COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS

The Challenge of Cable Television

Cable television is at least thirty years old, yet it is still talked of as a new communications medium. Why? Optimists say because it has yet to realise its multi-channel potential to enrich and diversify television programming. Even better, cable will provide the citizen with a host of interactive information, educational, and transaction services.

Sceptics see cable offering old programming in new packages. They ask: Will only the well-off benefit? Who will control cable systems? Can privacy be protected? Does cable TV damage public service broadcasting? What do we really want cable for?

In many countries cable is on the verge of new growth. Public debate tries to weigh the enthusiasm of the optimists against the scepticism of the critics. Where is the evidence upon which to base policy recommendations? This issue of TRENDS looks at the scope of cable TV research and attempts to summarize some of the main conclusions to date. They may offer ideas for future policy and research. The challenge raised by cable is to devise policies that will best ensure its potential is achieved. The history of cable TV shows how formidable that challenge actually is.

Review Article

I: The Promise of Cable Television

The Wired Nation: Cable TV: The Electronic Communications Highway. Ralph Lee Smith. (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1972).

Ralph Smith's influential *Wired Nation* sums up much of the early 1970s' optimism that cable TV was about to usher in a new era of communications. In the 1950s cable community antenna (CATV) systems had sprung up in rural North America to supplement inadequate over-the-air broadcasting. By the mid-1960s CATV systems were challenging local broadcasters by providing their subscribers with up to twelve channels of programming relayed from local and distant tv stations. A few years later cable operators were ready to wire up the cities with new twenty channel systems.

At this point a host of research studies were commissioned to speculate on how the wiring of America's cities could be used to create a new urban communications environment. People began to hope that some of the most intractable urban problems — alienation; loneliness; lact of community; the sharp divisions between rich and poor, black and white; the educated and the illiterate — might be (at least partially) overcome by the imaginative use of the multiplicity of cable channels.

The *Wired Nation* envisions a wide range of new cable services. Cable TV would offer the viewer a greater variety of programmes. The needs of special groups could be catered for by channels offering specifically tailored programming. Children, the handicapped, old people, religious minorities, ethnic groups and others could have their own channels. Two-way facilities built into new cable systems would make possible interactive services like home shopping and banking, home information services and a variety of opportunities for home education. Local programming and community channels would help reinvigorate the neighbourhood. Local democracy could be strengthened by creating an electronic public forum via the cable. And access channels would provide new avenues for free speech and experimental programming. The "electronic communications highway" would also be the "television of abundance"

Cable's "blue sky" promise was overtaken by economic recession and pay-TV. Optimism was swiftly followed by disillusion. There was talk of the "cable fable". Looking back on the hopes of the early '70s one is conscious that they failed to take adequate notice of the prosaic economic, technological, social and regulatory realities that were shaping cable's development. In surveying the research that has been done since then, it is clear that the technology itself will not change the basic structure of national and local communication. This issue examines the various contexts that have affected cable development under four main headings: i) cable's impact on the broadcasting system; ii) the economics of cable; iii) cable's programming promise and iv) the cable-computer connection.

II: Cable TV in the Broadcasting System

The history of cable TV prompts questions as to the ways in which technological innovations enter existing communication systems. Most research on cable's relation to the overall broadcasting system has focused on the US and Canada and has looked at two major questions. Firstly, how do regulatory authorities attempt to manage communication innovations? Secondly, what is the real impact of cable TV on existing broadcasting systems?

Defending the Broadcasters

LeDuc's classic analysis of Federal Commmunications Commission (FCC) looks in detail at the way a regulatory agency attempted to create a policy for cable TV while adapting to external industry and political pressures. Le Duc shows that the FCC tended to shape its policy in response to the bureaucratic bias in favour of the status quo and the political power of the local broadcasting lobby who feared competition for their audiences. The result was that restrictions on cable growth in defence of established broadcasting interests were justified in terms of protecting the public interest. Yet the public consistently showed that they wanted the increased programming offered by cable.

This defensive attitude to change in the broadcasting market was found by Mosco[1] to be consistent over a range of FCC policy-making. In looking at FCC response to four major innovations (FM radio, UHF TV, CATV and subscription TV (STV) he discovered that in each case FCC decision-makers coped with the complex challenge of the new media by simplifying the issue. They ignored information that did not conform to established thinking.

