

# **I Want My NCETV:**

**The story of how KUHT changed television forever**

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### **Abstract**

KUHT-TV, channel 8, was licensed to the University of Houston's Board of Regents in 1952, and became the nation's first Non-Commercial Education Television Station (NCETV). Its creation and success paved the way for educational television programming, and would help to establish the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). KUHT exceeded all initial expectations by far, and would forever change the face of television in America. It was the first American station, commercial or non-commercial, dedicated to quality educational programming, that served both the entertainment and academic hunger of American viewers. KUHT-TV redefined the definition of distance learning, and provided the American television audience with a quality alternative to the advertising laden programming of commercial television.

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When you turn on the television today, you have a wide variety of stations and programming to choose from. There are programs with large amounts of violence, sex, religious overtones, and even rich cultural themes. Thankfully, in the United States, there is also specific programming made for younger viewers and mature intellectuals, which are both educational and entertaining. But the miracle of television doesn't stop here. The television is no longer simply used for news, sports, and entertainment, because it can now be used to educate viewers.

But imagine a time when there was no educational programming. What would the young children of America watch? Although Jerry Springer may be adored by some, is it really appropriate material for little Bobby or Mary? How could this issue be addressed and solved, and who would be willing to do it? Would there be any racial implications involved? Who would fund such programming?

Well, this problem was recognized by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and caused them to make a valiant effort to provide the nation with Educational Programming. The FCC envisioned that educational stations would further increase the value of television and education, and respond to a desperate need for quality educational programming as American society cried, "I want my NCETV."

The year is 1953. Howard Cosell begins his sportscasting career as the host of a New York area Little League baseball program for ABC radio. *Dragnet*, *The Lone Ranger*, and *Ozzie and Harriet* rule the networks. People all over America have been overtaken by the dance craze "The Stroll". The New York Yankees win their fifth straight World Series. Neva Langley from Georgia is crowned Miss America. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg are in jail awaiting execution after being convicted for selling atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. The FCC's historic "Freeze" has finally ended. And Dwight D. Eisenhower, a Texan, is president.

The development of television has boomed since the end of World War II and Commercial Television stations are gaining increased revenue in spectacular fashion, and refuse to listen to educators about deepening the quality of their educational programming. The Commissioner of Federal Communications Commission (FCC), coins the phrase "electronic blackboard of the future", referring to the educational potential of television (Hawes). The FCC organizes a campaign that arouses support in the academic community to assist in pushing for educational uses of television, and providing an alternative to commercial broadcasting.

But there are legitimate concerns being expressed when considering using television for purely educational purposes. The most important issue was whether or not educators could afford to build and maintain production facilities, staff stations, and conduct everyday operations involved with successfully running a station. But regardless of these concerns, the Federal Communication Commission dedicated television channels exclusively for educational use. The Sixth Report and Order document was adopted by the FCC, and it authorized 252 channels dedicated to

educational television. Commercial broadcasters are infuriated with the large amount of channels reserved by the FCC for educational purposes, except in Houston, Texas where they supported an educational station partly because they felt its presence would reduce any further competition. Unfortunately, their support would backfire as they would get all they could handle in a few years.

Meanwhile in the southern United States, the University of Houston in Houston, Texas was laying the groundwork for what would eventually change the face of television forever. The University of Houston had built grand new facilities for KUHF, its FM radio station. The Ezekiel W. Cullen Building was a \$5.5 million dollar architectural masterpiece. Upon a FCC program test, FCC Commissioner Paul Walker declared, "These are the finest radio facilities in the country, commercial or otherwise." (Hawes 22). KUHF-FM would flourish, but eventually the University of Houston's administration, like so many other institutions, began to turn its attention to educational television.

In 1952 the FCC set aside a total of 252 channels, 80 VHF and 162 UHF, throughout the United States for educational use (Miller). Although they did not know it then, one of these channels would not only serve its original educational purpose, but it would raise the bar as to what is considered educational programming. This channel was reserved channel 8 in Houston, which the FCC granted to the University of Houston as the nation's first non-commercial educational television license in 1952. Channel 8 was first called Educational Television, and many people couldn't imagine why the University of Houston wanted to start a noncommercial television station, other than for pure notoriety or historic fame.

