "Something started at 8:37 p.m. and then it ended at 9:14, and the next thing started at 9:15 and went to 10:37. It was crazy." NYC TV, on the other hand, has already shown viewers a brand new face via clean, professional graphic packaging and programming that is, at times, quite compelling. As a government institution in a city in the midst of a financial crisis, NYC TV has devised many innovative ways to do more with less.

Bloomberg is a Republican mayor of a city where registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans five to one. During

his 2001 election campaign he spent more than \$50 million of his billionaire's fortune to defeat his Democratic opponent, Mark Green. Bloomberg made his name and much of his fortune via Bloomberg LP, his financial news and information services company that places custom-made computer terminals known as "Bloombergers" in financial institutions.

So the mayor is certainly no stranger to information technology. Though he's perhaps most strongly associated with the smoking ban that affects every bar and restaurant in New York, Bloomberg has spearheaded several initiatives that have already improved the city's IT infrastructure and the communication between government and citizen.

"I think the mayor is a true, ardent believer in technology and what it can do in terms of efficiencies," says Wierson. "What it can do in terms of saving time and, particularly given the fiscal situation, what it can do in terms of saving money."

And so the city's www.nyc.gov website has been expanded, and there's also 311, a new catch-all telephone hotline designed to answer any question related to city services. The relaunch of the city's official television network is part of the administration's attempts at making government more accessible to New Yorkers. (NYC TV also has an overhauled website at www.nyc.gov/tv.)

Like the mayor, the team that took over what would become NYC TV had no previous experience in government. Wierson's background is business and finance, and Unger worked for an independent record label. Both got involved in Bloomberg's election campaign, working in field operations. Unger had done some video production work, documenting the campaign for history with a MiniDV camcorder.

After the successful campaign, Wierson, 31, and Unger, 28, were attracted to the overhaul of the TV network because of the wide-open room for improvement and its considerable creative opportunities. Wierson, whose fuel of choice is sugar-free Red Bull, riffs endlessly about his current project with the energy and zeal of a veteran start-up businessman, which in fact he is.

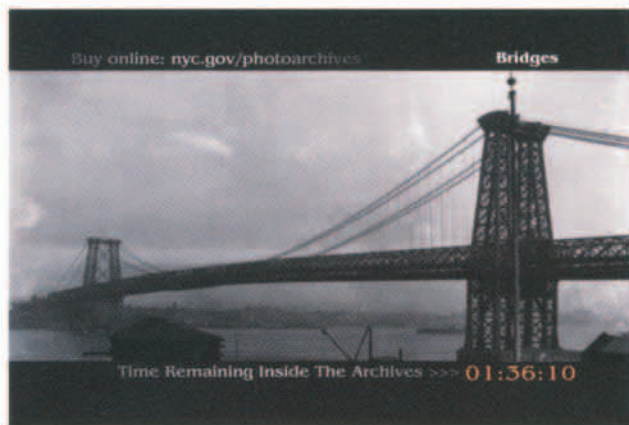
"Arick is one of the most organized and driven people I have ever met," says Unger. "He plans. He executes. The job is done, and he never looked at the clock."

The first steps of the overhaul were taken in early 2002 after Bloomberg took office. One of Wierson's first tasks was to get his staff "to program things into set blocks of time either by half hour or by hour." The need to adopt such a simple, fundamental protocol underlined the scale of the project in front of him.

Some 30 to 40 people are on staff at NYC TV—Wierson says the number fluctuates. About half of those employees report to work in the Bronx, where the master control system for the network resides. Postproduction and production headquarters are in the tower of the One Centre Street building, across the street from City Hall. This posed another problem for the new team, because there was no direct link from the station's downtown headquarters to master control via fiber or microwave transmission. Going live, therefore, was not an option. According to Wierson, in order to get mayoral press conferences and city council meetings on the air, a Crosswalks producer would drive his van from downtown Manhattan to the Bronx to deliver tapes.

"One of the first things was establishing a fiber link from downtown to the Bronx," says Wierson. The fiber link also connects City Hall to the Switch, the largest video switching center in New York. This means that NYC TV can feed any media outlet that has access to the Switch. All fiber connections are currently analog in order to allow signal compatibility with as many media outlets as possible.

