



## brief

TO

THE CANADIAN RADIO AND TELEVISION COMMISSION  
RE: COMMUNITY CHANNELS ON CABLE TELEVISION  
FROM CHALLENGE FOR CHANGE/SOCIÉTÉ NOUVELLE

Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle is an experimental programme established by the Government of Canada as a participation between the National Film Board of Canada and certain federal government departments which now comprise: Agriculture, CMHC, Health & Welfare, Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Labour, Regional Economic Expansion and Secretary of State/Citizenship. The Programme is responsible directly to the Secretary of State, via the Privy Council office.

Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle was established to focus on communications and social change; to create an awareness of the nature of change and its accelerated pace in present day society and the need which we all have (and specifically the least organized amongst us) of harnessing and working with it.

In the beginning this took the form of making films "about" such subjects as poor people, welfare agencies, minority groups, human rights, etc. This approach proved unsatisfactory because it was essentially no different from the treatment given the "disadvantaged" by many television programmes, government reports and newspaper articles in that action that could result in change was very often out of the

reach of those affected. The problem remained but often with the subjects highly embarrassed and frequently more frustrated than before. Slowly, a different philosophy grew—that of involving citizens in the production process—choosing their own subject areas, controlling the editorial process, and determining who should see the film. The film maker from the Programme now became a spark plug for process rather than a creator of product and could use his previous liability as an outsider to mediate difficulties and bring conflicting parties together.

With the introduction of low-cost portable and easy to use 1/2" videotape equipment—and C.R.T.C.'s proposed community channels on cable systems ("for the enrichment of community life through fostering communications amongst individuals and community groups"), CITIZEN ACCESS TO THE MEDIA became one of the main thrusts of the Challenge for Change programme.

By preparing their own programmes for the community channels on matters of immediate concern to themselves, we felt it would be possible for ALL citizens to participate in local issues; to dialogue with their elected officials; to tap into various information sources and generally to express themselves in whatever way they wanted—be it political debate or cultural expression, or just talking WITH each other across distances of time, and space, and misunderstanding. It could reintroduce the human scale into problem solving and indeed *make* local problem-solving everyone's concern. The danger would be that monologue instead of dialogue: one way communication instead of feedback; and "coverage" rather than an exchange of informed opinion would turn the channel into a Tower of Babel. However, given the timidity of much local media, the "economic disinterest" of the national media and the almost complete lack of access for the ordinary guy, we felt that the Challenge for Change philosophy adapted to true citizen access to the community channels would be a positive way of encouraging

# WHICH SIDE HAS POWER?

One of the many traps that creative and concerned people are now being suckered into is cable television. Whoever believes that gaining access to cable will enable him to control his destiny in any meaningful way, is a fool.

In Canada and in the States, cable access groups have been systematically blinding themselves. The energy of the liberals has been spent on proving that they are good boys sincerely concerned with human ecology, and so they feel they have *earned the privilege* of cable access (see National Film Board's Challenge for Change brief to the CRTC). The radicals aren't going to play that game, they

spend their energies on *demanding the inalienable right* to cable access. It is all a joke.

The CRTC is responsible for broadcasting in Canada. Like a medieval touring court it travels the country graciously receiving briefs from electronic-media supplicants. The bored and busy court members can't possibly be expected to hear all the briefs, so they listen to this one, and listen to that one. Afterwards, the access groups scuttle back to their churches, lofts and YMCAs, hoping they have made a good impression.

Meanwhile, there is a brief that no one seems to have read. The capitalists, the cable station owners,

are trying to justify themselves: "In spite of the rapid growth of cable, the revenue growth of TV broadcasters has been sustained, their operating profits have accelerated . . . the large growth in cable viewing had little effect on the audience of Canadian television broadcasters." As far back as 1968 the RAND corporation was recommending community access to cable. Was no one suspicious? I quote from a later RAND report explaining its apparent altruism. "*Cable's small negative impact in the 1980s will probably be unobservable—lost in the static of more decisive developments.*" (RAND R-689-MF)

Government knows it. Big industry knows it. Even small cable companies know it. Everyone knows it except the groups fighting for cable access. CABLE IS DICKSHIT.

Sure people should make their own programmes and have access to cable. Sure the cable companies should be licensed as utilities with no responsibility for the content of the program originator. We can even go one step further and say that production and distribution should be separated; cable companies should be equipment supply centres providing hardware, while the transmission of programs should be on separate utilities under citizen control. Cable definitely has potential value. But the exaggerated romance with the equipment is siphoning off productive energies out of all proportion to its usefulness.

