Missouri TV network could arrive sooner than later

By MIKE DeARMOND

COLUMBIA | You don’t have to cast about very far to run across speculation that the Big 12 Conference is alive today because Texas could not get assurances from the Pacific-10, or possibly other conferences, that it could solely profit from formation of its own television network.

The Big 12 promised exactly that.

But do not expect Texas to be the only Big 12 school to combine Internet video capabilities with expanded cable clearances and even a dedicated television channel into a 24-hour, seven-day a week potential revenue gusher. In fact, expect just about every current member of the Big 12 to do exactly that. And, according to officials at Missouri, to do it as quickly as possible.

“I would like to think that within five years we could be a very serious player with all the resources that we think that we have here,” said Chad Moller, Mizzou assistant athletic director for media relations. “I want to dream big. I think that’s absolutely a goal that we need to establish and try to shoot for.”

Moller and other athletic department officials held a brainstorming session last week that grew out of a statement made by University of Missouri system president Gary Forsee after the Big 12 stayed together.

“Why shouldn’t there be a Mizzou Network?” Forsee said. “Why shouldn’t we take advantage of the great history that we have and monetize that?

“We have the best journalism school in the world. I suspect that would be a fantastic opportunity for them.”

The building of a Missouri Network would go far beyond having students provide content to an enterprise in which Moller contends content may not be as important, initially, as the method of delivery.
Missouri already has an Internet content stream — Mizzou All-Access — which for $9.95 per month or $80 per year provides live and archived game action in sports such as softball, baseball and gymnastics, as well as news conferences, some of those offerings free of charge.

"We stream a lot of games," said Kevin Fletcher, coordinator of online operations for Mizzou All-Access. "Really, the only games we don't stream are football games. We have not streamed swimming, we have not streamed tennis and we haven't streamed any regular-season track."

Fletcher estimated that the monthly All-Access subscriber list is currently around 500 with another 100 or so paying the yearly fee.

CBS Sports has just come on board and by August will be providing an updated video player as well as more access to archived events that eventually could include replays — using school rather than national network footage — of such events as the infamous "Fifth Down Game" or the 1961 Orange Bowl.

However, most fans, Fletcher anticipated, would consider a Mizzou Network to include a dedicated TV channel available through their cable provider in high definition.

Currently, any Missouri men's basketball game that is not shown on one of the Big 12 Conference or national network packages is available via the Missouri Sports Network on various cable TV stations around the state. In Kansas City, that is generally on Metro Sports on the Time Warner Cable system.

Moller said that even if the school and its longtime media rights-holding partner Learfield Sports do introduce a dedicated channel for a Mizzou Network, it would most likely be a cable offering. Over-the-air stations — while available to a wider audience — are generally affiliated with one of the national networks and are unable or unwilling to bypass network shows.

The Learfield-Mizzou partnership in the last year produced a $4 million profit for the school. Learfield also handles media rights — telecast fees, advertising and other marketing — for more than 50 colleges and conferences in 31 states.

Included are Kansas State, Iowa State, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, Oklahoma and Oklahoma State.

How much profit is to be made by each school is, of course, a prime consideration for any school looking to establish its own network. How much is enough? And how long might it take to get there?

"We've not gotten to that level of detail yet," Moller said. "We're still talking about what we need to find out and who do we need to go to."

The University of Texas has been studying the possibilities for at least three years, and perhaps longer. According to the Dallas Morning News, Texas could be the first school to get its own, dedicated cable venture up and running.
“There is a lot of ground to cover and so many different ways of doing it,” Texas A.D. DeLoss Dodds told the Morning News. “We plan to start slow and small and build as we go.”

The anticipated launch of Everything Bevo? Perhaps as early as the summer of 2011, according to the Morning News.

Subscriber fees through cable operators for the Big Ten Network range from 10 cents per TV household in non-Big Ten states to 70 cents in states with a Big Ten school. The Big Ten, however, still does not have an agreement with Time Warner, the king of the cable companies. The NFL Network is even less widely available.

