

Fourth of July Parade in Saugerties cablecast on Public Access Television.



Nicholas Johnson (1970) has commented that communications will be the primary technological determinant of urban life in the next several decades. "Communications will be to the last third of the twentieth century what the automobile has been to the middle third." Such a statement is as foreboding as it is promising. Forecasts of the development of communications media already range from eloquent prose about the tremendous potential of new media (Youngblood, 1970; Shamberg/Raindance 1971) to horrifying suggestions of a future society unprecedented in the degree of control and repression (Gross, 1970). Cable communication in particular has probably as many potentially negative consequences as it has positive ones. Cable technology is so imminently powerful that it deserves immediate assessment with respect both to its effect upon urban institutions and related technology and the effect of the institutions and technologies upon cable itself.

Two Possible Futures

It is obviously difficult, if not hazardous, to attempt to make forecasts about changes in the nature of urbanism brought on by such a rapidly changing area as cable communications. Peter Drucker (1968) has noted that in the future "the unsuspected and apparently insignificant (will) derail the massive and seemingly invincible trends of today." Nevertheless, it is important to engage in an anticipatory delineation of first, second, and third order consequences of various alternative developments. Of the many futures that are possible, I will elaborate on two.

The first alternative is essentially an extrapolation into the next few decades, the events, developments and value systems of the present. This assumes a continuation of current social trends. Thus we will witness a rapid growth of megalopoli possibly developing into

Doxiadis' world of ecumenopolis: a continual global city. We will, in addition, continue to see the flight of upper income groups, together with industry and the economic base, to exclusive suburban areas. Older urban centers will then become massive human sinks with palliatives being perennially applied through quasi-benevolent welfare-state policies. Complex bureaucratic institutions will continue to proliferate, becoming diffused and interwoven throughout all areas of society. Finally, with social disorganization increasing, environmental degradation reaching a new high, and clamor for security and control mounting from all sides, government and its corporate cohorts will look to research organizations and academia for solutions in systematic applications of a new and powerful union of the social, behavioral, and technological sciences.

The second alternative assumes that the forecasts of increasing exponential change are wrong; that we are instead entering into an historical era in which exponential curves begin to flatten into logistic or S-shapes—an era of evolutionary change into a fundamentally different level of societal existence. This future assumes an eventual emergence of a corresponding shift in values, with voluntary reductions in overall consumption levels, a redefinition of individual rights and responsibilities, an acceptance of cultural diversity, a recognition of ecological interdependence, and a critical attitude toward the possibilities and the problems of technology. There will be simultaneous undertakings to create a variety of new patterns of urban habitation, with access to life support systems and services being increasingly seen as a basic human right. Cable communications and its attendant services will be recognized as a medium for the creation of wholly new communities as a tool for exchanging socially useable and useful information.

The scenarios below attempt to expand upon these two alternatives in terms of an overall societal framework.

