

Thea Sklover, Open Channel: "I would like to do more training in high schools on use of video equipment because I feel that young people are a very logical place to begin getting more and more people within the community who know how to make video on their own, who know how to produce television. It's a responsibility I feel we have now, that every young person should have the skills of video, just the way they have the skills of writing. It's one of the main ways that they'll be communicated with in their lives, and if they have no control over it, then it's always being used on them. They have no defense, no understanding of it, and they have no way to communicate with it. Communication should go two ways; right now, in terms of video, most people can only receive it, they can't give it....Right now we need money for equipment and for people, people to man the equipment, people to train, people to maintain the equipment, people to go out and tell other people in the community about Public Access....Public Access in New York has just barely been born; it's at its very earliest stages. It's just beginning to be picked up by the media. People who might make use of it are just beginning to know of its existence...."



and perhaps more important, the requirement *may not be exceeded* without special permission from the FCC. In an area of little population, a single Public access channel might be adequate; but in a heavily populated area, where the demand could be much greater, provision should be made for not only a "soapbox" channel, where people can express themselves on specific issues, but a channel where ongoing programming can begin to build audiences. In areas outside of the top one hundred markets, the FCC has ruled that franchise requirements for Public Access may be made, but that they may not exceed the FCC standards for the top one hundred markets.

Building an audience for Public Access requires commitment on the part of the cable operator. The best way of letting people know about Public Access is by publicizing it over the cable system's own origination channels and in their mailings to subscribers. Newspapers should also carry public channel announcements along with their television listings (they have yet to do so in New York). A particularly heavy commitment is required of the cable operator in order to maintain a picture quality adequate to attract viewers. To begin with, the expenditure of money on equipment and man-hours necessary to maintain a good Public Access signal is probably the same as that required to maintain a good signal on a paying channel. In addition, there are the special technical problems presented by cablecasting half-inch videotape.

Without half-inch video, Public Access would not amount to much, because it is the only videotaping process suitable to the particular needs of Public Access, in that it is cheap, portable, and easy-to-operate. BUT, as its principal manufacturer, SONY Corporation, tells its complaining cable-users, it was never intended to be cablecast or broadcast, and thus far, SONY has declined to modify its equipment for CATV use, the CATV market being a small one. The chief difficulty is the "time-base" problem: the speed at which the tape passes the recording-playback heads on the half-inch machines tends to fluctuate, causing a tape signal which lacks precision. If the fluctuation is not too great, a home receiver can "lock in" on the signal and produce an acceptable picture; but if the problem is magnified by problems in the cable system's own signal, the picture on the home receiver can be totally unintelligible. The long-range solution is to find a manufacturer who will produce an adequate machine. The immediate solution is two-fold: one, to make available to people doing half-inch programming a free or nominal service for checking their equipment on a regular basis; two, a committed effort on the part of the cable companies to bring the signal of the Public Access channels up to the standard maintained by the cable channels transmitting network programs (this should be a franchise requirement), and also to make modifications adapted specifically to half-inch.

In Manhattan there are two franchises, and it is useful to compare their handling of their Public Access channels. Although they were officially opened only last summer and did not really get started until Fall, both companies are receiving considerable public channel programming. Of the two companies, Sterling Manhattan (Time, Inc is the major owner), which has the middle and lower portions of Manhattan, has attracted the most programming. They got off to a slow start by charging a maintenance fee per program for the use of their equipment, but they waived the fee when it became clear that would-be users could not pay it, and they have in general made a solid effort to work with the problems of cablecasting half-inch videotape. The company's programming director, John Sanfratello, would rather not have to work with half-inch. But, recognizing its necessity, with the cooperation of the company's president, William Lamb, he has put his engineering background to work, along with the know-how of his best engineers, and has begun to find solutions. The result has been a noticeable improvement in their Public Access signal, to the point where, on good days and in the right sections of the city (where their equipment is newer and better), it is possible to see a Public Access cablecast of a half-inch tape and not to be able to distinguish it from any other good cablecast.

Teleprompter, on the other hand, got off to a good start by charging no equipment-use fee, and for awhile was much more heavily programmed than was Sterling. But the signal on their public channel is so poor that even technically superior material comes over badly. They promised improvements by the end of 1971, but it still looks bad. The most reasonable explanation, given by one of their technicians, is that they are microwaving their public channel, rather than cablecasting it, and are using outdated equipment. Microwave requires monitoring to make sure the sending and receiving equipment are in proper alignment; if they are not, the signal will be distorted.