

A REPORT FROM CANADA: TELEVISION AS TOWN MEETING

by Dorothy Todd Henaut

A TECHNOLOGICAL TOWN MEETING

Television has the potential for being a technological town meeting, an important instrument in re-democratization.

To give a concrete illustration: A handful of people starts organizing around an issue—let's say pollution, which is an ever-present problem nowadays. They need numbers. They need to reach all the people who have been privately concerned; they need to educate others and instigate new concern. And they need to gather all those people together, and initiate action.

If the handful of concerned citizens has access to community television, they can make a TV program themselves—with the help and advice of someone familiar with the technology of videotape recording. But they control the program; they decide who and what to film; they add commentary; they do the editing. And they invite all the viewers interested to come to a subsequent meeting to discuss possible actions.

Then the meeting is taped, and highlights from it are shown on the community TV (or the meeting could be televised live). People who couldn't make it to the meeting are kept informed. Subsequent actions by the ground are taped and shown. Dissenters are given their chance for broadcast time. A public issue is debated in public by the public, and decisions taken by public bodies are taken before a well-informed public.

PLUGGING IN THE PEOPLE

Community television can ensure the right to be informed and the right to inform. Communication becomes a two-way street, and feedback is built into the media. And television becomes a tool for democracy.

BROADCAST OR CABLE?

Broadcast TV has the advantage of being in every home, today, but it also has the weighty disadvantage of being tied into network demands and commercial imperatives. Between the two, the possibility of free, open-ended, uncensored community television is damn remote.

Cable, on the other hand, has the inestimable advantage of being undeveloped. Alternatives are still possible. Cable companies, of course, are owned by private enterprise. Nonetheless, in Canada we are lucky to have the Canadian Radio-Television Commission, whose concern for Canadian content places a new onus on cable owners and broadcast owners to present Canadian television.

Cable companies also have anywhere between 8 and 24 channels available, which means that devoting one channel to community programming would not detract from the strong "priority" channels, such as U.S. networks, educational TV, or total-sponsor channels (such as a channel leased by Eatons or the A&P).

A QUESTION OF CONTROL

But who is going to control the community programming? Are cable operators to improvise a running series of Bingo games (Canadian content)? Are they to get free programs from the local church group or university media course? Or will they fulfill the role of providing a channel for community discussion and involvement? How can this be done?

A BRIEF BY RICHARD NIELSEN AND PAT FERNS

Richard Nielsen and Pat Ferns, of the CBC, presented a brief to the CRTC called *Community Television: a realistic proposal*. It is a document of great interest, and I think the best thing I can do is to print extracts from it here:

At present probably no city in the world, certainly no city on this continent, has access to a genuine community television service. TV broadcasting up to now has meant either commercial broadcasting, state broadcasting or educational broadcasting, and none of these has chosen the city or community as a basis of operation.

A community television service must be in some way responsible to the community. It must not become a vested commercial interest of any one group. It must not be a committee-ridden. Such a service must be able to attract a substantial share of the audience, and some system must be found to make available to it substantial amounts of money.

It is naive to argue that amateurism in community television is an enduring virtue. Community participation is a two-way process involving the activists who appear before the camera and the viewers who are witnessing the events on the screen. Hopefully, the latter group will become more actively involved with their community; but whatever happens, it must be recognized that the audience is an important element in community television.

From these objectives it is obvious that a community television service must not be owned and operated by the cable companies in their own commercial interest. It must not be "sold" to any commercial interest other than the cable company. It must not be "managed" by a citizens' committee but by a production company with an interest in the effectiveness of its programming and the efficiency of the operations.

STRUCTURE

There are six elements in the structure that we propose for a community television channel within the cable network. These six bodies are the CRTC, the Cable Companies, the Charter Board, the Production Company, the News Service and Community Groups.

THE CRTC

As the ultimate authority, the CRTC must approve the charter of this community television venture . . . and judge the performance of the Charter Board in its administration of the charter.

THE CABLE COMPANIES

The Cable Companies provide the necessary channel for this community television service, and they must purchase this material from the Charter Board. An instruction from the CRTC to all companies to raise tolls by 60 cents per month to pay for this non-profit-making, non-commercial service would be a realistic beginning . . .

