cable cop

by Sue Fox and Johnny Videotape

Cable TV is everyone's potential two-edged sword. The problem is how to gain all the benefits from cable's 2-way information flow potential, while insuring responsiveness and responsibility to the community — including economic feedback. The solution: insist on the public's rights at every opportunity, and now, before the rules are changed again. Seems the FCC has developed a chameleon policy regarding its position on cable TV.

For example, recently ATC (American Television Corporation) and Cox, two of the largest cable systems in the country, announced a merger (see chart on page). As with all cable systems, they face the problem of how to get more subscribers. At present, approximately 9 percent of the US is on cable — in areas that are generally signal-starved, offering a lucrative market. But these are pretty well filled. To gain further subscribers they are going to have to offer more to the public than just another TV show off the air. There are several people who want to insure that it isn't going to be merely burglar surveillance systems and the like.

Consequently, San Francisco Attorney Tony Kline and several community groups called for a meeting with representatives from both cable giants to discuss plans for insuring the child born of the union, Cox-American, would have a strong sense of public responsibility. Cox-American was represented by Monroe Rifkin, president of ATC, but no members of Cox's hierarchy showed. Kline had gathered with him members of CRLA, the NAACP, the Committee on Open Media, and Allan Frederiksen (alias Johnny Videotape) from the Santa Cruz Community Service Television Project. This coalition's bargaining position was based partly on the possibility of blocking Cox-American's new license by challenging their violation of the FCC ban on cross-ownership of media in a given market, and lack of public service. Cross-ownership will happen because Cox owns a broadcast TV station in Oakland, California, while ATC owns the nearby Lafayette cable systems. There is also a similar example of cross-ownership among their combined holdings in the Southeast.

Prior to the meeting, professor Phil Jacklin of the Committee on Open Media wrote:

> A cable TV operation is by its nature a local monopoly. A single subscriber never has more than one choice for service. When several local monopolies are controlled and owned by a single large corporation, then the resulting "network" has implications for whole regions of the country and for the nation itself.
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> When there is a natural marketplace of ideas, there is a natural or unplanned access and diversity. But in a monopoly situation, we must "design in" access and diversity. We must design and establish institu-

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