

## 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.

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...."





*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 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.

Much is a matter of commitment. Recently, Sanfratello came up with a modification which he says makes even the most technically impossible tapes viewable over cable. The part for the modification cost fifty cents.\*

A uniform characteristic of all of the groups and individuals doing half-inch programming for the public channels has been commitment. With few exceptions, people doing Public Access programming receive little or no pay. Most of the groups have had philanthropic support. Open Channel, organized by Thea Sklover to provide taping facilities and personnel to groups wishing to put programming onto the public channels, got started with a \$19,000 grant from the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation and a \$15,000 grant from the Stern Fund. Open Channel has taped with more than eighty requesting groups and organizations, and has more than that waiting. They have also done some of the most ambitious public channel programming, including a two-and-one-half hour "special", a music service from a black church in Harlem. Alternate Media Center, at New York University's School of the Arts, also received support from the Markle Foundation, with a grant of \$275,000 to be spread over three years for the purpose of promoting community and non-professional use of the cable via half-inch video. The Center is run by a woman named Red Burns, who, with students and paid professionals, has been helping groups around the country as well as in New York to create their own capability to produce half-inch video programming. In general the Center contributes the technical know-how and cable experience, and the groups find their own funding for equipment, tape and other expenses. The Center is in the process of organizing a Public Access video center for Reading, Pennsylvania, the first one to be funded by a cable company (Berks TV Company, a subsidiary of American Television and Communications, the nation's third largest CATV company in number of subscribers). The Center will train resource people for one year, then leave it to the people of the community to run.

Two of the best series of programs on the public channels received funding from the Fund for the City of New York, through its Center for the Analysis of Public Issues. One is a series for and about old people, called "The Elders; programming includes an exercise class taped at an old people's center, a nutrition discussion group, and a discussion of an old people's rights movement with Bella Abzug. The series was produced by David Othmer and taped by students from the Alternate Media Center. As with the programming of other special interest groups, these tapes have had an audience, and the response has been strongly enthusiastic. The other series was done for the signing deaf, those who use sign language, produced by the Deafness Research and Training Institute, a federally funded rehabilitation center affiliated with New York University. The series includes a cooking class, some panel discussions on problems of the deaf, and an excellent tape on how to use half-inch videotape equipment, made with Frank Cavestani at Space Videoarts, which has received support from the Samuel Rubin Foundation.

Considerable programming, some of the most varied and creative, has been done by people in the so-called "underground" video groups in New York: Global Village, Peoples Video Theater, Raindance, Space Videoarts, Videofreex. Their commitment to and development of half-inch videotape as an alternative to our communications system pre-dates Public Access by several years and has been of the greatest significance to its development. All of these groups have received funding from the New York State Council on the Arts, but, since the non-commercial use of half-inch video is for the most part also non-remunerative, most of the people involved live and work on a shoestring. Although they have sought foundation support, few of the groups have received it, despite the fact that their accumulated body of work is impressive. One reason why they have not received foundation support may be that their commitment to alternatives includes their own life-styles, and this may be misleading to foundation people.

One very encouraging aspect to the Public Access financial picture is that much has been accomplished on relatively little. But it is clear that, if Public Access is to have a chance to be experienced by our communities, in order to be valid even as an experiment, it will have to have a substantial commitment of money and people, probably from philanthropic, commercial and government sources.

\* The part was a capacitor, inserted into the Automatic Gain Control to subdue its tendency to overreact to signals from half-inch tape (including a 60-cycle hum which is often present).

*Red Burns, Alternate Media: "One of our principal concerns is the whole problem of deconditioning people from the assumption that they have no access to media, and that they cannot deal with it... What we've come around to believing and understanding is that it's terribly necessary for this video equipment to be available on a community basis. (But) we don't have enough money, and I don't think any foundation would have enough money, to give everybody video equipment. So we don't go around turning everybody on to video, saying, 'Hey, isn't that nice!', and then leaving... We have evolved a way of working in which we attempt to set up projects which can be self-generating. We will go in with resources to begin with and any kind of expertise and advise that we have learned and then it has to be taken over by the community... Our concept is based on the fact that there are resources available in the communities, but that the resources will not be made available until the communities get into the idea of the use of the equipment... So initially we're trying to find ways to provide money, whether it's the cable companies who are into the possibility of making a contribution, or community planning boards, community colleges, or neighborhood groups....."*



I have mentioned in this article some of the areas in Public Access which need work. Obviously, most of these areas will require funding, sometimes not very much, to get the job done. In addition, the following are only some of the other ways in which Public Access might be assisted:

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As we go to press, Sterling-Manhattan Cable announces the formation of a free access studio for production of video tapes. Portable video recording equipment as well as editing facilities will be available on a first come, first serve basis. Its location will be announced in the near future. Hopefully, this example will set a precedent for other cable stations around the country.

1. Video access centers staffed with people to teach non-professional, non-commercial groups and individuals who wish to do their own Public Access videotaping how to use portable half-inch equipment. The center would need to be equipped with half-inch cameras and recording decks (total cost of each set-up: about \$1300 with discount), videotape, and a part-time repair person to keep the equipment up to cable-use standard. Expenditures for testing and repair equipment and rent would also be necessary.
2. Literature on how to use half-inch video equipment, simply written and illustrated, so that it would be useful to people with a wide range of educational backgrounds, with specific instructions for cable-use.
3. A Spanish - English version of the same.
4. A "spot" advertisement on commercial television, informing people that Public Access exists for their use and viewing, and how they can use it. Also bus and subway posters in cities, bus-stop and train-station posters in the country, with the same information. Newspaper display ads carrying use and viewing information.
5. A research project, to be updated at intervals, on techniques for improving the use of half-inch over the cable. The project should include a survey of all cable companies using half-inch on their own originating stations, and it should set up a system for the ongoing exchange of such information. There should be an inexpensively printed handbook of the research results, sent out to everyone involved with Public Access.
6. Franchise acquisition. If a number of foundations could pool their resources to acquire a franchise, then set about to establish a model cable system with fully developed Public Access facilities, that system could greatly influence the development of CATV as well as Public Access.

These suggestions just scratch the surface of the ways in which funding could be creatively integrated into the Public Access situation.

An involvement with Public Access really is an involvement with change. Some foundations have been debating the question of whether or not to directly involve themselves with making changes in our society. But it would seem that the question is not realistic. In reality, life IS change, and a live society is continuously changing. There is no way NOT to participate in the process, hence the question should be: what do we want the meaning of that change to be? Or: who are we who make these changes?

Technology is really nothing—a piece of equipment lying around—until somebody picks it up and uses it. And it is what we choose to do with it, which is to say, WHO we are who use it, which determines the effect of our technology upon us.

Cable technology has within it the possibility to hasten along a day when "big brother" is indeed "watching you", aided by a total system of two-way, individual access cablevision—into our homes, our bank accounts, our business transactions, where every TV set cablecasting the football game in the local bar can be transmitting our conversations and actions as well.

It also has the capacity to let us talk to each other, people who, in an earlier time, might not have been able to understand each other or to care, who might have been too frightened to listen to each other face-to-face.

We have a chance to witness the excitement of our own beings, our own lives, REAL people, not plastic people, with words we really mean coming out of our real mouths.

Do we want it? We can have it. Of all the promises of cable television, it is the most immediately realizable. It is here—but to grow it must have our commitment.