The new setup in City Hall's Blue Room allows NYC TV to tape with a Sony Betacam SP DXC-327a camera and go live with the press conferences that the mayor periodically holds there. Also, the fiber link has speeded up field production as well. For example, if city council speaker Gifford Miller gives a press conference somewhere in the field, a production team shoots the event and drops a tape off at the downtown headquarters. This footage is then fibered to the Bronx. Channel 74 is played out via a Sony



A still from *Inside the Archives*, part of a sequence of bridge photos.

Flexicart automation system.

Timely transmission of city council proceedings and mayoral press conferences is a useful public service, but the NYC TV team was anxious to create content that would be compelling to the average New Yorker, not just the city-government wonk. But, says Wierson, "We had basically zero acquisition or production budget to speak of." Without such resources, NYC TV would have to get creative. "I thought either through leveraging preexisting city assets or by developing strategic partnerships, is where most of the growth would occur in terms of content acquisition or programming."

New York is a city with a long and storied history, and its Department of Records and Information Services (DORIS) stores much of that history in its downtown headquarters on Chambers Street. From the city's old WNYC television station, DORIS has a trove of old video footage of city events, much of it from the '70s. Wierson saw this as a city asset that was going unused and an opportunity to create programming for very little in terms of production costs. From that footage a show called *City Classics* was born.

The show debuted in September 2002, when the station was still Crosswalks. Viewers could watch Mayor Ed Koch taking phone calls during a radio show in the late '70s and Muhammad Ali boxing on the steps of City Hall. Wierson says that not only did *City Classics* generate some much-needed attention and feedback for the network, but the fact that it was a regularly produced, original show prompted the introduction of many basic business rules and production protocols.

Wierson says the goal was not to find a turnkey solution to all the station's woes right out of the gate. Because master control is in the Bronx, and because even regular programming was a foreign concept to the station, it was important to take things one step at a time. "You don't want to flip all the switches on one day," he says. "You gotta phase different things in." For that reason, and also because of its limited funds, NYC TV has not made a complete

digital migration yet. That is, however, in the long-term plans, as is a move to downtown Brooklyn. No date has been set, but the move is expected to take place early next year. In Brooklyn the entire staff will be united under one roof. Luckily for taxpayers, the money for the move comes from a franchise agreement with Time Warner Cable.

When you're operating with taxpayer dollars, says Unger, "You keep your future vision in mind while you work on the present. Equipment is an issue, but so is staffing."

Currently the station has four Sony Betacam SP DXC-327 camcorders, one Betacam SP DXC-537, two Panasonic AJ-D410 DVCPRO camcorders, and two AJ-D610 DVCPRO cameras. But the station's next new project after the creation of *City Classics* would not use any of these professional production camcorders—in-
stead, it relies on live camera feeds from the city's Department of Transportation.

If you turn on NYC TV 74 during the morning rush hour or during the late afternoon and early evening rush, you will see rather pixilated images of cars and trucks zooming (or more likely inching) by at a low frame rate. This is *City Drive Live*, a show that switches among 22 traffic cameras positioned on major roadways throughout the five boroughs. The primary



Walter Garaicoa, NYC TV's director of postproduction, views a tape of *Inside the Archives*, a new program that consists of an artfully packaged series of photographs related to New York City history.

purpose of these cameras is to assist the Department of Transportation in pinpointing the location of traffic problems such as stalled cars, which informs the department's emergency operations. Before anyone at NYC TV got the idea to repurpose this content, the Department of Transportation was webcasting these camera feeds so that website visitors could see exactly how congested the Brooklyn Queens Expressway was currently looking.

But not everyone can be on the Web all the time, especially when they're rushing out the door in the morning. "We've got 22 cameras across the city and they're organized in routes," says Wierson. "If you're interested in one camera, if you give me five minutes, I will show you that location [and] whether the street is completely empty or whether it's bogged-up, bumper-to-bumper traffic." Wierson claims that *City Drive Live* fills a glaring need in the market: Network news shows focus mainly on the major traffic accidents of the day's commute, and they don't necessarily report on the thoroughfares that are simply congested.

