

*Short Communication***Never again shout, “that WOULD have been useful for my teaching!” at the TV**

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We are aware from our own experience, as audience if not as lecturer, that being talked at for 50 minutes is not the most captivating form of communication. A change of dynamic, preferably involving an element of topicality, can make a significant contribution to engagement. I have found that short excerpts of television programmes and news can therefore be excellent ways to add sparkle to a lecture. I'm sure, however, that you have suffered the experience of switching on the television and finding yourself 15 minutes into a programme that would have nicely illustrated something about which you are going to be teaching. Perhaps you decide to watch the evening news as a break in your marking, and are unexpectedly confronted with a highly relevant story. In the past, we might have termed this “oh-bother-it” syndrome. Fortunately, however, increasing media sophistication means that there are both ways to prevent and to cure this nasty condition.

Prevention

There are now several ways to know in advance about programme transmission times. In the UK, the best of these for academic use is the Television and Radio Index for Learning and Teaching (TRILT, www.trilt.ac.uk). Part of the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC), TRILT allows you to set up a weekly e-mail alert using whatever keywords you choose to employ. You will get one listing of any scheduled programmes on both terrestrial and digital services during the upcoming fortnight that match your searches. You can then arrange either to record them yourselves or ideally for the audiovisual department at your institution to record them for you, in accordance with the Educational Recording Agency (ERA) regulations.

As with all database searches, the effectiveness is only as good as the coding that has gone into it, but the TRILT service seems to pick up most programmes. The downside is likely to be sifting through details of repeat transmissions, particularly on the digital channels. I, however, consider this a small price to pay for the benefit of having the video ready on time. With a particular interest in Bioethics, I have a range of keyword alerts set up including ‘stem cell’, ‘gene therapy’, ‘designer babies’, ‘cloning’ and ‘nanotechnology’. Some surprising sources can be thrown up; I have, for

example, made use of a 90 second clip from the anarchic cartoon “South Park”^{*} which served as a thought-provoking, and surprisingly accurate, introduction to a lecture on stem cell therapy. This programme would certainly not have been on my normal viewing schedule, and without TRILT I would certainly have missed it. There will, of course, be some programmes listed which are not what you were expecting; I was amused when the search for ‘organ AND transplant’ threw up an account of a former Soviet soldier who coordinates the movement of neglected organs from British churches to be lovingly reassembled in Latvia! To make use of TRILT, your institution needs to be a member of the BUFVC; if you are not sure whether you are covered, their website includes a list of member institutions (<http://www.bufvc.ac.uk/aboutus/memberlist.html>). Currently, you will also need to use an Athens password to access the search features.

In addition to TRILT, you may like to consider setting up alerts via the website www.tvgenius.co.uk. TV Genius lacks some of the sophistication of TRILT, but can be used to send you e-mail alerts on the morning of any programme matching your search criteria, or alternatively a text message one hour before transmission. In my experience, TRILT and TV Genius are complementary – each finding some programmes that the other has missed.

Here is the news

Of course, alert services of this type require prior knowledge about transmission details and thus cannot help with coverage of news items that, by their very nature, tend to arise in a fairly unexpected manner. How can you know that an interesting news story has broken? Several strategies can be adopted. Cultivating the habit of listening to the Today programme on Radio 4, rather than “waking up with Wogan” has served me well. I also check the BBC news website (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>), particularly the ‘health’ and ‘science/nature’ subsections, two or three times a day. Once again, however, technology is at hand to make this even simpler. Many news sources, and indeed some journals, now offer RSS (Really Simple Syndication) which can be used to alert you to breaking news, see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/3223484.stm> for more details. My own preference is for <http://www.google.com/alerts> via which you can arrange for alerts to be sent ‘as-it-happens’, ‘once a day’ or ‘once a week’. Clearly ‘as-it-happens’ is the choice of preference to warn you about breaking news, but there is a tension between interest and interruption; if you have several different alerts set up you can become inundated with e-mails. The majority of my alerts are therefore set to ‘once a day’, I rely on the other methods mentioned to forewarn me, coupled with the confidence that most ‘missed’ material can now be recaptured.

Cure

Having considered ways to be alerted about forthcoming programmes, how then can we obtain copies of programmes that have already been transmitted? Here the BUFVC again comes up trumps. Provided that your institution holds a license from the ERA and is a BUFVC member, it is possible to use their off-air recording back-up service (<http://www.bufvc.ac.uk/services/offair.html>). Since the beginning of 2002,

BUFVC has recorded and archived all programmes transmitted on the five terrestrial TV channels during the week, plus many programmes at the weekend. Different categories of BUFVC membership come with different allowance for the number of times that the back-up service is used and therefore you are required to place orders via your audiovisual department. Your institution may levy a fee for use of this service as a means to recoup some of their investment in membership, so it is worth checking the local arrangement before you splash out on everything that you have every missed! The TRILT service (as above) can be used to check transmission details for the programme(s) you are after.

Finally, one other interesting development; for news clips, it is also worth having a look at the BBC's new "creative archive", a growing collection of footage relating to landmark events (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/calc/news/>). On a bioethics theme, for example, they have already made available reports on the birth of Louise Brown (the original test-tube baby) and on the cloning of Dolly the sheep. There is a feedback form for suggesting clips that you would like included.

This short article has inevitably approached the topic from a UK perspective. For readers elsewhere the specifics of television broadcasts and licensing arrangements are going to be somewhat different. Nevertheless, judicious use of RSS, Google alerts and monitoring of news websites should allow you to set up in advance for future programmes, even if the full benefits of the back-up service are not at your disposal.

Happy viewing!

* The episode of South Park featuring stem cell therapy is "Kenny dies", the closing episode of Season 5. The useful section comes when Cartman goes to the Alder Research Group in search of treatment to help his sick friend Kenny. You should be warned that other aspects of this programme are likely to cause offence to many students.

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