In addition, the Cable Companies should make some commitment with regard to the provision of studio facilities, remote equipment, etc. . . .

THE CHARTER BOARD

The Charter Board would be a large committee representing community interests and responsible for ensuring that the terms of the charter are fulfilled. Representatives of the Cable Companies, the Production Company and the News Service should be on this committee, although the major representation would be of interested groups from the community, e.g. members of the business community and labor, citizens' groups, religious groups, political parties, schools, sporting associations; in fact, as representative a cross section of the community as possible.

The importance of the Charter Board is paramount: it represents the community, who are both the audience and the participants. The Charter Board will appoint the company to provide the production and coordinating services necessary in programming, and the agent to provide the news service . . . As the protector of the charter, the Charter Board is a non-profit, non-commercial body; indeed, it is the embodiment of the aspirations and ideals of this community television venture.

THE PRODUCTION COMPANY

The Production Company is responsible for coordinating community events to be cablecast, for ensuring that individuals and groups within the community have reasonable and

easy access to the medium, and for the overall production of the programming for this channel.

The Production Company would operate on an annual contract, the renewal of which would be the decision of the Charter Board. The Production Company would own little or no capital equipment, and thus there would be no problems concerning the non-renewal of the contract. But the Production Company is the servant of the charter, not the Charter Board, in that it must have independence in fulfilling its obligations to the charter.

Community television must have the freedom to experiment and to give expression to the diversity of opinion within the community, without every decision being subject to bureaucratic interference.

THE NEWS SERVICE

The News Service is crucial to the success of the operation. It is only part of the programming, but an important part, for the duty of community television is to inform. The provision of this information will inevitably lead to a community response to what is happening. Reporting encourages participation, not only in the community, but also in community television, for it is hoped that the channel will become the arena where community business is conducted. Furthermore, the News Service will be central to the building of an audience, which is the other side of the community involvement coin.

The fullest coverage of community events has been in print, and so it would seem logical to attempt to involve one of the daily newspapers in the city in the provision of news material for community television.

(Nielsen and Ferns elaborate further on the News Service. I'm not sure that this might not perpetuate the unfortunate aspects of typical reporting, for I think a new approach to journalism has to be developed concurrently with the new approach to television. I would therefore see a closer relationship between news and programming than they envision.) (DTH)

COMMUNITY GROUPS

The strength of the structure we are proposing is that the community, represented by the Charter Board, is central to the shaping of its television channel, and Community Groups will have major representation on the Charter Board.

PROGRAMMING

The format that we propose is for the programming of news and actuality material between the hours of 7 p.m. and midnight, seven nights per week. This channel would not be programmed at all like existing television stations, and much of its appeal would be its uniqueness. Instead of program periods divided into thirty-minute and one-hour segments, which exist presently only to accommodate the demands of a television network system and are, in reality, an invitation to viewers to turn off or to turn to another channel, we suggest continuous programming—as with local radio stations.

A number of programming suggestions follow, too lengthy to print here. (DTH)

CONCLUSIONS

In this brief, we have put forward a proposal for community television that contains equal measures of idealism and realism. The philosophy that we espouse embodies the ideals to which Canadian broadcasting, in theory at least, was originally committed by Parliament on behalf of the Canadian people. And the structure permits freedom while ensuring responsibility . . .

Our best hope is to contribute to the improvement of the quality and conduct of public life in our community and in our country through a better and more responsible use of television.

PEOPLE CAN DO THEIR OWN SHOWS

I think Nielsen and Ferns place a different emphasis on the role of professional television and news people than will be necessary if people are taught to use TV themselves. Obviously, programs should not be sloppy or boring. But the experience we have had with "amateurs" using half-inch VTR has proved that lively programs can be produced easily and well, when people have something to say. And a recent experience in Thunder Bay, where a citizens' group, Town Talk, produced a series of half-hour shows on the local broadcast TV, has shown that the audience in the community takes a lively interest in local issues presented on TV. The program included phone-in comments from the audience during the broadcast (sometimes as many as fifty were received); very often the same topic continued spontaneously on phone-in radio the next day; and at least one organization was formed through interest generated by the program.

