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On the Air

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ISU9 tripled its number of shows within a few years. What's next for Iowa State's student-run station? New Programming, new ideas — and even a movie.

by Justin Kendall

SU students probably don't spend much of their day contemplating how ISU9 has changed within the past couple years. You can't really blame them; if you're just flipping channels and happen to hit channel 9, you're probably not thinking about how there are now three times as many programs on as there were a couple of years ago. You're probably not thinking about how a relatively small group of dedicated students has been working like mad to try and revamp a station that's changed names, studio locations, and channel numbers. You might watch programs such as "1800 Seconds" or "Triple Threat Sports Show," and it may not register how ISU producers have struggled to bring more diversity to a station they're not always sure students are watching. Chances are, if you're watching, you're probably just thinking about whether or not you like what you see.

One thing is for sure, there's a lot more to see. Right now, ISU9 is pumping out more original shows than ever before. Part of this is because there was a huge programming gap after ISU9, then STV-9, was forced to dump "SCOLA," a live-feed transmission of international news programs. At that time, the station only had four original shows: "Wake Up ISU," "Cyclone Fitness," "Video Plus," and "Triple Threat," a sports call-in program. Of those four, only "Triple Threat" is still on the air in its original format.

Some international students voiced their displeasure with losing what was an important source of news, not to mention a connection with their home countries. The only problem was, for a station that badly needed to carve out its niche, "SCOLA" took up a lot of airtime. At any rate, when "SCOLA" became history, the ISU9 management had to get to work. They changed the station's name and worked on changing its image, too.

"It really forced us to fill the rest of the programming," says Mike Irwin, senior in journalism and former general manager of ISU9. It turned out that this was a good thing. "We just started doing shows, and it was incredible. For a while it seemed like everyone I knew had a TV show."

The arrival of temporary journalism instructor Dan Mundt also jump-started the fledgling channel. "Wake Up ISU," the station's news program, was on its last legs when Mundt made an arrangement with associate journalism professor Steve Coon about merging two electronic media classes to work on a new show. "Wake Up ISU" turned into "InCYde Out," which debuted in January 1999. It was fresher than "Wake Up ISU," and people affiliated with ISU9 have credited it with getting more students involved with the station. If the program seemed more spontaneous, that's because it was. It was ISU's first live, original show. "InCYde Out" made a big difference," says ISU9 General Manager Jen Spencer. "It was so exciting. It was so much fun just to come in, and it was a live show. We'd plug it in and we'd be on the air during a 30-minute show and come what may was on the air. It's nerve-racking, but it was exciting and I loved the tension and I loved the pace."

"InCYde Out" had changed everything. There was now enthusiasm for ISU9. There were also a lot more shows. "I think a lot of people caught the bug through that," says Spencer, senior in journalism. "That next semester, a lot of new productions popped up."

photo by Angi Grengs
So You Want to be a Star

Ok, so you’ve got a television-ready personality, but Hollywood isn’t beating down your door. Don’t worry, while you’re waiting for your big break, ISU9 can help make your small-screen dreams a reality. You don’t have to be interested in broadcasting as a career or even be a journalism major. Getting the chance to pitch your show to the ISU9 brass isn’t difficult. In fact, says Mike Irwin, former general manager of ISU9, “it’s beyond easy. All you have to do is come up with a show idea, write it down on paper, and come to one of the meetings.” All the details about your show, including length, how often it’ll be produced, and whether it needs to be shot in the studio or in the field should be included in your proposal, says Irwin, senior in journalism.

The next step is setting up a meeting with the ISU9 management team. You’ll pitch, they’ll tell you what it will take to get your show on the air, and you may win approval. If you’re given the green light, you’ll be set up with a crew. “Once you have approval to follow through with your show idea, then you can use channel 9 equipment to start producing and start learning,” says Jen Spencer, ISU9 general manager.

Just because the process for winning your show might not be that rigorous, doesn’t mean ISU9 management is going to settle for tapes of you and your best friend sitting on the couch. And familiarizing yourself with ISU9’s equipment is highly recommended. It won’t be the same as shooting your family picnic with a camcorder. “It’s not like you can just walk into channel 9 and put together a show, because it takes the technical know-how, which is a big barrier,” Spencer says. “We want people to be making an effort to produce a quality show.”

If you can learn the technology and can piece together a pilot, management will view it and then you’ll be able to schedule airtime through the programming team. And don’t worry if this sounds ideal but you don’t know what you want to do yet. “You can come in anytime throughout the semester and how soon it gets on the air is really up to you,” says Dustin McDonough, ISU9 assistant general manager.

To get involved or for more information, e-mail Jen Spencer at spencerj@iastate.edu.

—Justin Kendall