A more recent article by Le Duc[2] sees the FCC's 1980 removal of nearly all restrictions on importation and use of distant broadcast signals as an example of policy reversal shaped by external pressures. The 1980 decision was possible because the largest broadcasters had become less hostile to cable TV as they bought into cable themselves, and because of intense political pressure in favour of deregulation.

Encouraging New Programming

The Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) also saw cable TV as a threat to the existing broadcasting system. In particular, cable importation of US programmes seemed to challenge broadcasting's role of strengthening a distinctive Canadian cultural identity.

CRTC policy to restrict US programming was hampered by Canadian viewers' demands for more US material. However, because of its policy of encouraging "community channels", which it saw as not directly competitive with broadcasting, it did manage to stimulate Canadian programming expertise. A report for the CRTC in 1979 argues that helping a local Canadian programming industry to develop is a more constructive policy for coping with cable than trying to defend the status quo.[3]

The Impact on Broadcasting

Uncertainty about cable's effect on broadcasting prompted researchers to see if commercial broadcasters' revenues and audiences were seriously threatened by cable. For many years the FCC policy was premised on just such a threat, until in 1979 the results of a two-year economic inquiry concluded that cable affected broadcast profits only marginally.

The effects of cable expansion plus the growth of videocassette recorders (VCRs) on public TV appear to be more serious. Don Agostino's research[4] indicates that public stations in four and five station markets will lose a large percentage of their audience share, while in large markets public TV will suffer from the loss of cultural and public affairs programmes to specialised cable channels.

Measuring Cultural Impact

The US cultural invasion of Canadian TV has stimulated research on the impact of imported US programmes on the attitudes of English-Canadian viewers, though there is little consensus on how far consumption of US programmes weakens Canadian culture. Andre H. Caron and David E. Payne[5] have recently tried to extend this research by looking at consumption of US and Anglophone Canadian media by 814 French-Canadians. However, the authors point out the difficulty of isolating effects of specific media consumption from other factors, such as sociolinguistic background and interpersonal contact with Anglophones.

III: The Economics of the Cable Industry

Researchers have been particularly concerned to examine how economic considerations might influence cable's potential to diversify the range of programming offered to TV viewers.

The economic expansion of cable TV was stimulated when satellite distribution placed pay programming in the reach of virtually every cable system. In a 1980 report, Smith and Gallagher highlighted the initial boost to programming diversity provided by cable's expansion but warned that there were counter pressures, notably cable companies' reluctance to give up valuable channel capacity for relatively unprofitable community and access programming, the dominance by Home Box Office (HBO) of the pay supply market, vertical integration of major pay suppliers and the desire of movie producers for a larger share of pay-TV revenues.

At present most concern is being expressed about tendencies to vertical integration and concentration of ownership.

Vertical Integration

In 1980 the three biggest pay cable programme distributors in the US, HBO, Showtime and The Movie Channel constituted "almost the entire program distribution business" and had "exclusive ownership ties" to multiple system operators (MSO's) that covered "21.5% of all cable subscribers." For Barry Litman and Susanna Eun[6] such vertical integration allied to strong programme distributor networks will lead to an oligopoly market structure for the pay cable industry. To ensure that competition and diversity are encouraged, the federal authorities will have to have a strong anti-trust policy.

Concentration of Ownership

Ownership of cable systems by telephone companies, broadcasters and TV networks and multiple ownership of local cable systems also raise questions about media diversity. A detailed FCC report in November 1981 by Gordon et al,[7] recommends that rules prohibiting ownership of cable by broadcasters and TV networks should be dropped, that no restrictions be placed on MSO's, but that the ban on telephone cable ownership should be retained. These conclusions are based on an expectation of increasing competition to cable from STV, multipoint distribution services (MDS), home video and future direct broadcast satellite (DBS) operations.

A comprehensive look at ownership questions in cable is provided by Christopher Sterling.[8] He points to three structural consequences of present cable industry expansion: i) as the need for capital grows, financial institutions will be increasingly involved in both lending and minority ownership roles; ii) the economics of cable will continue to force MSO concentration and vertical integration; and iii) costs of video programming and intense competition will reduce the number of services and outlets by the late 1980s.

Sterling argues that the increasing trend to concentration is taking place just as Federal regulatory agencies are showing less concern about the subject. There is, therefore, less chance that appropriate policies to safeguard the public interest will be initiated early enough to have a substantial impact on industry structure.

IV: Cable's Programming Promise

Research on the potential of cable to enhance the diversity and quality of television has focused on four main questions: A) Will satellite-distributed cable programming make a significant contribution to television diversity? B) Can cable help create truly local and community TV? C) How can cable channels be best opened up to the widest public access? And D) Is it possible to devise new forms of community and local control of cable systems?

