

The Second Coming of Television ?

Public Access:

In some parts of New York City today a dial twister with cable television could be looking at some pretty unusual programs. Often unannounced and without titles, these programs pop onto the screen to run for half an hour or an hour, sometimes breaking up into stripes, occasionally vanishing into snow, leaving a viewer with only the sound to help unravel the mystery of what the program is and who is doing it. In a time when we can almost take for granted a first-class television picture, it is not to be expected that anybody would want to watch a channel whose picture quality consistently duplicates that of the earliest days of television. But for some people these programs on the new Public Access cable channels in Manhattan are charged with an excitement unequalled by anything television has ever done, their very presence a crazy miracle, a chance to change the course of the nation's most promising and least fulfilled mass communications medium.

Strictly speaking, the Public Access channels could be defined as those set aside for direct use by the public, with no control over program content being exercised by an intermediary, such as the cable operator, other than that necessarily imposed by libel and profanity laws. Cable time is made available to groups or individuals, free of charge, on a first-come-first-serve basis, providing us with what may well be our first experience of an electronic mass medium through which people may talk to other people unmanipulated by media professionals.

Instead of learning about a rent strike in full swing on New York's West Side as a 60-second slice of picketing accompanied by a smooth commentary by an announcer (whose diction can't be faulted, but who tells you how many people were killed in a local fire in the same tone he tells you the football score), you find yourself looking at a tape of a building meeting made in the apartment of somebody who is trying to organize a rent strike. Such a presentation on the Public Access channel of a budding rent strike cost fifteen dollars for thirty minutes of (re-usable) half-inch videotape. The tape communicated something about the lives of the people in the room, and one could get a pretty good sense of why they were desperate to make changes. The tape was made, NOT at the point in the strike which would be most attention-getting, most newsworthy—namely, the point of heated confrontation, of people out of their minds with rage and despair. It was presented pre-event, when people were trying to get something done, because that's when the people who cared most about it thought it should be presented. Since they could afford the \$15. it cost to produce it, they could decide when it should be produced.

This brings up an important difference between Public Access and commercial television. When rent strikes are presented by commercial television they ARE presented as "news", not information. When one sets the two side-by-side, one realizes that the meaning of real events and real experiences must be altered to be saleable to ourselves, the viewing public as "news". As a result of this placing of the events of our lives on the market, our own perceptions as a people have been altered and our need to know has been exploited, however unintentionally. We are wooed by competing news shows, but neither we nor, probably, the people who produce the shows, realize that the "news" we are sending out and receiving has little meaning for us because it has little to do with the events reported or with our own experience. Public Access can give us experience of what the communication of the events of our lives can be when it operates free of the necessities of the news-marketing format.

Another aspect of news-marketing was succinctly phrased by Edward R. Murrow when he said, "Good news is no news." Some of the tapes shown on Manhattan's Public Access channels have documented people's pleasures and the beauty they find: a group of people getting together to make music, just for the fun of it; an Armenian grocer who clearly enjoys the Greek and Armenian specialties he sells; a half-hour tape of a running brook, because it is beautiful. Commercial television does much to reinforce our awareness of threats to our well-being, of reasons to despair; it very rarely validates or intensifies our awareness of the joy in being living creatures. Public Access will undoubtedly show us a different side to life, providing an opportunity for many people to have input into the collective bank of information that we form with mass media, rather than leaving it up to a few networks to form our collective awareness.