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Former rivals now partners

In bow to new realities, local TV stations say they will share content

By **CHRIS CHURCHILL**, Business writer

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Television news outlets in the Capital Region were once as fiercely competitive as the Red Sox and Yankees.

That was then. Now, WRGB Ch. 6 and WNYT Ch. 13 are negotiating a plan to share content, evidence that new economic realities are forcing rivals to reconsider methods.

"There are big cultural issues for both of us," said Robert Furlong, general manager at WRGB, the CBS affiliate in Niskayuna. "We're used to throwing rocks at each other."

The sharing will start with sports footage, requiring one cameraman to prowl the sidelines instead of two. But neither station on Tuesday ruled out the possibility of someday sharing news coverage, too.

"We're taking baby steps into an area that's new to us," said Steve Baboulis, general manager at WNYT, the NBC affiliate in Menands. "We're just trying to maximize the resources we have available."

The stations, which each had layoffs last year, are following a national trend forced, in part, by smaller staff sizes and spandex-tight budgets. Three Phoenix stations, for example, this week began sharing a helicopter to cut costs. In Philadelphia, stations have established a Local News Service that provides shared footage of press conferences or crime scenes.

"It's certainly something that has proven successful in other markets," said Lisa Jackson, news director at WRGB. "But it's brand new to this market."

The trend is evident on the print side of the business, too: Five newspapers, including the Times Union, last month announced they would begin sharing stories, photographs and graphics later this year.

Jackson stressed that WRGB's coverage of sports would maintain its own personality because the stations, at least at this point, are sharing footage but not reporters or anchors.

Baboulis, meanwhile, said combining resources for events that all stations cover will free resources for coverage that makes each newscast distinctive.

"The main goal is to try to provide more content for viewers," he said. "We all have that in mind as we face a different revenue picture."

The two stations, owned by different corporations, were not sure exactly when the content-sharing would begin. They have both technical and staffing issues to consider before the plan goes into effect — considerations that would have flabbergasted old-school television workers.

Paul Conti, a former WNYT news director who now teaches journalism at The College of Saint Rose in Albany, said such sharing was unimaginable when he left the business just four years ago.

"That shows how much things have changed," he said.

Chris Churchill can be reached at 454-5442 or by e-mail at cchurchill@timesunion.com.