The audio that plays during *City Drive Live* is taken from the city's WNYC radio station, which also has its offices in the One Centre Street building. Besides the live feeds from the cameras, there's a station ID graphic above the traffic camera image, and the lower third identifies the street being shown and displays a ticker that gives further traffic information. To get the show on the air, fiber lines route the video from the DOT's Traffic Management Center in Long Island City, Queens, through the cable companies up to NYC TV master control in the Bronx. Once the station has packaged its graphics with the traffic video, the finished product is re-routed to the head end of the cable companies. *City Drive Live* takes frequent breaks to air promotional spots for other NYC TV shows and public service announcements.

What has really announced the transition of channel 74 from Crosswalks Television to NYC TV is the station's clean, very modern-looking graphic sequences—including bumpers, promotional spots, station IDs, and show opens. All graphic work is done inhouse. NYC TV has one workstation, a dual 1.7GHz Xeon Dell, that's used for 3D and runs 3ds Max and Combustion. In addition there are three other main workstations for editing and graphics—an Avid 1000 with uncompressed component input, and two Apple G4s that both run After Effects (one has Final Cut Pro)—plus three G4 laptops used as scanning stations and for field editing.

Roland Le Breton, a French computer graphics artist who studied at the Sorbonne, is responsible for the look and feel of NYC TV's graphic content. While in France, he helped found a production company that created graphics packages for prime-time shows on major networks. He moved to the United States three years ago, and once he got his Green Card he accepted the first job offer he received, at Crosswalks Television. He was intrigued by the opportunity to overhaul the entire look of a station.

"When we produce a new show that requires a graphic package, I am usually given no particular direction," says Le Breton. "I take it from there, and so far, nobody came to me saying, 'You know what, let's try something else.'" That approach seems to be for the best: Le Breton received a 2003 Emmy Award for outstand-

ing graphics from the New York chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

Ninety-five percent of NYC TV's annual operating budget goes toward personnel costs, and many employees have taken significant pay cuts from previous positions to work in city government. Employees tend to wear many hats, and that means some continuing education has been necessary. Without the funds to flat-out pay for classes for his employees, Wierson secured an innovative barter deal with DV Dojo, a sort of Internet café for videomakers that also offers classes in all aspects of video production at its headquarters in the East Village.

"They have students who would love to see their stuff on television," says Wierson, "and I have producers and editors that could definitely use some extra training. And also I need content.



NYC TV general manager Arick Wierson (left) on location in Manhattan as a production crew shoots a promo that features Miss Universe 2003, Amelia Vega (in pink).

So we did a kind of triangular relationship." NYC TV created :10 bumpers to bookend a series of :60 spots titled "On Location," which leaves :40 for DV Dojo students to fill with their own videotaped slices of New York street life. They send their best work to NYC TV, which then selects, packages, and airs the segments. In return, Wierson sends his employees to DV Dojo for weekend classes in Final Cut Pro and other programs.

Other new programming depended on different types of partnerships to get the shows off the ground. *Inside the Archives* is a great example of NYC TV's interdependence with other city government agencies. The show is based on an odd concept, but somehow it works. Like *City Classics*, *Inside the Archives* depends on DORIS for content—except that content is still photography rather than video. Walter Garaicoa is director of postproduction for NYC TV, but in his nine years at the station he's done about every job imaginable. Currently he produces *Inside the Archives*.

Essentially, each episode is a series of hundreds of black-and-white and sepia-toned photographs pulled from the city's archives and presented with letterboxing. Many of the shots are a hundred years old or more, and few people have laid eyes on most of them before. Lingering onscreen for 10 seconds each, the photographs are arranged thematically, so you might see a series of shots of bridges or of policemen. At the bottom of the screen in the letterbox is an animated clock, which counts down the time left "inside the archives" for that week's show. The idea is that after time expires, the "vault" is closed.

But here's where the interdependence comes into play: Also in the lower letterbox region is animated text that directs viewers to the DORIS website (www.nyc.gov/archives), where they can purchase sets of photos. Furthermore, in the course of the production of this show, NYC TV scans and digitizes thousands of the archival photos, another boon for DORIS.

"Thanks to this collaborative relationship," says Brian Andersson, commissioner of DORIS, "we're able to reach out to the public in an entirely new way. We are very grateful to the NYC TV staffers who digitized the photos for us."

After scanning the photos, the post team organizes them into a slideshow in Apple's free iPhoto application. In After Effects, photos are reframed to achieve good screen composition, and the graphics are added. In Final Cut Pro, everything is brought together and very modern, electronic-based library music is added.