The "Television of Abundance"

Expanding the Choices for Television Viewing. Nick De Martino, John B. Ford and Stuart N. Brotman. (New York: Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, 1981).

The three articles in *Expanding the Choices for Television Viewing* examine the prospects for TV diversity in the light of prevailing economic and regulatory trends. The authors seem clear that the social and cultural enrichment that cable satellite-distributed programming might bring will not come simply by relying on market forces. Greater diversity of programming is hampered by two main problems at least.

First, channel scarcity, as John Ford notes, has not been abolished: 70% of US TV households still receive 12 or fewer channels of cable TV. Second, according to Nick De Martino, the financial incentives point to concentration upon movie and entertainment programming. The two most profitable services, HBO and Showtime, make their money not by "narrow-casting" to special interests but by giving a mass audience uncut, uncensored Movies and light entertainment.

Who Watches and Why?
Audience research is limited. Market research for Showtime indicates that its subscribers are people who use TV as their main entertainment medium, who are blue-collar and who are in two-income households. A sample of 1,500 viewers ranked Broadway and Las Vegas-type shows at the top of their viewing preferences. Public affairs, news, documentaries, and situation comedies were at the bottom of the list.

There has also been some research on cable subscribers' viewing behaviour but the results are limited and inconclusive. A recent study by Sparkers[9] into the impact of multi-channel cable on actual viewing behaviour found that subscribers were not taking full advantage of all the programme choices available. They did not adapt viewing patterns set for broadcast TV.

Can Distinctive Programming Survive?
A hope of real diversity comes from the growth in non-pay programming distributed by satellite. A variety of innovative services is available among the 35 basic and 12 pay cable networks now operating. One can mention Cable News Network (24 hours daily in-depth news coverage), Nickelodeon and Calliope, exclusively children's channels, and Appalachian Community Service Network (ASCN) offering adult education and training.

Unfortunately, it is far from certain that most of the more innovative services will be able to survive in the long run. There is still little hard evidence as to whether such services are economically viable.

Some innovative services might survive if, as Elizabeth Young[10] says, that the public service market could become a big customer. The key problem is finding sufficient funding to set up new projects. In late 1980s, for example, the American Educational TV Network (AETV) began as an adult education service; in early 1982 it had to suspend operations until it could re-finance its operation.

Cable TV: Local Service Medium

Community Media? Local Radio and Television and Audio-Visual Experiments in Europe. Paul Beaud. (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1980).

In the mid-1970s experimental projects took place in Britain, France, Belgium, Switzerland and the Netherlands, which sought ways of making community cable TV a true local alternative to national broadcasting.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from the community cable experiments because they lasted only a short time (generally two to three years) and because very little research was done on them. Beaud does, however, claim that the projects showed a need for local TV and that it could be viable. The possibility of creating truly alternative community TV stations remains in doubt.

The Lure of Professionalism
One problem community cable has to come to terms with is that of professionalism. This is exemplified by two significant and contrasting Belgian projects, Canal Plus at Liege and No Tele at Tournai.

As Beaud notes, No Tele has a rather restrictive attitude to active participation by the community in programme production. One reason is probably the desire to present high-quality programmes after the style of broadcast TV. Canal Plus, by contrast, gives many more people in less established groups more chances to borrow video equipment and make their own programmes for cable re-transmission. Yet only by improving the technical quality of the local TV programmes is it possible to appeal to audiences used to national TV standards.

Cable as a Neutral Resource

The longest lasting and best known of the five British local cable experiments was Swindon Viewpoint. It attempted to be a distinctive community medium by seeing itself as a "neutral resource" to be used as a "local communications facility". In addition it aimed to "demythologize" TV, believing that the interesting nature of local programmes would compensate for inferior technical standards and show that there were other styles of TV than those of national broadcasters.

Swindon Viewpoint showed, according to a 1974 research report[11] by the Centre for Mass Communication Research at Leicester University, that the "neutral resource" idea had value, but that it favoured participation by already established and active (largely middle class and well-educated) members of the community. Moreover, in spite of attempts to "demythologize" TV, part of the attraction for participating groups was the "myth" of TV as a "technically difficult and glamorous activity" as well as a scarce resource.

Access to Cable Programming

CTIC Cablebooks: Vol 1: The Community Medium. Vol. 2: A Guide for Local Policy. Ed. by Nancy Jesuale. (Arlington, VA: Cable Television Information Center, 1982).