Being the nation's first non-commercial educational television channel would be KUHT's first claim to fame, but definitely not its last. KUHT would first need to ride piggy back with its media predecessor, the radio station KUHF, in order to be operated efficiently. Operated together in the extravagant Ezekiel W. Cullen Building, KUHT and KUHF would become one of the most effective means of outreach the University of Houston and the city of Houston possessed. Unfortunately there was only room enough for one media at the top, as was being discovered throughout the nation. The more and more television advanced technologically, the more revenue it took from its predecessor radio. And at the University of Houston, as KUHT-TV began to advance, KUHF-FM would soon begin an unstoppable free-fall decline.

Over two-thousand dollars worth of renovation and equipment upgrades were completed in order to house and operate KUHT-TV and KUHF-FM together at the University of Houston. All necessary things were done and KUHF not only had the support of the academic community, the city of Houston was behind it as well. The mayor of Houston at the time, Roy M. Hofheinz, encouraged Houstonians to take interest in the "new wonder of the educational world" (Hawes 33). And when antenna complications delayed the first broadcast of the nation's first non-commercial educational station, anticipation and interest only heightened.

On Monday, May 25, 1953 at 5 p.m., KUHT-TV officially went on the air with its first program called "It's Five". The program featured George Arms and a half dozen coeds in a variety format, including some "down-to-earth" advice for women giving parties, beauty secrets, flower arranging, instruction on making a convertible blouse in ten minutes, and how to prepare a child psychologically for a tonsillectomy. The

program also included a five minute newscast. It was the beginning of educational television in America, and an alternative to commercial stations currently in the market. But the critics did not subside, as many predicted that educational television would not last in this relatively new medium, where commercials stations were producing programs were giving radio all it could handle, as indicated by revenue shares. But two weeks after the first broadcast, at the official KUHT dedication ceremonies, FCC Commissioner Frieda Hennock addressed the critics and naysayers. “John Crosby, the great television critic, told me, ‘When you say educational TV, I don’t know what you are talking about until you get it on the air.’ Well, it’s on the air. This is what it means. We’re showing the scoffers – We’re showing the world.” (Hawes 35)

“For here in Houston begins the practical realization of the tremendous benefits that television holds out to education. With TV, the walls of the classroom disappear, every set within viewing range of the signal is a potential classroom. With it, the finest teachers, doctors and artists may be brought right into the school or home. The accumulated riches of man’s educational, cultural and spiritual development can be spread right before the viewer’s eyes in a convenient and attractive format. In fact, the sky of man’s constructive imagination is literally the only limit on the good that can be derived from educational TV.” (Hawes 35)

KUHT would begin broadcasting an assortment of both live and filmed programming from purely University programming to local programming. While these programs were education and entertaining, the University of Houston knew that there definitely could be more. The university began researching its vision on taking instructional television outside of the classroom and straight to the audience, wherever

they might be. Conclusions from the research conducted by university psychologists exhibited advantages of using channel 8. One was that television is at least as effective in teaching subject matter as conventional classroom instruction, and in certain areas, may be a great deal more effective. Second, television has immense potential for saving teacher time and room space, which was an objective that sold instructional television to the university in the first place. Third, no evidence supports the fear that television suffers as a teaching device because of the lack of direct teacher-pupil contact. (Hawes)

The university then quickly sprang into action to try and make the vision of educational instruction through the television a reality. The university held workshops during the summer of 1953 and did everything within its power to get instructional television up and running. This hard work and determination was rewarded with success the following semester. From fall 1953 through the spring of 1955, each long semester had eight to nine courses for college credit available through instructional television. These live instructional telecasts required 13 to 15 hours of viewing a week, and were mostly available at night, when presumably working students would be able to take advantage of them. Instructional television was now up and running at the University of Houston. The nation's first non-commercial educational station had now produced the nation's first instructional television programming. But KUHT would not be satisfied just yet, as this was just the beginning of the evolution of educational television.

KUHT broadcasted both live and filmed shows that varied from instructional shows, to local experiments in enrichment programming. Ironically, one of the most popular shows was the Houston Independent School District (HISD) board sessions, which were broadcast every month. Each month, thousands and thousand of viewers



would tune in to KUHT to view the melees that erupted during the HISD sessions, which usually pitted the school board liberals versus their conservative counterparts. The newspapers published public opinion which suggested that the HISD programs “furnished more comedy than Milton Berle” and “are the best programs on the air” (Hawes 45).

But while the humor was great entertainment and excited viewers, KUHT did not lose sight of their original mission, which was to educate. One of the first important films produced by KUHT was part of 17-part series titled “People Are Taught To Be Different. It was an anthropological apologia on black life that was written by Dr. Henry Allen Bullock, a sociologist at Texas Southern University. “The idea was that racial discrimination has to be literally taught, that people are not naturally prejudiced.” (Hawes). This series was produced by a white director and white crew, because at this time the University of Houston had no black students, another thing that quickly change. Many other films and film series would follow as KUHT received numerous grants as its development continued.