Compare that with ESPN, which is estimated to be seen in just under 100 million homes in the U.S.

Referencing information provided by TV industry analysts, the Morning News reported Texas might get between eight and 10 cents per subscriber in the state. Homes outside Texas might bring only two to three cents per subscriber each month.

With an industry-estimated 1.6 million TV households in the major Missouri markets of St. Louis, Kansas City and Springfield, at an estimated nickel-per-month subscription profit per household, a Missouri Network would bring in more than $80,000 per month just from those areas, or $960,000 per year. And that would be a baseline figure, absent any revenues from any TV or Internet advertising.

So far in the Big 12, only Texas A&M athletic director Bill Byrne has expressed much opposition to trying a school TV network. Byrne has contended that A&M might be better served by developing an increased Internet-based platform.

At Missouri, Moller cautions that development of a dedicated-channel approach could be “a very tall order.”

“I want to dream big and believe that we can do something along those lines,” he said. “I believe we have the resources and the people and the energy to get to that point.”
All Tigers, all the time?

**MU ponders starting own TV network.**

By David Briggs

Friday, June 25, 2010

For Missouri sports junkies, it would be a primetime lineup made in heaven.

One night might feature a live basketball telecast from Mizzou Arena, a studio-produced postgame show and a replay of the football team’s 2007 win over Kansas. The next: a live volleyball match, a tape-delayed soccer game and the Gary Pinkel Show.

Call it the Tigers Sports Network — a channel devoted around the clock to all things MU.

Last week, after the Big 12 was saved, University of Missouri system President Gary Forsee publicly asked, “Why shouldn’t there be a Mizzou network?” Since then, MU officials have met to discuss new ways to deliver athletic programming to fans.

Their most ambitious idea is a 24-hour sports network filled with live games, archived footage and studio shows.

Missouri, a school outside the power elite of college athletics, is exploring uncharted digital territory. No school has ever created its own network, and while the downsized Big 12 allows its members to retain local media rights, that concession was aimed largely at the conference’s powers. Oklahoma, which recently invested in a $3 million high-definition video facility, and Texas hope to start their own networks.

Could Missouri, the only power-conference school in a state of 6 million, centrally located between two major television markets and home to a prominent broadcast journalism program, launch its own channel?

“I would caution from making it sound like that’s absolutely going to happen, but I think we have certain resources and advantages that other schools don’t,” said the Missouri athletic department’s director of media relations, Chad Moller, who has been involved in the school’s talks about future media ventures. “So I’d like to think we can make that happen at some point. Whether it’s five years down the road or longer, I don’t know, of course, but I think it’s a great goal to set out there.”
Sports media analysts are mixed over whether the costs and potentially limited audience would make an MU-owned network feasible.

Neal Pilson, the former president of CBS Sports who now runs a consulting firm, said he suspected it would be “an uphill economics battle because of the size of the state.” Another analyst said it could work because the major cost for most networks — acquiring programming rights — is not in play.

“That’s the big cost, and they own the programming,” said John Mansell, a sports media consultant based in Virginia, noting a school-owned network would be a valuable recruiting tool. “I’m not so sure it would be a huge risk to do it.”

For now, Missouri holds no grandiose media plans. Moller said the next likely step is enhancing the school’s online programming. The athletic department annually streams about 150 live games online — mostly nonrevenue sports like baseball, softball and soccer — through Mizzou All-Access for $9.95 a month. Further near-term possibilities include tapping decades of archived footage.

As for the future, Moller said, “What I want to do is not limit ourselves to anything, to dream big, shoot for the moon.”

Texas has discussed creating its own television network for years, and the issue became a sticking point during the school’s recent flirtation with the Pac-10 Conference. In the Pac-10 and Big Ten, schools assign their media rights to the league, a scenario that would keep Texas from pocketing the $3 million to $5 million industry analysts forecast a UT network will generate.

