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WPT's new stations to get more viewers
Deborah Ziff
608-252-6234
dziff@madison.com

It 's 11 a.m. on a weekday, and that means it 's time for "University Place " on Wisconsin Public Television 's newly unveiled station, the Wisconsin Channel.

For two hours a day, the station airs mostly local university lectures on topics ranging from Fur Trade 101 to Why We Age.

Never heard of it?

That 's probably because most people in the Madison area don 't get the channel that debuted this year and is devoted to all things Wisconsin. But beginning in late August, that will likely change.

Wisconsin Public Television began broadcasting the Wisconsin Channel in the Madison area in January as one of its four digital stations. People who get free, over-the-air TV via digital receivers or tuners are able to watch all the stations.

But those who get cable through Charter Communications or satellite TV -- about 75 percent of households in Dane County, according to 2007 Nielsen data -- haven 't had access to the channels.

Charter will add all four channels to its digital service on Aug. 20, said Tim Vowell, director of government relations at Charter.

The Wisconsin Channel features mostly homegrown content, some of which will be new to Madison-area viewers. Besides "University Place, " the channel airs programming from Milwaukee Public Television not previously available to cable viewers here. It also airs Wisconsin-driven shows, such as "Wisconsin Hometown Stories " or "Director 's Cut, " more frequently than the main station.

Although the audience has been small for the Wisconsin Channel, officials at WPT say that 's not necessarily a bad thing. They can experiment with programming and quality.

For instance, the station first tried out Andy Moore 's weekly music show, the "30 Minute Music Hour, " on the Wisconsin Channel, before deciding it was ready for prime time on the main station.

The extra channels also allow them to cater to niche audiences, said Malcolm Brett, director of broadcasting and media innovations at Wisconsin Public Television.

He acknowledges that not everyone will be interested in the ancient glacial lakes of Wisconsin and other lecture topics on "University Place. " When the station only had one channel, it didn't have the luxury of broadcasting programs that didn't have broad appeal.

But with four channels, WPT can better fulfill its original mission of educating the public, Brett said, even if not all shows have the production quality of "Frontline. "

WPT's standard public television channel is broadcast at 21.1. The Wisconsin Channel is at 21.2, while Create, a channel that focuses on arts, crafts and cooking, is on 21.3, and Kids is on 21.4. A high-definition version of 21.1 is broadcast at 21.5 during certain hours.

Wisconsin Public Television is still creating an archive of content for the channel, and "University Place " within it.

More than 75 lectures have been taped for "University Place, " mostly from UW-Madison, but also from Harvard Medical School, the University of California, Santa Barbara and other schools. WPT employees identify lectures they hope will be of general interest and plan to record lectures from colleges throughout the state.

Wisconsin Public Television coordinates with stations in Ohio and Pennsylvania to create content for "University Place. " The three states share a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, \$600,000 split over three years, which must be matched by the stations.

By Feb. 17, all television broadcasts will be digital. People who get free TV by antenna must buy a digital set-top converter box, buy a TV with a built-in digital tuner, or subscribe to a cable or satellite service.