

The Public Access cable channels came into existence as a result of several communications "events": the growth of cable television; the separate but parallel growth of a semi-communications, semi-artistic, field around the inexpensive and portable form of television taping, half-inch video; the growth of a recognition, among many of those involved with mass communications, that the broadcast television industry has, for the most part, become locked into a system of economics and of thinking which can never permit the realization of its great promise.

Cable television itself did not grow up in answer to a need for more and better programming, rather in answer to the need for a better picture of the same programming in bad reception areas. Entrepreneurs saw money in the system, and they developed CATV, as it is often called (for Community Antenna Television), elaborating it to include services and programming not offered by broadcast television.

People receiving their television over-the-wire instead of over-the-air pay about six dollars a month for the service and expect to receive in return a pretty good picture plus perhaps some local sporting events and local news. What they do NOT expect, yet what is predicted from many communications quarters for the cable, is a communications revolution of such major proportions that it could change all of our lives. The unique construction of the coaxial cable (the cable is not just a sheathed wire—there is an electromagnetic relationship between the wire and its sheath which prevents radiation of current and allows the cable's great capacity) permits it to carry information of unprecedented amounts and variety with considerable flexibility. A broadband cable network (BCN) can allow us to order and receive in print-out form books, magazines and newspapers, information from data banks and computers. It would be possible to order from a store, to be billed, and to have the amount deducted automatically from our bank balance. (For the definitive handbook on CATV, see Ralph Lee Smith's article, "The Wired Nation", which comprises the May 18, 1970 issue of *The Nation*; also *Scientific American's* November 1971 issue has a somewhat sketchy technical run-down.)

From an historical perspective, this is a strange period for communications; given the nature of our country, there seems little question that the cable WILL cause profound changes in our lives, yet those of us who work with it today are dealing with quite a prosaic medium. It is hard to keep remembering that the thing is going to grow beyond recognition. Yet it is important to remember it, because we are not faced with the question of WHETHER cable should be used for change; cable IS change, and we may still have a chance to determine WHAT change—humane or inhumane, life-fulfilling or life-denying. Public Access has an important role to play in these determinations.

Since the Manhattan Public Access channels are the first ones operative in the country, they are quite naturally regarded as a test of whether or not Public Access channels are needed and whether they can work. The difficulty with using them as a test, however, is that the concept of regular people being able to appear on television in an everyday way, and talk to other people who make up a viewing audience, is so alien to us in this land of experts that Public Access is in the difficult position of having to succeed in order to succeed. Public Access must succeed in making itself known to potential viewers and users before it can be successful; and it must have a viewing constituency to amount to real Access. Talking to yourself is hardly access, even if you ARE doing it over a television channel.

Public Access has a long way to go before it can begin to have impact. In actual fact, New York's Borough of Manhattan has the only formally operative Public Access channels in the country. If Public Access is to become a reality, people in towns and cities across the country which are now in the process of issuing franchises to cable operators need to know that the franchise agreements can include a requirement for free Public Access channels. Although the Federal Communications Commission's February 12, 1972 rule-making on cable television (see bibliography) includes a requirement that there be one Public Access channel in each CATV system within the top one hundred television markets, the requirement does less than it might have to promote Public Access television. For one thing, it requires only one Public Access channel, whereas the Manhattan franchise, which up until the rule-making had been regarded as a possible Public Access standard for the FCC, requires two. In addition,

John Sanfratello, Sterling Manhattan CATV: "I think that our people (the cable companies) are going to have to come to the realization that the public channels are an obligation, and that the same care in the broadcast of the public channels should be taken as is taken with our commercial channels... I think that any CATV operation that is put into a situation where they may not have voluntarily said that they're going to have the public take an active part is going to be a little untidy about the type of signal that they're putting out on the public channel... That's only because it is a profit-making organization, and they want to concentrate on making enough money to keep the operation going and to get more cable out, which is where the biggest expense is right now... If I were a foundation, I would give money to people who are producing programming. I would stop giving money to organizations who are supposed to make information on the public channels available; I think that was started because it was felt that the people who would get involved from the CATV companies would try to cut out as much (of the Public Access programming) as possible. I don't think that has happened. I think the CATV companies have upheld their obligation - they're doing a pretty damned good job with the Public Access channels. They could have fought it very, very hard...."