Who shall have access to cable channels, under what conditions, and for what purposes? As Vernone Sparkes[12] sees it, this question is associated with another: "What programming policies are most likely to result in cable programming that serves the fullest possible range of information and communication needs in urban areas?

The response to these questions by the US FCC and Canadian CRTC is analysed by Sparkes in terms of three possible alternative models for community programming: the origination model, the access model and the facilitator model.

Prior to 1974 both the FCC and CRTC actively favoured and encouraged local origination (LO) of programming by cable operators. After that date the FCC placed more emphasis on access, and the CRTC developed a hybrid model incorporating elements of LO and access, the facilitator model.

Local Origination

Under 1972 FCC rules, cable systems with more than 3,500 subscribers had to originate programming of their own. The cable operator was given full control of production and content and could accept advertising. Even though the 1972 rules were dropped in 1979, most local cable franchises contain both local origination and access requirements.

Local origination channels conform to no one pattern. The degree of local community participation and control, as well as the quality and scope of the programming depend upon the cable operator's concept of his role. A recent survey by Susan Bednarczyk et al[13], contrasts Cox Cable's LO Channel in San Diego — eight full-time production staff, four advertising representatives, technical staff, and a budget of $600,000 p.a. — with Syracuse Cablesystems, New York — two full-time producer/directors and volunteers.

Cable A Common Carrier?

The aim of the access model of community programming is to place control of content, production and promotion in the hands of the public itself. The cable operator has no programming responsibility and no control over the access channel. In theory the access channel is an "electronic market-place" of ideas.

In 1972 the FCC required cable companies with over 3,500 subscribers to make at least one public, educational, government, and leased channel available to the public on a first-come, first-served non-discriminatory basis.

These rules (and others in 1976) placed common carrier obligations on cable companies who tried to have them removed by the courts. In 1979 the cable operators were successful before the Supreme Court and the 1972 rules were struck down. According to Marsha Temple[14] the Court found that the FCC could only regulate cable as ancillary to broadcasting and Andrew Nimelman[15] interprets the judgement as a further decisive move toward complete deregulation.

In spite of the 1979 ruling there were in that year some 566 channels provided by 400 cable systems. To encourage use of these channels, public access centres grew up. A report by Jean Rice[16] finds that libraries, schools, consortiums of local organisations, access groups and cable operators themselves are all involved in administering use of access channels. A determining factor of use is the amount of funding available and one popular solution is to support access by cable franchise fees.

Canada: Facilitating Public Access

A 1978 CRTC survey found that 274 cable TV systems out of 455 had a community channel and estimated that about 20,000 individuals and 5,300 groups had participated in community programming in the first six months of 1978. According to a 1979 study by McNulty[17], the most common types of community programming are interviews on subjects of general interest, coverage of municipal council meetings and coverage of local sports events. In addition, there are some examples of local news programmes for special groups (children, the elderly ethnic minorities, etc).

Ownership and Control of Community Cable

Communication at Pouvoir Mass Media et Communitaires au Quebec. Jean Francois Barbier-Bouvet, Paul Beaud and Patrice Flichy. (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1979).

Many community groups and individuals were originally attracted to experiment with low cost video and community cable TV as means of promoting community development and social change. Barbier-Bouvet et al concluded that community TV could not be a source of social change until and unless fundamental problems of ownership and control were tackled. They point out that purely local TV is usually dominated by local power elites (the church, local business and government) and/or the cable company. Community TV stations easily become captured by a small group of community activists or video enthusiasts.

Their analysis is echoed by other research. The researchers from the Catholic University of Nijmegen who studied Dutch cable experiments note that the most active volunteers in the projects were young people who regarded their activity as a pastime or a way of learning professional techniques.[18] Robert E Jacobson[19], in advocating municipal ownership of cable systems, argues that both access and community ownership (i.e. ownership by minorities and other local groups) do not change existing power relationships. Only a system of involvement at all levels of planning and implementation can offer a real alternative.

A recent article by Nick Jankowski[20] which looks at one of the Dutch experiments in detail concludes that community TV can play only a limited role in social change. He believes that cheaper and more flexible media like low cost video and radio are more appropriate for community groups.

