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The Greening Of Cable

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Cable is slowly falling in love with the color green.

I'm not talking cold, hard cash. The green I'm referring to is the color of the eco-friendly movement. You know, recycled paper, biofuels, battery powered cars -- anything and everything in the name of saving the earth from our own pollution-generating excesses.

Several networks seem to like the way green looks on their schedule. The Weather Channel last October launched *The Climate Code with Dr. Heidi Cullen*, a 30-minute weekly Sunday afternoon series which provides a platform to discuss the hot topics of global warming and climate changes, as well as a companion, video-rich website dubbed One Degree.

The Sundance Channel decided prime time was the best time to focus on ecology. The network's *The Green* three-hour block of environmentally-friendly programming launched April 17th and will include such shows as *Big Ideas for a Small Planet*, a 13-part documentary series that undoubtedly have conservation and organic living as its theme.

If a block of programming isn't enough, Discovery Networks is going to devote a whole linear channel to the topic. The company will paint its Discovery Home channel green in 2008 as it commits \$50 million toward its Discovery PlanetGreen global, cross-platform initiative.

Other networks such as the **Documentary Channel**, Lime TV and Current TV offer short and long-form programming on global warming and how to live a green lifestyle.

How did a topic which only a few years ago was dismissed by most people as the musings of crazy far left-wing radicals become such a hot commodity for cable TV?

Much of the credit for waking up cable and viewers to the dangers of global warming and the positives of embracing a green lifestyle goes to a movie made by a former vice president. Whether or not you agree with his conclusions, Al Gore's Academy Award

winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* laid out in laymen's terms the negative effects of greenhouse emissions on mother earth that many scientists have been warning us about for years.

And people seem to be finally listening.

In the spring of 2004, only a quarter of Americans in a Gallup Poll said they were worried "a great deal" by climate change, according to New York Magazine. That number is now over 40 percent today.

"The movie *An Inconvenient Truth* made the issue of ecology and the buzzword green fashionable and acceptable," said Bill Carroll, vice president and director of programming for Katz Television Media Group, a seller of time on broadcast media.

Now that the subject is en vogue -- Wal-Mart is aggressively selling energy-efficient, fluorescent light bulbs and Frito-Lay is cooking potato chips in low-fat sunflower oil -- cable networks are jumping on the green bandwagon to offer programming that advertisers feel good about sponsoring.

The Sundance Channel's "The Green" programming block for example has already attracted such big ticket companies as Lexis and Smith Barney.

"Advertisers are always looking to be part of what's trendy, and [green programming] is trendy," Carroll said. "When the culture seems to embrace it, then advertisers embrace it. They want to be associated with anything that seems positive."

But eventually such programs, no matter how informative and important, will eventually be judged by how many eyeballs are watching. And at least for now, a documentary about melting glaciers or a series about how to make your house green-friendly would be hard pressed to draw a fraction of viewers than an original episode of *The Sopranos*. As such, it's not surprising that TNT, FX and USA haven't jumped on the environmental bandwagon yet.

"People watch television to be entertained first and foremost," said TV historian Tim Brooks. "I think you'll see some shows do well, but the big test will be whether you see any of the general networks try something within the genre. Maybe it could be part of a storyline, but it's hard to see major producer building a show around this subject yet."

Eventually, all television trends fizzle. If and when green is no longer in fashion, it's questionable whether the marketplace will continue to support a multi-platform green lifestyle service such as Lime or an around-the-clock cable environmental channel such as Discovery's, still to come.

But for now it seems environmentalism is all the rage. Discovery Channel has managed to draw 46 million viewers to its 11-part *Planet Earth* series.

With those numbers, it might not be a bad idea for cable networks to bet some green on green programming.

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