As the years passed, KUHT showed the world that educational television could be entertaining, fun, and educational, while remaining competitive with programming aired by the national commercial networks. And with this, the United States began to take notice, and jump on the educational bandwagon. In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) was formed. But the Corporation for Public Broadcasting was officially prohibited from producing programs itself, so it set up the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) to allocate monies from individual educational television stations.

As more and more interest developed in educational television, educational stations sprang up throughout the United States, and eventually KUHT and its facilities were being dwarfed by newer, more extravagant, stations, whose studios rivaled those of national networks. KUHT also found it difficult to stay afloat in the television world, because of the cost of studio and equipment repairs and the costs of leasing PBS programs for broadcast. The station that was the “granddaddy” of television almost didn’t survive the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, but KUHT managed to fight and claw its way through some turbulent years, and in the mid 1970s the administration began to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

But on June 30, 1977, a petition was filed with the FCC to deny license renewals to KUHT-TV and KUHF-FM. The petition was signed by representative from the National Black Media Coalition, Operation Breadbasket of Texas, Inc., Black Citizens for Media Access, Texas Southern University, Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center, Conference on Minority Concerns, Pilgrims United for Progress, Welfare Rights Organization, Urban Theater, Shape Community Center, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, and the Creative Artists Society of Houston. These petitioners claimed that the stations abandoned their obligation to the black communities of Houston, discriminated in its employment practices and programming practices, practice of racial exclusion and refused to air the activities of Texas Southern University in a meaningful way, and engaged in commercial practices or activities which are prohibited by the commission’s rules. However, some of the facts used to support the petition were inaccurate, and the FCC could not see the supporting facts as having enough relevance to refuse a renewal to the stations. But the FCC did grant the stations a temporary one year license, and

required KUHT to provide quarterly reports detailing hiring practices. Eventually the dispute was resolved, and KUHT was issued a full license renewal.

KUHT-TV would continue to provide quality educational programming to its viewers both young and old. The station would face other problems and obstacles, but would remain resilient and strong throughout all future problems including declining budgets, increased competition, and advanced technology. Although many other non-commercial educational television stations would enter into the industry, KUHT had already taken its place in history. It had done the unthinkable, and proven all of its doubters wrong. It had successfully competed with commercial stations, who did not always engage themselves in fair competition. It had taken the very essence of quality educational television, and raised the bar of excellence, by which all others would be forced to follow. KUHT is another example of what makes this country great, and it symbolizes the fact that anyone with a dream and dedication to achieve anything no matter what the critics say.

“Public Television was created to fill the programming void left by commercial TV, and tolerated as a belated addition rather than as a co-equal.” (Noam 7). Educational Television was part of the programming slated for Public Television, in what can be described as TV’s garbage time. What a shame it was for education to be put on the backburner of such a new and exiting medium during the early days of television broadcasting. Although in the past, popular opinion suggested that educational programming had no real audience, it is now known that this was simply not the case. When KUHT arrived on the scene as a small television venture by a University of Houston, viewers jumped at the opportunity to take part in such quality programming.

The programming that no one wanted, quickly became the programming that everyone needed, and paved the way for many other NCETV stations, while establishing a major corporation, CPB, and broadcasting service, PBS, along the way.

When a child turns on a PBS station and watches a show like Sesame Street, he has no idea what great sacrifices and struggles it took to get that big yellow bird on the screen. While watching Sesame Street, all a child realizes is that the show is fun and entertaining, and the only thing the parent realizes is that shows such as Sesame Street provide an escape and safe haven for young impressionable minds, which could be devastated by the programming on commercial stations.

One might ask why is there a need for a paper such as this. Well, there is an old saying, "Those Who Forget or Don't Know the Past, Are Doomed to Repeat It", which sums up the necessity of a paper like this. If you don't know the history behind something, you can't fully appreciate it. If history were to repeat itself incorrectly, and the NCETV stations did not exist, could you imagine what society would be like. There is already enough violence acts being committed by children now, what if there were no alternative to commercial television? What would the young minds in our society watch? Would they watch Oprah to learn about relationships, Jerry Springer to learn about sex and violence, or South Park to learn that profanity is okay at any age. I personally have no children of my own, but I definitely would like them to watch Big Bird teach the alphabet a song, or Mr. Rogers sing a song, than see Buffy behead another vampire.

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