But the Longhorns reside in a different world, a football-mad state with a population of 25 million. Missouri would face several barriers in forming a network, primarily ensuring the channel was distributed widely enough to offset the channel’s costs — studio, equipment and personnel.

Starting a television network with the collaboration of the school’s broadcast journalism program is one thing. Getting cable or satellite providers to carry it is another matter.

The NFL Network, for instance, launched in only 11.5 million homes. Even the Big Ten Network, which is available in 75 million households and pulls in 70 cents each month from subscribers within the league’s footprint, endured early distribution challenges.

“The cable operator looks at it from this perspective: Is this programming service sufficiently distinguishable from other programming services that it might attract new subscribers … and what’s it going to cost?” Mansell said.
He said Missouri’s premier programming, which could include a dozen or so basketball games not picked up by the league’s television partners and one football game each season, likely would not be enough to sway a cable provider to carry the network on the same basic tier as ESPN, CNN and TNT, which would require an across-the-board price bump for subscribers.

“If I’m a cable operator,” Mansell said, “I want to carry it on an upper-level, fairly narrowly distributed sports tier, something that might carry the tennis channel or the NHL channel — channels that aren’t necessarily that widely utilized by the subscriber base.”

Fan demand could change that. Missouri is situated in the 17th-most populous state between two top 32 television markets, each of which the Tigers ultimately control despite the cities’ divided college allegiances.

According to Nielsen Media research provided to the Tribune, the Tigers’ last three football games on ABC against opponents other than Kansas averaged a 14.9 rating in the Kansas City market. Kansas’ last four games on the network leading up to last season’s MU game averaged an 11.6.

Missouri’s ratings were slightly lower in St. Louis but well above those of rival Illinois. In the past two years, the Illini’s highest rating on the city’s ABC affiliate was a 2.8 for a September game at Ohio State.

Pilson estimated an MU channel, if carried on a provider’s basic tier, would command the school “10, 20 cents” per subscriber each month. But he expressed doubts Missouri could turn a profit.

Other Big 12 schools, including Oklahoma State and Texas A&M, immediately nixed talk of a school network.

“The financial numbers simply do not work in our favor to produce 168 hours of TV every week,” A&M Athletic Director Bill Byrne wrote in an online message to fans. “If you think about it, a separate school network does not work unless it’s public television.”

One analyst suggested Missouri is best off simply sticking with an enhanced, subscription-based online model.

“Most experts long-term don’t believe cable will be distributed the way it is today,” said A.J. Maestas, president of Navigate Marketing, a Chicago firm that helps schools determine their market value. “It will be more like the Internet where you dedicate all your bandwidth at one time, and there’s very little barrier to broadcasting your own channel. ... Someday, I’m picturing we’ll have access to 5,000 channels — 4,800 of which have such a small audience that they’re very limited.”

Will the Tigers Sports Network be one of them?

“Stay tuned,” Forsee said.
MU professors’ new book examines 'Twilight' craze

As the third “Twilight” movie hits the big screen Wednesday, University of Missouri professors have come out with a scholarly book on the teen vampire craze.

“Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media & the Vampire Franchise,” by MU communication professors Melissa Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, analyzes, among other issues, the importance of gender dynamics to the “Twilight” franchise.

Teenage girls were drawn to the supernatural/human love story, making the first two movies blockbuster hits. But MU professors say they see a shift in the marketing for the new movie, “Twilight: Eclipse.” To draw male moviegoers, they say, the full-length trailer portrays it as an action movie.
Russell savors challenge

Late wife offers him inspiration.

By Janese Silvey

Sunday, June 27, 2010

Professionally, it’s a golden opportunity for David Russell, who has long been interested in the governance of higher education. Personally, taking the helm of the state’s higher education department is somewhat of a tribute to his late wife.

Lynn Russell was the one who urged him to apply for his first University of Missouri System job when he got out of the Army nearly 20 years ago, and she encouraged him to pursue a doctorate. She, too, worked in higher education, so it became a shared passion for the couple. Now, more than six months after she passed away, Russell still feels her support.