Community television should really try to create a new style of TV—get out of the rut of self-styled "objective" journalism, have a staff prepared to teach and support citizen groups in making their own programs, and spend time seeking out participation by groups still too timid to try it. Not quite a community-organizer role, but as close to that as to the classic TV role.

Time should also be scheduled for "practice sessions" with inexperienced groups, so they can see themselves on immediate playback, can learn and grow from that experience, and can also learn which approaches to their subject have most impact. They will lose their nervousness, gain confidence, and become better judges of what they are doing.

Half-inch VTR can easily be transferred to one-inch for cablecast, and the lightness and portability of the half-inch will mean real possibilities for supple and imaginative programs, for relatively little money.

The need for a strong core of professional staff will always be a real one, however, as many citizens willing to participate in programs will not have the time or the desire to produce them themselves. But the attitudes of professionals will have to be those of "facilitators of communication" rather than those of "experts and controllers of communications"; they will have to develop talents as teachers and animators.

THE NEXT TECHNOLOGICAL STEP

If the members of a community learn to use the tools presently available for community dialogue and debate, they will become prepared to use to the maximum the facilities that will be available in the near future, with "wired cities" providing television and film "banks" computerized for easy access. There will perhaps be more of a chance to use that technological breakthrough for useful human ends.

THERE WILL BE A BATTLE

The foregoing theory of communications has not yet been put into practice, and it will not be easy to do. It disturbs the status quo; it risks controversy; it could generate a lot of changes. The owners of the facilities are very jealous of the prerogatives of property-owners, and the impact could be so great on the established media that they too may feel very threatened. Local governments may also feel nervous about all this free debate of public issues. Advertisers may dislike the active, questioning mood of the public. There will be a lot of talk, mostly vague and self-righteous, about "responsibility". It will take some alert, determined, convinced and committed people to make it come true.

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VIDEO in EL BARRIO and the CLASSROOM

by Elliot Glass

A few students chuckle, a few frown, but all look attentively at the monitor which flashes the Spanish lesson of the day, "La basura en el barrio." A lesson on Garbage in the barrio! "Outrageous," shout the paradigm and verb specialists who would rather see a "grammatically well rounded lesson," say "Juan en la universidad de Madrid" than a natural dialogue between two angry residents of el barrio. The fact is, however, that the unnatural "well rounded grammar lesson" is rarely if ever interesting or relevant and is most often not at all "well rounded." Verbs, nouns and adjectives, in various set patterns and combinations, put the student into a verbal straight-jacket so that he is only able to respond to a programmed set of questions.

I remember that when I taught English and German in Tokyo, the Japanese, diligent and intelligent as they are, were unable to comprehend and communicate the simplest ideas, despite the fact that they had studied English for thirteen years. Why? They had learned very contrived conversations, neatly packaged information which corresponded to specific situations. Any deviation from the input patterns would confuse and confound rather than extend the grammatical concept. If you asked, "Do you have the time?", and if they had learned to respond to "What time is it?", you would receive a polite Japanese smile and "Sorry, I don't understand."

The examples are far too numerous and every language teacher is all too familiar with the shortcomings of the pattern drills and the concocted stories and dialogues. TO THE STREETS MOLDY PROFESSORS! TO THE STREETS WITH YOUR 1/2" PORTABLES! GO TO EL BARRIO AND TALK TO THE PEOPLE. It is there and not in books that the language lives. By video taping natural situations, you not only inform the students of the attitudes, values and problems of the Spanish speaking community in New York but also expose them to the dialect of over a million Puerto Ricans, Cubans and Latin Americans. We are in New York not Madrid. For those who still believe in a dialect caste system, I advise a rereading of *La pronunciación española* by the renowned Spanish Philologist and linguist Tomás Navarro Tomás. There are no superior dialects. That is not to say that we should teach "Spinglish" or any of the dialects spoken in New York, but simply train the student's ear to be able to understand what is said in the streets of the city.

The video process (class → barrio → class) provides more than just exposure. With each new tape the paranoia of the middle class students lessens and finally disappears when the students themselves go to el barrio to make tapes for their class. When the latter happens, the University is supplied with an invaluable link with the Spanish speaking community. As a result of this communications flow between el barrio and the campus, tensions can be reduced and misunderstanding averted. It is probable that Spanish speaking community action groups will soon set up video theatres to disseminate information to their constituency and their software products can supply Spanish classes and, in fact, the entire academic community. I say the entire academic community because I'm sure students will also be setting up 1/2" video theatres—perhaps through Student Union funding—which would serve not only the local University but also the National University Community.

