

Videoconferencing facilities bring the world home to Williston

Vt. Interactive Television moves to Blair Park

By Roger L. Noyes
Correspondent

A group in Williston recently had the chance to meet face-to-face with officials at a Sudanese refugee camp in the African country of Chad — all from the comforts of a modern office space in Blair Park.

With television monitors, a set of cameras, microphones and a real-time video and audio feed, Williston, for at least a brief moment, entered into a distant world.

In late June, Vermont Interactive Television, a network of videoconferencing facilities that made this liaison possible, moved one of its satellite offices from Colchester to Williston in the hopes of gaining wider exposure, said Linda Brownell, the branch's regional site manager.

"It's a bit of a larger space," she said of the new facility, located in the Vermont Technical College building on Lawrence Place. "This gave Vermont Interactive Television

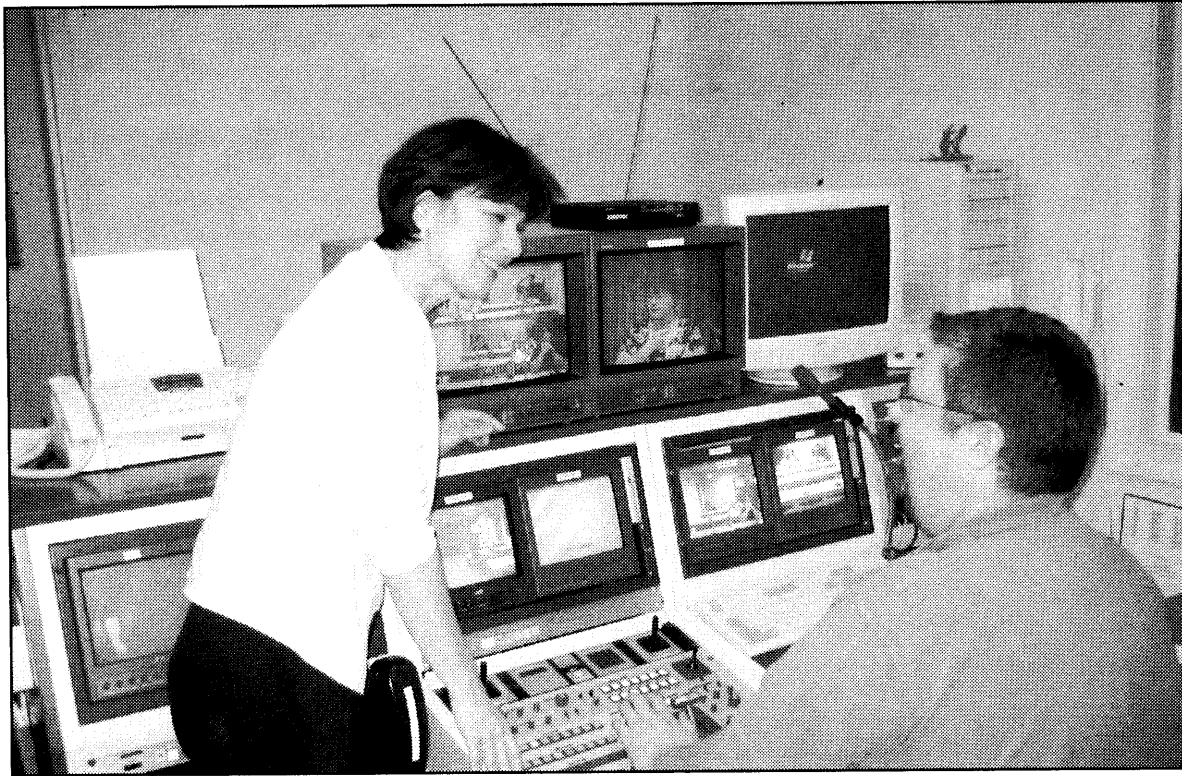


Photo by Roger Noyes

Linda Brownell, regional site manager at Vermont Interactive Television in Williston, monitors a videoconference with technician Gary Lambert. The organization, run by Vermont Technical College, recently moved from Colchester to Blair Park.

a chance to expand into a place that was more visible."

The new Blair Park location contains a 30-seat conference room for live two-way video and audio trans-

missions where customers — like the documentary-makers who arranged the broadcast to Africa — can meet with individuals at videoconferencing centers around

the globe.

Established in 1989, VIT was created to fulfill more modest needs than global communication. At the time, Brownell said, Vermont Tech-

nical College was looking for an efficient way to coordinate classes between its main campus in Randolph Center and a remote site in Newport.

The college's solution was to invest in videoconferencing technology so that students at both locations could be connected as a single class via television hookups. That way, instructors didn't have to trek across half of the state to conduct multiple sessions.

"Back then, the whole concept of videoconferencing was new," said Brownell. "We were really on the cutting edge."

VIT is still run by Vermont Technical College. Today it has 14 conferencing centers throughout the state that are available to corporations, non-profit groups, government agencies and academic institutions needing interactive, remote-site communications services.

Last year, roughly 30,000 people attended one of VIT's 14 sites for classes, corporate interviews, government public hearings and the like, Brownell said.

"Most every college in the state

VIDEO

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has used us at some time, and almost every state agency has used us," she noted.

VIT's revenue comes in part from customer fees, though roughly two-thirds of the program's budget depends on state revenue, said Brownell, who works with three part-time technicians at the Williston facility.

Despite all the advances in communications technology over the last decade, Brownell said that videoconferencing systems haven't changed substantially since VIT opened in 1989.

One key piece of equipment, however, has improved drastically. It is the decoding equipment that converts the analog signal to digital before it is transmitted through phone lines. Today's units, said Brownell, provide much clearer reception than their precursors.

"The signal used to break up, but

it got better quickly," Brownell said.

The decoder is also the most expensive component. It costs about \$20,000.

Though Internet communication may seem like the wave of the future, Brownell said the Web isn't yet as reliable as traditional videoconferencing systems, and she doesn't expect institutions will necessarily want to invest in something new when well-established technology is already available.

"Will that technology in 15 years put us out of business? Probably not," she said. "We take care of the technology so that you can take care of business."

Last Thursday, instructor Jill Gidge held a VIT videoconference to train insurance agents on changes in industry regulations. Thirty students assembled in the Williston conference room as Gidge lectured from a VIT facility in Waterbury. The two locations were also linked to another

conference site in Rutland.

As Gidge lectured, students viewed her live, on-screen presentation. When any of them had a question, they spoke through microphones and were heard in all three of the remotely linked conference rooms. A technician zoomed the camera in on individual students as they spoke, allowing them to be seen by everyone linked to the network.

Gidge, who lives in New Hampshire, said it is much easier to drive to one of the VIT locations and broadcast her class to multiple venues than travel throughout the state, or have her students do so.

The professional agency that sponsors her course "worked with Vermont Interactive Television so people wouldn't have to drive five hours to take the class," said Gidge, who has used videoconferencing since 1996.

"It's really convenient," she said.