

Burgeoning world of cable programming

Annual press tour at cable forum finds growing variety of shows and services for basic and pay

The National Cable Forum, the annual programming gathering for journalists, was a four-day window to the software side of the cable industry. As such, it showed cable programming to be emerging from a constantly evolving group of companies, whose strategies and fortunes often correspond to changes in the industry. While the broadcast networks have recently cut the length of their press tours, this year's cable event was a half-day longer to accommodate more extensive presentations by cable programmers.

The many announcements at this year's forum, held at the Beverly Hilton in Los Angeles, showed basic cable networks still searching for the right formats, but growing healthier in the process. Meanwhile, most of the pay cable networks were trying to find the best strategy to help them break out of the current plateau—or even decline—in subscriber levels.

Among the many announcements certain themes recurred:

- An increased use of schedule grids and program blocks. As more product is made available to the cable networks, they are able to organize material in once-a-week time periods, either by shows, themes or day-parts. Among channels announcing major changes in their scheduling were Tempo, The Discovery Channel, The Movie Channel and The Weather Channel.

- Greater use of personalities. Channels such as Lifetime and The Movie Channel announced hosts for movies. Live talent is supposed to give the channels a stronger identity than taped "interstitial" material, and do a better job at retaining viewers between programs.

- Talk about buying "big-ticket" items for cable. This year, several channels said they would consider making a bid for at least part of the National Football League telecast rights. Other channels, such as Lifetime and USA Network, are candidates for improving their programming with money received from cable operators.

- Purchasing exclusive programming rights to theatrical films was discussed by HBO, Showtime and The Disney Channel.

Following are rundowns of some of the cable service's presentation.

HBO increasing number of made-fors; de-emphasizing foreign co-productions

After signing a multi-million dollar movie agreement with Warner Communications two weeks ago ("In Brief," June 9), Home Box Office executives at the cable forum were instead emphasizing the pay channel's original product. In particular, the Time Inc. subsidiary said it will expand its offering of made-for-TV films, previously under the name of HBO Premiere Films, and now to be called HBO Pictures. Rick Bieber, senior vice president, HBO Pictures and Programming Operations, said that the channel's made-for movies scored highly in subscriber satisfaction surveys. An additional benefit of the channels was that they could be marketed abroad as theatrical films.

HBO said it plans to increase the number of made-for-HBO productions in 1987 by

50% over 1986—when budgetary restraints held down production—and that the channel should begin showing one presentation a month by mid-1987. Bieber said that HBO Pictures would include additional productions on newsmaker figures, such as *Murrow* and *Sakharov*, and would expand the number of genres it currently offers. Bieber added: "We are spending a lot of time on quality of execution." Seth Abraham, senior vice president, programming operations, said the increase of original programming was especially important for prime time and weekend, which he called the "bread basket" of the pay service.

Abraham said the channel produces "a little more" sports than it used to and did not rule out the possibility that HBO might bid for part of the NFL rights.

Being de-emphasized on HBO are mini-series, especially foreign co-productions. HBO Inc. Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Michael Fuchs said that the networks had "overdosed" on mini-series. He also said that since many foreign production fees were based upon length, the mini-series were often unnecessarily long and turgid. Concerning theatrical films and pay television, the HBO executives who appeared at the forum on Friday said that the situation is different today than it was several years ago. Fuchs said that the HBO/Warner deal, which may result in the pay service buying exclusive rights, was done purely as a defensive measure. He said recent exclusive movie purchases by Showtime/TMC did not make sense in today's industry environment. Exclusivity, he said, was like saying: "Let's create two different brands. But the cable operator doesn't want to sell two different brands any more."

Although Fuchs said that individual movies were no longer as valuable to HBO as "Jaws" once was, they were still "two-hour blocks" of programming that were important to HBO and co-owned Cinemax. Fuchs said that, in fact, HBO Inc. had "bought much deeper than before," and that part of the recently signed Warner agreement "was a [film] library deal."

HBO is currently test-marketing a third



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Bieber, actress Lesley Ann Warren and Fuchs