V: Linking Cable and Computer

The emphasis on cable TV can obscure the fact that cable is essentially a broadband transmission device capable of carrying a variety of electronic signals including computer data, voice, text and video. This broadband potential aroused interest in the early 1970s and later as researchers and others saw cable providing a range of entertainment, educational, community, information, security and transaction (home shopping etc.) services. Research has tended to focus on two main areas of interest. First, public policy toward cable. How should cable be regulated in the interests of promoting its broadband development? Second, experiments with interactive and two-way cable to test its potential to meet public service needs.

Policies for New Technologies

Recently, cable's technological advance has begun to accelerate. Researchers have been faced with the problem of accurately charting the new developments and of formulating new regulatory strategies.

Three chapters in *The Cable/Broadland Communications Book* attempt to identify the main areas of technological development. Gary Arlen points to the entry of cable companies into local distribution of data services to business in competition with telephone companies. This entry of cable systems into traditional common carrier service points up once again the inadequacy of regulating cable as simply ancillary to broadcasting.

John Wicklein looks at the uses of interactive cable systems like Warner Amex's QUBE in Columbus, Ohio. QUBE subscribers are equipped with keypad consoles which enable them to interact with a computer system at the cable head-end. Using the keypad, viewers can respond to multiple choice questions (instant polling) or selections of products (home shopping) displayed on their TV screens. Wicklein sees a danger to privacy from such computerized cable systems which monitor viewers' expressed personal preferences. This information can be correlated with other available data (financial and personal) to create subscribers profiles which may be of value to government or commercial interests.

In a third chapter, Kathleen Criner discusses the opportunities for cable systems to carry text services like viewdata and teletext. Cable operators could find themselves becoming "electronic publishers" in competition with newspapers and other printed information media.

An attempt to formulate some policies which recognises that broadband cable systems are part of a new telecommunication-computer communication network has been made by Richard Neustadt, Gregg Skall and Michael Hammer.[21] They recommend that the US adopt a policy based on freedom for (electronic) publishers and diversity for audiences. Content regulation should be minimized and competition encouraged among various information providers (cable companies, broadcasters, telephone companies, etc.). Large cable systems should make some channels available to other including electronic publishers.

Vincent Mosco, in a new book[22], represents a more critical attitude to the growth of advanced cable systems. He analyses the commercial pressures that are behind the development of videotex systems (e.g. Britain's Prestel) and interactive cable (e.g. QUBE or Cox Cable's Index) and concludes that the cost of developing and marketing innovative technology is helping reinforce the economic power of large corporations such as Warner Amex.

A Participatory Cable System

In the US during the mid-1970s the chief public cable experiments tested: i) educational uses (Spartanburg, South Carolina and Rockford, Illinois), and ii) ways to link the elderly with the relevant social welfare agencies at Reading, Pennsylvania.[23] The Reading project asked: How can citizens use cable TV to obtain the services they require? Thus starting from the user's point of view, the Alternate Media Center of New York was able to help build up a genuine community cable system with the active involvement of many elderly people. In the course of the project the elderly developed new skills and found that they could create a local TV system which would specifically serve their needs and interests. The success of Reading, however, was based not on technology alone, but on a policy that placed the needs of system-users at the centre of the project.

New Experiments

Outside the US there have been interactive experiments in Japan and in West Germany four pilot projects are planned to begin in late 1982 and 1983. These projects will be larger than those in Japan or the US. In addition, the Heinrich Hertz Institute of Berlin is developing an experimental two-way cable system for 10,000 subscribers to begin in 1983.

As reported by Jan Tonnemacher[24], the objectives of the research include an increase in community awareness, the social integration of minority groups, the provision of educational services and improving the "transparency" of government administration. The emphasis is not on persuading the public to accept the technology, but the impact of the service on the family, socialisation, interpersonal communication, existing local media and cultural events.

Footnotes

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2 Don R. Le Duc, "The New Marketplace Standard in American Cable TV Policy", *Media Information Australia*, No. 19 (February) 1981, p.16-19, 24.

3 *Canadian Broadcasting and Telecommunications: Past Experience, Future Options*, Hull, Quebec: Government Pub. Centre, 1980.

4 Don Agostino, *"New Technologies: Problem or Solution?"*, *Journal Communication*, Vol. 30, No.3 (Summer) 1980, p.198-206.

5 David E. Payne and Andre H. Caron, "Anglophone Canadian and American Mass Media: Use and Effects on Quebecois Adults", *Communication Research*, Vol. 9, No.1 (January) 1982, p.113-114.

6 Barry Litman, and Susanna Eun, "The Emerging Oligopoly of Pay-TV in the USA", *Telecommunications Policy*, Vol. 5, No.2 (June) 1981, p.121-135.

