



## 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.



people to participate rather than spectate in determining their own present and future.

Once upon a time the Town Hall was the place where all citizens could participate in their own affairs. With the growth of population in urban areas we have to move the Town Hall *into* people's homes. Community channels can be the way.

#### Summary of Findings

1) The use of ½" VTR with industrial sync for cablecasting is feasible, and the technology is improving almost daily.

2) Truly portable equipment (½") is essential if programming is to escape from the studio to allow people to participate on their home ground. Regulations that would specify the use of 2" VTR only for cablecasting would kill community programming.

3) It is quite possible for "beginners" to produce adequate material after a very short period of practice. The finished product will not have a high technical gloss but this is not of prime importance if the *raison d'être* is "people-participation".

4) Local programmes have proved popular wherever they have been produced, but this novelty could wear off if people are only "programmed-at", and not programmed-with.

5) The present C.R.T.C. guidelines state that a community channel should be provided but there is an inevitable confusion between "community programming" and "local programming".

**Community Programming**—to us, means that EVERYONE has the privilege of using the local channel. It is not a favour to be granted by the Owner. Community programming means citizen participation—guaranteed by a truly representative body of all social strata that excludes neither the poor nor the police. It MUST mean FEEDBACK and two-way communication. Perhaps it should be called Community Service.

In practice LOCAL PROGRAMMING means coverage of local events by the cable company. The

company decides what goes on the air—and, therefore, what does *not* go on. Some companies are owned locally and open discussion of local community affairs is often avoided because of conflict of interests. Other companies are operated for absentee owners who provide a minimum amount of locally originated programming and *only because this has been suggested by C.R.T.C.* If they own a chain of stations, costs are minimized by bicycling prints or tapes, around their system. Therefore, a given community channel might only get as little as one hour of local material a week—and that hour would have been produced *because* it would appeal to *all* stations.

6) The major part of programming MUST originate in the community. It cannot be provided by outsiders. It is doubtful whether it is sensible for the cable company to be the sole authority which should control all community programming decisions.

7) Feedback should be strongly encouraged as an essential part of community programming—whether this is in the form of wired locations with cameras installed, or videophones, or phone-in audience reactions or open-ended audience participation shows. For example, in Fredericton, a community hall (in a section of the town not yet "cabled") could be wired to become a studio for \$5,000.

8) Minority groups should be encouraged to produce their own programmes for a community channel. This could be done by the provision of federal or provincial grants to help them with equipment and general production costs.

9) Legal liability for a given programme *has* to be transferred from the cable company to the programme originator—not only to get the operator "off the hook", but to ensure "responsible" programming.

10) To ensure that all segments of a community are given the Right to Access—local coordinating bodies have to be created that will not be dominated by political or commercial vested interests. It is pos-

sible that some form of rotating Charter Board as proposed in Thunder Bay could be the answer. This Board would also guard against the abuses of the right to programme by operating as a Review Board rather than a Programming Body.

11) A production nucleus is essential to guarantee production continuity, "adequate" technical standards, and to initiate programmes. In the case of small systems—this could consist of one person.

12) Some way has to be found to finance production. Although the costs can be very low some groups will not be able to afford even these. Three alternatives for financing were suggested by one cable company manager:

1) Increase the subscription rate with the proviso that a determined percentage of the subscription be used for community programmes.

2) Allow "institutional" advertising.

3) Let the station be partly exempt from provincial tax.

We feel that the introduction of advertising on the community channels will inevitably lead to a ratings system—to the detriment of the specialized programming which is one of the community channel's greatest assets.

C.R.T.C. in its recent publication *Cable Television in Canada* suggests \$20,000 as a minimum per annum figure for a simple studio operation. Given this, it should be possible to work out a scale where a system of X number of subscribers (5,000 has been suggested by F.C.C.) *must* provide this basic studio facility and then as the number of subscribers increases so the cable Company must put a proportionate additional amount of money into community programming. However, even below the 5,000 figure we feel that *all* cable stations must provide *some* facilities for local origination even if it is a ½" camera plunged into the head end and a broom closet as a studio.

Throughout the cable flurry I have been haunted by one question. The aggressive marketing of cable and the importance given it by government are out of proportion to its apparent economic or propaganda value. Why are the authorities so interested in installing a coaxial cable into every home in America? Interested enough to donate a channel for community use. Is the value of cable (for government) to provide a palliative, a letters-to-the-editor format designed to absorb the aggressions of disgruntled groups? Does the government think that the hostility-vitiating capacity of community access will pay off in reduced police expenditures? Or, is cable access a loss leader, the free gift that seduces people into the supermarket?

The coaxial cable itself will soon be obsolete for telecast purposes. Lasers and communications satellites offer greater freedom at less expense than services now available by cable. In other words, not only is someone pushing cable awfully hard for apparently meager returns, but the meager returns themselves will cease in a matter of years.

It is becoming apparent that the hidden interest of promoters, is in the cable, and not in the TV. They don't care what kind of *terminal* people want—flowers, TV, or ticker tape, just so long as they can install the coaxial cable. And in order to lay down that cable, they are going to offer every inducement in the book. The cable can handle any kind of data ranging from computer print-outs and burglar alarms to videophone and telephone communications (and not surprisingly, Bell Telephone is fighting desperately to keep its grip on the 2-way tele-communications field.)

In the light of this type of analysis, the economic value of cable becomes more obvious. Most people are buying cable in order to have more feature films to select from, but the renegades need a different inducement to install their cable. So, community cable becomes the free gift and everyone packs into

the information supermarket.

We are running out of room for consumer goods. Products have to be recycled and the great production boom is tapering off. But the geniuses are ahead of us again. Just when the consumer society was getting glutted, they have discovered a range of products that take up no room and destroy no wildlife. They are peddling software. Door to door they come with the innocuous cable, leaving behind a direct line to a cornucopia of consumer software.

The hucksters of tomorrow will make it so easy to purchase software that the consumer society will never have to leave its hearth, home, and coax terminal. Banking, shopping, reading material, films, news and business, will all be pipelined to your home via the handy set of copper wires. The society that consumes together stays together.

And as always, every communications device finds military and police applications. If telephone tapping is a fear, imagine the surveillance made possible by coaxial cable. Even without tapping, the telephone company now has a complete record of every long distance phone call you have ever made from your home. When virtually *all* information an individual receives is processed through a cable, privacy will become a nostalgic memory. By pushing a retrieval button, controllers will know what movies you have selected to see, what books and magazines were printed out for you, at what part of the news you lost attention, who you spoke to and what your facial expression revealed about your attitudes...

Caveat Emptor.

Tom Paskal

**But beyond the technological supermarket, there remains an even more profound flaw in the cable vision: and that is, whether we want to replace Johnny Carson with Jerry Rubin, whether we want to develop a brighter, more intelligent, ever more seductive TV, even if it has the purest socialist heart. True, poor people's housing developments don't usually have their own auditoriums, and hence a cable TV town meeting would offer some organizing potential. But why not just build a meeting hall, instead of using twice the resources to construct a TV system?**

**Television watching is, to begin with, a passive activity. That's why you ought to keep your eye on it. If it is true that passivity, alienation, and a sense of powerlessness are among the most dangerous epidemics in our society today, the television set is suspect at the outset regardless of what's programmed on it.**

Ramparts