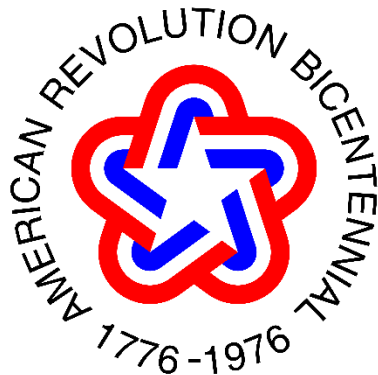


Televising The Nation's Big Birthday 50 Years Ago: A major TV extravaganza that most Americans missed

By James E. O'Neal

It's difficult not to notice the current fanfare and run-up marking the nation's 250th July 4 anniversary celebration, an event in which television is certain to be quite prominent. And you can be sure that the coverage will take advantage of as much 21st-century video and audio technology as possible. Broadcasters will be employing high dynamic range (HDR) imaging to capture firework displays in all their splendor and carrying the accompanying percussions in immersive multichannel audio. You can also count on coverage of special semiquincentennial events from even the smallest villages and hamlets that are in some way connected with early American history thanks to today's tiny high-definition video cameras, our country's 5G wireless broadband network, and a technology known as "bonded cellular" that combines multiple wireless broadband "voice-grade" circuits into a "pipe" sufficiently large to transport high-definition video.



There was a very large national celebration 50 years ago—the U.S. Bicentennial—with some equally ambitious television coverage. July 4th fell on Sunday in 1976 and the celebration spread over both Saturday and Sunday. CBS devoted most of its Sunday schedule to Bicentennial events, and NBC was only slightly more restrained, devoting 11 hours to the celebration that day. ABC, which was the real underdog back then, only veered away from its regular programming for a paltry three hours of special July 4 programming. To NBC's credit, that network originated feeds from all 50 states over the course of the weekend—quite a feat then, as satellite relay of video still was in its infancy and most remote broadcasts traveled via AT&T terrestrial coaxial cable and microwave circuits.

The author was very much involved in some very special U.S. Bicentennial celebration television coverage. However, even though it far surpassed the scope and duration of what the "classic" television networks did that weekend, most Americans never saw it or even knew of its existence, as reporting of this initiative in the popular press was virtually nil, and the one broadcast industry publication that did carry a reporting of this coverage extravaganza gave it just five lines (a mere 28 words) buried halfway down in its reporting of Bicentennial television events (the magazine devoted more space in its reporting of an Atlanta radio station's special holiday programming).

The special programming of which I was part, and which was mostly invisible to Americans, was produced by the video unit of a U.S. government agency that was officially abolished nearly three decades ago, the United States Information Agency's Film and Television Service. (Some may remember that the USIA was at one time headed by the legendary Edward R. Murrow, and that its radio, television, and film

products were known throughout the world. However, any U.S. dissemination of our programming was strictly prohibited by the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act.)

Our special “Salute By Satellite” Bicentennial coverage spanned two very long days and featured satellite video feeds to 36 different countries at a time when satellite-delivered video was so special that the mainstream networks superimposed “via satellite” over the few satellite feeds they aired in news programming to indicate to viewers they were seeing something that was truly special.

This Bicentennial initiative far surpassed the scope of anything done prior to that time by the relatively small USIA Film and Television Service, with many of those involved initially expressing the belief that it was a “mission impossible” and sure to fail given the limited staffing resources and lack of experience in doing live programming. (Almost everything produced by the unit was recorded on videotape or film, with usually weeks spent in editing and polishing before it was ready for consumption.)

Suffice it to say, despite all of the naysaying fears of failure, the programming aired without a hitch and was seen by a global audience estimated at 143 million individuals. Back home, the largest audience that even giant NBC could deliver during the Bicentennial weekend was less than half of that—just 70 million during a half-hour period on Sunday evening.

I need to note that I was 29 in 1976, and as almost all of the technical crew (and a lot of the production personnel) involved in making this special programming possible were in their 50s and 60s, I may be the last individual left standing to recount the events of that weekend half-a-century ago. Look for my comprehensive story about the USIA’s Bicentennial television coverage saga in the September issue of *Dials and Channels*.