7 Kenneth Gordon, Jonathon D. Levy and Robert S. Preece, *FCC Policy on Cable Ownership: A Staff Report*, Washington, DC: FFC, Office of Plans and Policy, 1981.

8 Christopher Sterling, "Cable and Pay Television" in Benjamin M. Compaine et al., *Who Owns the Media?*, 2nd ed., White Plains, NY: Knowledge Industry Publications, 1982, p.373-450.

9 Vernone M. Sparkes, "Public Perception of and Reaction to Multi-Channel Cable Television Service", *Journal of Broadcasting* (forthcoming).

10 Elizabeth Young, "Public Services by Cable/Satellite: Experiences and Challenges" in Mary Louise Hollowell (ed), *The Cable/Broadband Communications Book*, Vol. 2, 1980-1981, Washington, DC: Communications Press, 1980, p.164-178.

11 Paul Croll and Charles Husband, *Communication and Community*, Leicester: Centre for Mass Communication Research, 1975.

12 Vernone Sparkes, "Community Cablecasting in the US and Canada: Different :Approaches to a Common Objective", *Journal of Broadcasting*, Vol. 20, No.4 (Fall) 1976, p.451-460.

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14 Marsha Temple, "Technology Meets Bureaucracy: The FCC's Policy for Two-Way Television", *Federal Communications Law Journal*, Vol. 31, No.3 (Fall) 1979, p.413-462.

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16 Jean Rice, "Cable Access: Promise of the 80's in Mary Louise Hollowell (ed.), *The Cable/Broadband Communications Book*, Vol. 2, 1980-1981, p.100-117.

17 Jean McNulty, *Other Voices in Broadcasting: The Evolution of New Forms of Local Programming in Canada*, Ottawa: Department of Communications, 1979.

18 Paul Beaud, *Community Media?* p.80, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1980.

19 Robert E. Jacobson, *Municipal Control of Cable Communications*, New York: Praeger, 1977.

20 Nick Jankowski, "Community Television: A Tool for Community Action?", *Communication*, Vol. 7. No.1, 1982, p.33-58.

21 Richard Neustadt, Gregg Skall and Michael Hammer, *"The Regulation of Electronic Publishing"*, *Federal Communications Law Journal*, Vol. 33, No.3, (Summer) 1981, p. 331-418.

22 Vincent Mosco, *Pushbutton Fantasies: Critical Perspectives on Videotex and Information Technology*, Norwood. NJ: Ablex, forthcoming.

23 "Experiments in Interactive Cable TV", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 28, No.2 (Spring) 1978, p.142-208.

24 Jan Tonnenmacher, "The New Media in West Germany", *InterMedia*, Vol. 10, No.2 (March) 1982, p.18-26.

Current Research on Cable Television

AUSTRALIA

The **Australian Broadcasting Tribunal** (153 Walker Street, North Sydney, NSW 2060) Inquiry into cable TV commissioned research studies including one by **Dr.G. Caldwell** (Centre for Continuing Education, Australian National University, PO Box 4, Canberra, ACT 2600) on how society will be changed by the new technologies.

AUSTRIA

Prof. Dr. Hans Heinz Fabris (Institut fur Publizistik und Kommuni-kationswissenschaft, Universitat Salzburg, Sigmund-Haffner-Gasse 18/111, 5020 Salzburg) is coordinating a project on the social impact of new media in Austria.

CANADA

André H. Caron (Département de communication, Université de Montréal C.P. 6128, Succursale "A", Montréal, P.Q., H3C 3J7) is soon to publish a book with David E Payne presenting some of their findings on the cultural impact of US cable on Canada.

DENMARK

Ole Prehn (Institut for Sprog, Kommunikation og Kulturhistorie, Aalborg Universitetscenter, Lanfafervej 6, Postbox 159, 9100 Aalborg), is using the expansion of cable TV in Britain, Germany and Denmark as a case study in technology assessment.

FINLAND

Martti Soramaki (Planning and Research Dept., Finnish Broadcasting Co., PL 95, SF100251 Helsinki 25) is working on a report provisionally entitled "New Communications Technology, Households and Finland: An Overview".

FRANCE

Michel Souchon and **Régine Chaniac** (Dept. de la Recherche Prospective, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, 4 Ave. de l'Europe, 94360 Bry-sur-Marne) have completed a confidential report on cable for the Minister of Communications.

