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by Michael Barrier

Let's say you're channel-surfing one evening and a familiar movie catches your attention. You settle back to watch it one more time, but then you notice something unusual: You're hearing not just the usual soundtrack, but another voice, too. A smooth, professional narrator is describing exactly what's happening on the screen, but without ever stepping on the dialogue.

What you're seeing has come to you from a Tulsa company called Narrative Television Network (NTN), which offers programs for the blind and visually impaired. NTN provides 20 hours a week of narrated movies and TV shows to cable operators, in two-hour blocks. It is one of the many small cable networks, offering less than a full day's programming, that a cable operator can combine on a single channel.

NTN's president and co-founder, Jim Stovall, 39, is himself blind. He suffers from macular degeneration, an eye disease that most often attacks the elderly; it was diagnosed in Stovall when he was 17. He was thinking of quitting high school. Instead, he went to college and later worked as a stockbroker. He was totally blind by age 29.

"The level of intimidation would be hard to describe," he says of his descent into total blindness. "You want to get this little space that you feel comfortable in, and never leave it." He had made enough money as a stockbroker "to buy myself some time," he says, but "I wasn't sure what I was going to do."

He met Kathy Harper, a legal researcher with severely limited eyesight, at a support group for the blind. They recognized in each other a desire to make careers that transcend their handicap. Stovall had already experienced the frustration of trying to follow a familiar film from its soundtrack alone, so they began experimenting with narration.

Once they had mastered the technical side, they put together a two-hour package of old TV shows, duly licensed from copyright owners and transferred to video cassette. The cassettes were distributed by mail, through a national library service for the blind. (As to why those blind people would have VCRs in their homes, Stovall explains that "the vast majority live in a home where someone else is sighted.")

"After three or four weeks, we realized we had a distribution problem," Stovall says. "there was no way we were ever going to keep this audience happy with the limited amount of programming." Demand was overwhelming—like most other Americans, blind people didn't want to enjoy a couple of hours of TV a week, they wanted several hours of it a day.

The only answer, Stovall and Harper soon realized, was to put their narrated shows on the air. Tulsa has a single large cable system, and it agreed to broadcast two hours a week of the narrated shows. With that as a lever, Stovall was able to get the shows on other cable systems, then on a cable network.

In the past few years, NTN has been delivering more and more programming—now 12 to 15 hours a week—with the narration on a separate audio channel, which you can't hear unless you push a button called "SAP" on your TV.

There will always be a core of "openly narrated" programs, Stovall says, but in the future most shows will offer the narration separately.

Such narration is "very much the equivalent" of the closed captioning for the deaf that is already common on broadcast TV, Stovall says. The broadcast networks "have been very interested in serving our audience," he says, but they have also been concerned about who would bear the cost of such a service and how revenue would be generated from it.

Although NTN benefits from widespread goodwill in the TV industry, Stovall says—"It's kind of a warm fuzzy"—he has always thought of NTN in business terms, not as a charity. "The long-term viability of this depends on somebody making money," he says.

The programming that NTN provides now is paid for either by the cable channels that pick it up or by "barter"—that is, the cable channels get to sell part of the advertising time. The U.S. Department of Education also subsidizes NTN's programming, as it does closed captioning. That federal funding—"seed capital," Stovall calls it—accounts for roughly half of NTN's revenue.

NTN may be just beginning to tap its commercial potential, but in other respects it has already paid off for Stovall and the half-dozen other people who work at NTN.

"This is a good business," he says, "but beyond that, speaking as a blind person myself, it's a big deal. I feel good about what I do. Everybody here does. When you go home, and you've had a long day, sometimes it's nice to know that you've done something good for somebody."

It's thanks to his blindness, Stovall believes, that he has been able to make such good use of a life that might have been wasted if he had dropped out of school. "If I had the choice now to be able to see again but also to go back and be the person I used to be," he says, "I wouldn't do that. I much prefer this."

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