“She would have told me to sit up straight, look people in the eye, take on the challenge and do it to the best of my ability,” he said.

And that’s exactly what he plans to do.

Russell becomes interim commissioner of the Missouri Department of Higher Education on Thursday. The appointment is only for a year, but Russell — who said he’d be interested in the position permanently — said he has no intention of being a placeholder.

Topping his to-do list is to build consensus within Missouri’s somewhat-piecemeal higher education community, trying to find shared goals among leaders of four-year, two-year, public and private universities and colleges. Although not officially on the job, Russell already has started working toward that goal by meeting with the various entities to better understand their concerns and priorities.

Russell also is worried about a leaky P-20 pipeline that sees less than a fourth of ninth-graders completing a college degree. High school graduation rates need to improve, he said, and when they do, the state must make sure those students have access to affordable higher education.

Those would be lofty goals at any time, but Russell is setting out to accomplish them at a time the department’s future is uncertain. Near the end of the legislative session, state lawmakers began contemplating whether the higher education department should merge with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to create what they would hope to be a
more efficient and inexpensive education department. The merger did not happen this year, but discussions could continue next year.

That's one reason Russell was tapped to serve in a temporary capacity, said Lowell Kruse, chair of the Coordinating Board of Higher Education. The board was getting ready to wrap up the search for a permanent replacement of Commissioner Robert Stein, who's retiring, when the potential merger was announced. Kruse said the board proceeded with interviewing three finalists but did not want to hire a permanent replacement until the future was more certain.

Kruse said the board tapped Russell because he's well-known and respected in the higher education community and was able to take a year leave of absence from his job as vice president of the UM System to fill the role, Kruse said. "All the way around, we feel very fortunate to have someone like David pop up on the radar and who was interested," he said.

Russell also will be at the helm when state lawmakers deal with what's expected to be a $1 billion budget hole in fiscal year 2012, when federal stimulus money runs out. So far, higher education budgets have been shielded from major funding cuts because of the tuition freeze agreement between Gov. Jay Nixon and university presidents.

To deal with massive cuts in the future, Stein sent a grim note to college presidents last year outlining ways higher education could be more efficient in Missouri, such as doing away with duplicate academic programs or even shutting down campuses. Although it's up to each college's governing board to make those decisions, Russell said with collaboration, institutes could find common solutions.

Russell is taking on the challenge at what's no doubt a tough time, but he sees it as an opportunity to make major changes in Missouri's college landscape.

"Things couldn't be more discouraging to people about the future because of the economy than right now, but that's a point when people are receptive to change," he said. "Working with each other, we can break out of the box, finally, and find new ways to do things."

Reach Janese Silvey at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jsilvey@columbiatribune.com.
Governor signs education, PAT, research grant legislation

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JEFFERSON CITY — Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon signed legislation yesterday allowing fees to be charged for a popular early childhood education program and giving school districts more flexibility in deciding how to spend money during tough budget times.

Nixon also signed several other bills that increase the amount for state spinal cord research grants and gradually cut the rates telephone companies charge one another.

Most of the new laws take effect Aug. 28. But provisions designed to help school districts with their budgets become effective Thursday. Under those portions of the legislation, school districts would not need to meet state standards for things such as teacher professional development if state funding drops.

The Missouri budget that takes effect next week keeps basic state aid to schools flat even though a funding formula called for an increase. Nixon also is blocking funding of some state assistance for busing.

The state budget also makes deep cuts into the Parents as Teachers early childhood education program. That program now is free, but Nixon signed legislation that would allow parents to be charged a fee. Families whose children have not yet entered kindergarten would remain eligible for annual development screenings.

Another bill signed into law yesterday would lower what telephone companies charge other phone providers for connecting calls from one part of the state to the other. That could cut telephone bills for Missourians who make lots of long-distance phone calls while making local phone calls more pricey.

The governor also signed a bill boosting spinal cord research grants from $50,000 to $250,000. The grants are awarded by the University of Missouri. They are funded by a $2 court fee charged on every criminal or infraction case.