GREAT BRITAIN

Dr. Tim Hollins (Broadcasting Research Unit, British Film Institute, 127 Charing X Rd., London, WC2H OEA) has begun a one-year research project on international developments in cable TV.

ITALY

Giuseppe Richeri (via Fondazza, 48, 40125 Bologna) is to research the social organisation and impact of local integrated communication services through cable in France with the **Laboratoire de Communication Sociale of the Centre National d'Arts de Métiers in Paris.**

NETHERLANDS

Drs. Ed Hollander (Institut voor Massacommunicatie, Katholicke Universiteit, Postbus 9108, 6500 HK Nijmegen) is researching the use of "small media" (press, radio, film, cable TV) by non-professional groups for local public communication.

NORWAY

Kjell Olav Mathisen (Norwegian Telecommunications Administration Research Establishment, PO Bos 83, 2007 Kjeller) is working on developing a field trial to begin in 1983 in a village of 1300 households in which cable TV will be introduced. The trial will look at technical questions (cost of installation, two-way options, fibre optics etc.) and social questions: what kind of new serviceas do people want and to what ends can the cable network be used?

SPAIN

Dr. Esteban Lopez-Escobar (Facultad de Ciencias de la Informacion, Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona) is developing a cable TV research project.

SWEDEN

Dr Lowe Hedman (Local Communication Project, Dept of Sociology, Uppsala University, Jarvagspromenaden 19, S-753 20 Uppsala) has been appointed by the Swedish Neighbourhood Radio Committee to evaluate Neighbourhood Radio and (cable) TV pilot projects. In two studies of the TV projects before and after transmission began) he examined the public's attitude to the new medium. He has edited *Nar-TV För Föreningar* (Neighbourhood TV for Associations) to be published in the autumn of 1982.

USA

Dr. Don Agostino (Dept. of Telecommunications, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405) analyses the demographics of audiences of new TV delivery systems (cable, STV, MDS, VCR) and programming), their uses of new media and the effects on broadcasting.

Dr. Thomas F. Baldwin (Dept. of Telecommunications, Michigan State University East Lansing, M1 48824) will publish (with Pentice-Hall) a general description of cable TV in the US, in October '82.

Stanley M. Besen and **Leland L. Johnson** (Rand Corp., 1700 Main Street, Santa Monica, CA 90406) are preparing a paper on the economics of mandated lease access to cable.

Stuart N. Brotman (President, Communication Strategies Inc., 80 Trowbridge St., Cambridge, MA 02138) researches privacy, the allocation of regulatory power, the franchising and refranchising process, copyright enhanced services and the economics of cable programming.

Yale M. Braunstein (Dept. of Economics, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA 02254) is looking at the market structure of the cable TV industry. At the **Communications Media Center, New York Law School** (57 Worth St., NY, NY 10013), **Michael Botein** is researching cable TV and anti-trust laws, and **David M. Rice** is writing an article "Legal Issues in Cable Television Renewals and Franchising".

Dr. Robert M. Entman (Institute of Policy Sciences and Public Affairs, Duke University, 4875 Duke Station, Durham NC 27706) is researching how closely cable resembles a public utility and how it should be regulated.

Dr. Dean M. Krugman (Dept. of Advertising, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824) is studying how individuals consume cable and pay TV services, and the potential for advertising on cable and pay cable.

Dr. Eli M. Noam (726 Uris Hall, Columbia University, NY NY 10027) is to study the different ways new media are integrated into existing communication systems in the US and Western Europe.

Dr. Robert Pepper (University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242) is researching potential competition between the cable and telephone industries, cable ownership issues and cable programming, and a long-term project on the impact of deregulation on the growth of the cable industry.

Dr. Vernone Sparkes (SI Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, 215 University Place, Syracuse, NY 13210) researches new kinds of community programming and municipal and state regulation.

Dr. Michael O. Wirth (Dept. of Mass Communication, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208) is looking at the economics of per-programme and per-channel pay cable.

WEST GERMANY

Prof. Dr. Peter Hunziker (Fachgruppe Soziologie, Universitat Konstanz, Postfach 5560, 7750 Konstanz 1) has researched local community TV in Switzerland. With Horst Willi Schors, he has published *Der Elektronische Dorfplatz: Lokalfernsehen mit Burgerbeteiligung in der Praxis* (The Electronic Village Square: Local television and Citizen Participation in Practice) (Aarau: Sauerlander-Verlag, 1982).

