

SUNDAY, JANUARY

'AM America': ABC

By John Carmody



Bill Beutel



Stephanie Edwards

"AM America, Jan. 6, 1975. I'm Bill Beutel. . . .

"... and I'm Stephanie Edwards. . . ."

And about one minute after 7 Monday morning, that is how the ABC network will introduce its \$6.5-million gamble to:

1) Enter the lucrative early morning national TV market; 2) nudge NBC's 22-year-old "Today Show" into sharing a big part of its daily audience of 5 to 6 million viewers; and 3) leave "The CBS Morning News" to what even that network admits are the "very hard news" fans (about 1.5 million) who watch that one-hour show every day.

"AM America" has been in the works for at least 18 months as part of the ABC network's long-range plan, to gain full, major league status in competition with the bigger, richer NBC and CBS.

Never before has ABC had a network-fed program for its 185 affiliates before 11:30 a.m.

In the past year, with ABC vice president Dennis Doty as the ramrod, the network has been lining up its affiliates for clearances at 7 a.m. (about 90 per cent so far); national advertisers (who are signed up 100 per cent for the six minutes of each second half hour of the two-hour show, at least until April); and on-the-air talent, certainly the most important element in "AM America's" chances for success.

Doty interviewed at least 125 different TV performers over the last year—including "four or five" from Washington—and, quite deliberately, finally settled on three major talents from within the ABC network and affiliate system.

Beutel has been the early evening anchorman at WABC in New York. Edwards has been a co-host on Ralph Story's "AM" show in Los Angeles.

Story himself, whose morning program outranks "Today" in Southern

California about two-to-one, will handle the West Coast segment of the network show, which means that, at the very least, he will make an appearance each Friday on the program.

The daily news will be handled from the ABC bureau here (sharing a set with Howard K. Smith's "Evening News" at 1124 Connecticut Ave. NW).

Peter Jennings, a onetime ABC news anchorman, but most recently in Beirut for the network, will give a six-minute newscast on the hour, and another three-minute newscast on the half hour.

Brief sports and weather reports will be added to Jennings' report in New York on the hour. Local stations will have a five-minute news break on the half hour.

If this is starting to sound a little like the very successful format of "Today," don't be too surprised. Even rival networks do not tinker with a money-making formula.

What will be different Monday morning will be the "feel" of the ABC show and the attitudes of its on-the-air talent.

"They're very heavy at 'Today,'" claims Christine Dyerly, the New York coordinator for the show. She shares a lot of the responsibility for what you'll see and who you'll hear with senior producer Jules Power.

Nevertheless, from the opening seconds, when you hear a "bright but not frivolous" musical theme (composed for the show by Bill Goldstein) as film of "America waking up" rushes across the screen, until Beutel and Edwards appear in what TV producers call "a two shot," the differences from "Today" will be apparent—though neither substantive nor major.

Beutel and Edwards will sit on stools behind tall podiums, on a "sunrise colored" set—with lots of "warm oranges and yellows," according to Doty.

Even the theme music will be a little

See AMERICA, E8, Col. 1

Joins the Early-Bird Race



Bill Beutel and Stephanie Edwards on the "AM America" set during rehearsals in mid-December.

'AM America': ABC Joins

AMERICA, From E1

more upbeat than the "Today" show theme, which gets positively melancholy sometimes in its Friday close, as the credits appear.

"You can't get frivolous with the music," Dyerly points out, "because you never know what the first news item might be that morning."

Beutel, 43, has a pleasant, rather tired cast to his face, not a bad contrast to "Today's" cheerful Jim Hartz.

Edwards, 31, a Minnesota farm girl, is a handsome redhead who once earned notoriety as a "kook" by playing the trombone on both the Johnny Carson and Merv Griffin talk shows.

She was chosen for "AM America" because, according to one ABC executive, "she's a damned nice person and it comes across on the tube."

Currently, there are four "special contributors" signed up for the show. They'll make periodic appearances as interviewers and commentators, but with presidential election year 1976 coming up, that list may change.

It has already started to shorten. Special contributor Elliot Richardson the former Attorney General, should be on the show Jan. 8. But he is to become the new ambassador to Britain soon and will undoubtedly leave the show.

Former New York mayor John Lindsay, whom Doty calls "a unique communicator," is due to appear once a week, doing what Doty says will be "everything—interviewing his friends in government and the arts and coming up with features."

Doty adds, however, that ABC and Lindsay have "a gentlemen's agreement" to break up their relationship if the latter succumbs to the siren call of

political office in the next couple of years.

Former Sen. Sam Ervin will appear every other week, says Doty, to "provide a positive piece of America with his anecdotes and expertise in the government." Ervin is expected to emphasize the country's Bicentennial efforts as the months pass.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson also is slated to appear every other week to "help us understand the many people in our minority groups who have achieved success with little publicity," as Doty puts it.

The ABC executive says the network is currently looking for a "conservative" to join the special contributors on a regular basis.

A Boston physician, Dr. Timothy Johnson, who achieved local fame for his appearances on WCVB-TV there, also will make a weekly house call on the show to discuss health problems for early morning hypochondriacs.

The news magazine format is no accident, of course.

Aside from its calculated similarity to "Today," ABC employed the service of the Frank Magid Associates, a consulting firm out of Iowa and also ran its own audience tests in nine different TV markets around the country over the last 18 months.

The success of a morning program called "The Morning Exchange" over WEWS, an ABC affiliate in Cleveland (which outdraws "Today" there, two or three to one) was a major factor in adopting the news magazine format, according to Doty.

Nearly \$750,000 was spent in the researching and early development of "AM America," which will cost the network an additional \$5 million over the first full year of broadcasts, in addition to promotion and affiliate costs.

Since the network plans to stick

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with the show as long as three years in an effort to get a foothold in the morning market, ABC has pencilled in at least \$15 million for the program, industry sources suggest.

The national advertisers already have filled up their allotted hour each morning but ABC doesn't yet have any indication how the 170 or so affiliates already signed up have done selling the two, first half-hour segments that will carry local advertising only.

The network's researchers have found what Doty hopefully describes as a "new viewership" out there for a 7-9 a.m. program.

While "Today" attracts a mostly "over 30 female" audience—plus all those thousands of traveling people who tune in the program to get oriented in a strange town each morning—ABC hopes to attract the money-spending 18-to-49 female audience in large numbers.

"Ralph Story's 'AM' in Los Angeles," says Doty, "attracts three to six times the 'Today' audience in that market."

Nevertheless, Doty and producer Power repeatedly insist that no format has been locked in yet for the new program.

"It may look entirely different in six months—we just don't know," says another ABC executive.

Overall, the network is feeling pretty confident about its new show, which has been in full "clocktime" rehearsal in studio TV 7 on West 66th street in New York since Dec. 18.