While the Video theatres—campus and community—are not yet a reality, video tapes of el barrio produced by professors and students alike are being used at Queensborough Community College and will soon be used at Columbia and C.C.N.Y. ALL MEDIA TO THE PEOPLE.

OLEAN, NY

... Cable systems are also being used to improve the efficiency of police work. In Olean, N.Y., the cable operator recently installed a monitoring system for the police department. Through a series of strategically placed cameras, 75 per cent of the city's downtown area can be kept in view by a single police officer at headquarters. In addition to serving as a crime prevention device, the hookup makes it possible to oversee traffic conditions, and to respond quickly to an accident or to unusual congestion. The cost to the city is about \$6,500 a year, less than the salary of a single patrolman. (*Nation*, 5/18/70, Smith)

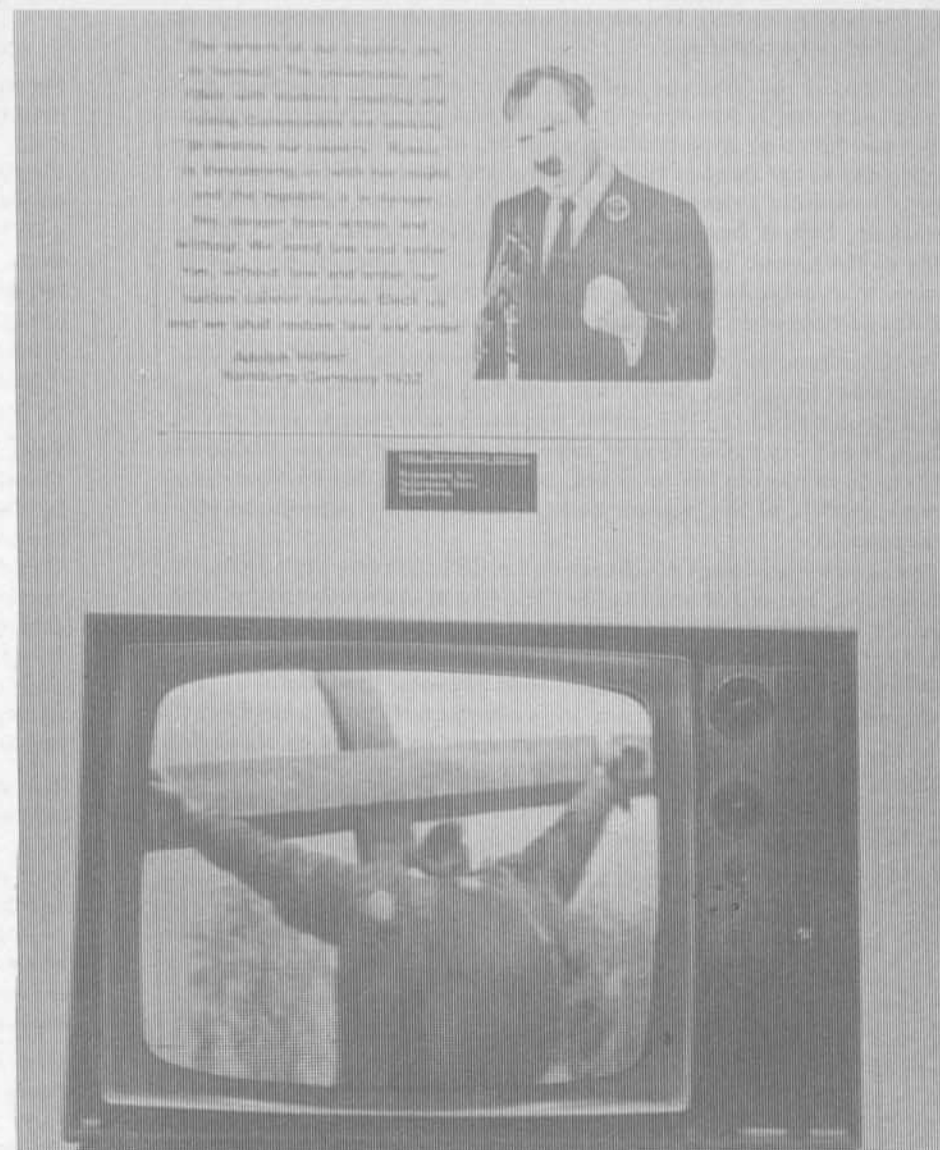
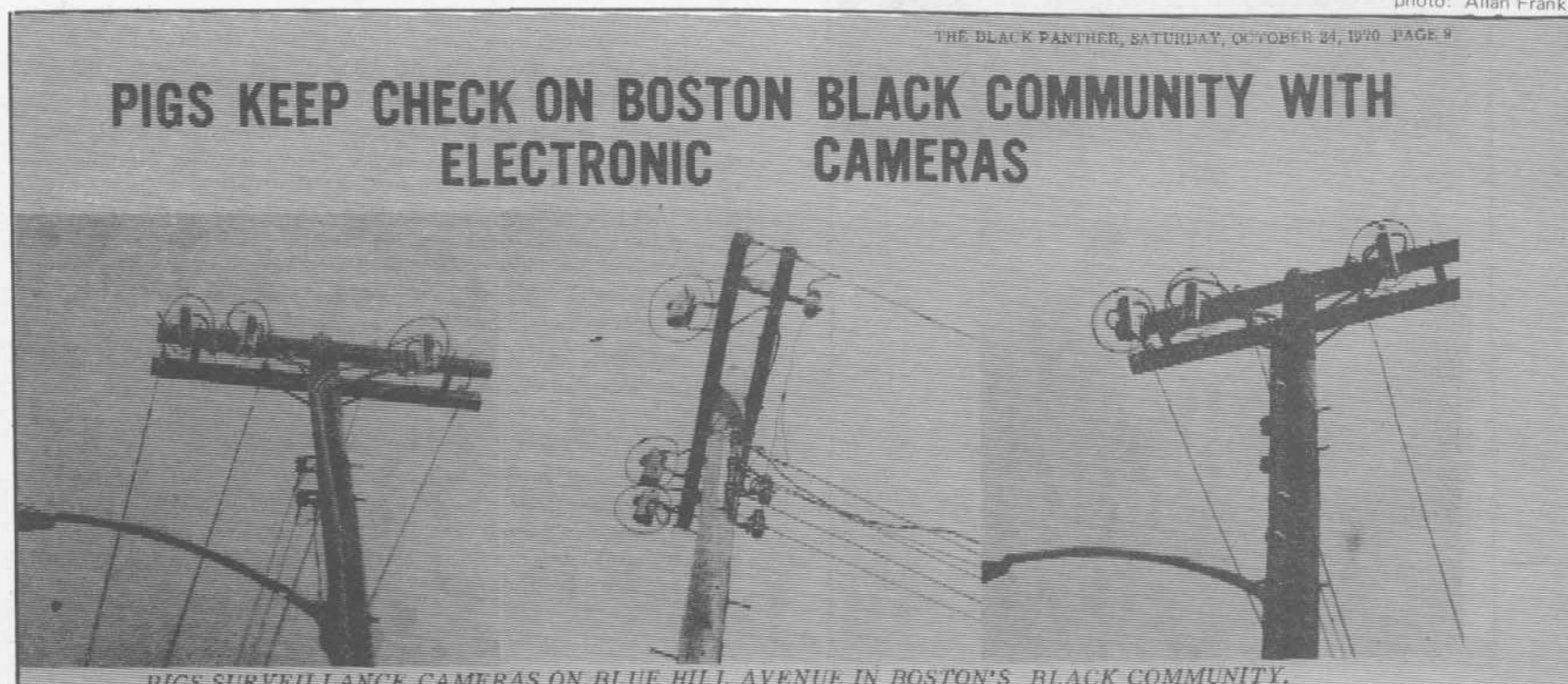


photo: Allan Frank



PIGS KEEP CHECK ON BOSTON BLACK COMMUNITY WITH ELECTRONIC CAMERAS

PIGS SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS ON BLUE HILL AVENUE IN BOSTON'S BLACK COMMUNITY.