Prof. Ludwig J. Issing (FB Erziehungs-und Unterrichtswissenschaften, WE 7, Frei Universitat Berlin, Malteserstr. 74-100, 1000 Berlin 46) is interested in the educational uses of new media (cable TV, videotex and videodiscs).

Prof. Dr. Klaus Merten (FB 03, Institut fur Soziologie, Justus-Liebig Universitat, Karl-Glockner Strasse 21, 6300 Giessen) is developing a long-term effect approach for the study of communication behaviour in situations where cable TV has been introduced.

Prof. Dr. F. Ronnenberger (Lehrstuhl fur Politik-und Kommunikatikons Wasenschaft, Friedrich Alexander Universitat, Findelgasse 7-9, Postfach 3931, 8500 Nurnberg 1) researches the advantage and risks of cable communication for democracy and the family.

Prof. Dr. Eberhard Witte (Muncher Kreis, Ludwigstrasse 8, 8000 Munchen 22) is involved in research on the Munich cable TV pilot project.

Perspectives on Communication Research

Encouraging User-Centred Research

Do viewers need or want more TV? The growth of the cable industry to date is evidence that substantial numbers of the public in various countries believe that more channels of TV are worth having. For many subscribers to pay-TV it seems that cable is a good way of seeing more of what you already know you like. But research shows that cable can meet other demands too: for more programme choice, for more coverage of local and community affairs, and for a more participatory television.

The weakest area of current cable research is in the understanding of the cable audience, both prospective and present. The focus is generally on cable technology and programming, not on users and their perceptions of what they want and need. The reason the Reading two-way cable experiment was so successful was that it was consciously user-oriented and responsive from the first. Learning from Reading, future cable researchers need to ask what are viewers' information and entertainment needs and in what ways can cable help meet them.

Encouraging Programme Diversity

So far the capacity of cable to provide a wider range and choice of programming has yet to be proven. There is more choice of channels but the majority of programmes is still in the old familiar formats: light entertainment shows, movies, soap operas, news and documentaries.

There are some signs of change. The Cable News Network has tried to give more in-depth and live news coverage and in so doing has extended the present concept of TV news. Here research has a role to play in encouraging experiments in programming. Research which attempts to evaluate the audience response to new programmes and channels, and which also, by playing with new formats, stimulates viewers to imagine what new forms of TV might be useful to them.

Decentralising TV

In spite of the limited success of the European community and local cable experiments, and the fact that community programming in the US and Canada is still a relatively small part of the cable business, the potential of local TV remains great. At the very least people do want to have TV services that treat local events and issues seriously and in some depth. How far they want a television that challenges the existing social order and conventional notions of what a TV station, does, is much less clear.

There is need for more research into present local patterns of communication and information use. What kinds of information are people presently getting and what kinds of

information do they want and find difficult to get? In what ways could a local cable system complement and extend the communication choices available to local people? Exploring such questions opens up possibilities for establishing community TV on the basis of more than assumed needs for another tv station.

Opening Up Television

The access movement has been troubled with many of the same problems that have afflicted community TV. In particular access, like community TV, can easily become a slogan under which established local elites or new activists capture a cable channel or station for themselves. The problem remains even with two-way systems, for technology cannot create participation. The central question is one of concentration and diffusion of social power.

Research into the way power is presently exercised and maintained in the communication system at both local and national level is valuable. But too much emphasis is placed on the difficulties of creating participatory communication systems. Interactive cable technology can be a stimulus to looking at TV as a two-way and not one-way medium. Many access and community TV projects have opened up local cable TV to a wider section of the community. Researchers should look for successful and innovative examples of participatory communication and seek to understand the achievements, even if they were only limited. We need to know what works as well as what fails.

Putting Cable TV In Context

Research which begins with the users of cable systems will soon discover that cable TV cannot be studied in isolation from other communication technologies. As cable becomes a broadband transmission system its growth is increasingly tied to developments in telecommunications, computing, and "electronic publishing". Its future will be worked out in relation to competition from direct broadcast satellites, low power TV, over-the-air subscription TV and other media. How will people use and choose between these technologies? Will the diversity of distribution systems be matched by diversity in content and diffusion of power? Can users exercise some control over these developments and what should public policy be?

In order to provide answers to such questions researchers will need to engage in interdisciplinary and cross-cultural studies. Such studies allied to the user-centred approach can bring new insights and different perspectives to policy-making. Only then may the challenge of cable be finally met.

JIM McDONNELL
Issue Editor

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