"*Inside the Archives* takes the concept of repurposing to a new level," says Shelly Palmer, a trustee of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. "The show can be left on like wallpaper. The photos are beautiful and interesting and the music is hypnotic. You can watch the show, or just leave it on and look up occasionally and enjoy it just as much. The transactional aspect of the show is also fascinating." The open of *Inside the Archives* is a testament to NYC TV's level of production quality. The concept was to walk the audience down into the archives, and at the same time bring the audience back in time. Garaicoa decided to use the lobby, hallways, and one of the basement rooms of the Department of Records. "We ran a couple of tests to try natural light vs. our own lighting schemes," says Garaicoa. "My videographer, Wiener Milien, suggested doing a combination of both."

Milien also suggested using a Glidecam stabilization system with a Sony PD150 camcorder for smooth motion during the traveling shots. In the payoff shot in the basement—an actual, functioning records room—the production crew had to go easy on the lights so as not to disturb the controlled climate. They placed Cookaloris over DP lights to create streaks of light rays that made it seem that the rows of boxes in the basement continued endlessly. In postproduction on a G4 laptop, Garaicoa color-corrected the takes, added a few light rays in After Effects, and ran the clip through Magic Bullet Suite to create a filmic look. The result is a trip through an eerie room shot through with beams of blue light, a scene that could have been lifted from a suspense thriller.

NYC TV's best-known show is perhaps \$9.99. The program relies on other city agencies—such as the Parks Department, Cultural Affairs, and Small Business Services—for preproduction assistance in the form of research and location scouting. It also relies on the goodwill of talent to secure their hosting services in exchange for nothing but some exposure. Each half-hour episode is designed as a guide to exploring a single New York City neighborhood for less than \$10. Little-known museums, salons that offer free facials, and historical sites are typical stops.

Julie Laipply is the primary host of \$9.99. A former Miss Virginia

and a current youth drug prevention speaker and communications consultant, Laipply brings an enthusiasm to the show so genuine that you believe her when she says she does the show, "Because I enjoy it so much and I enjoy supporting New York."

On Oct. 2 an NYC TV production crew, led by producer Harry Hunkele, was shooting stand-ups of Laipply at Belvedere Castle in Central Park for an episode of \$9.99. Shooting DVCPRO 25 under crystal-clear morning skies, the crew had brought typical production equipment: Visual Departures collapsible reflectors to fill shadows, a Miller tripod, PortaBrace bags.

Curious castle visitors watched as Laipply repeatedly delivered her line in a series of takes: "So this episode of \$9.99 is all about the fun and inexpensive things to do on Manhattan's Upper East Side!" Once everything came together—she hit her mark, her Sennheiser lavalier didn't pick up any audio interference—it was time to roll the equipment out of the park and walk to the next location, on Fifth Avenue outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Pedestrians on Fifth Avenue craned their necks as they passed, perhaps hoping to get a glimpse of a star. Maybe they continued on their way somewhat disappointed, but they did get to see a real production crew at work producing a TV show with a potential audience in the millions.

At press time, NYC TV is in the midst of rolling out its new fall season lineup, a concept that did not exist a year ago. New shows include *Inside the Archives* and *New York Noise*, which packages together music videos primarily by New York music acts on the verge of breaking it big. There's also *NYC TV Profiles*, which features interviews with celebrities like Isaac Hayes and Sandy Duncan that focus on their connection to the city. This show is produced largely by an independent production company, which funds the show by finding corporations to sponsor PSAs that run during *NYC TV Profiles*. (NYC TV is governed under similar rules as PBS, so it is not allowed to sell ads directly.)

NYC TV still focuses on keeping the public informed about the workings of city government through glamour-free shows like *Access Mayor* and *Council 51*, but the station has found a way to widen its audience by offering entertaining content. Channel 74 has come a long way from its inauspicious former incarnation, but clearly the station already had a lot going for it. "We're sitting here on a tremendous asset," says Wierson. "We're in the media capital of the world, we're in 1.8 million households—which puts us almost in two percent of all American households—we're a must-carry, and we've got the support of a mayor and an administration that is very forward-thinking."

But without the shrewd new partnerships—both within city government and beyond—and the innovative ideas that turned into inexpensive, compelling programming, it still might have been business as usual for the City of New York's TV network. ●



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