

foundation news

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Will Public Access be the Second Coming of Television?

This people-to-people form of cable TV can become a useful community service

by Ann Arlen

In some parts of New York City today a dial twister with cable television can look at some pretty unusual programs. Often unannounced and without titles, these programs pop onto the screen for 30 or 60 minutes. Sometimes they break up into stripes. Occasionally they vanish into snow, leaving the viewer with only the sound to help unravel the mystery of what is taking place.

In a time when we can almost take for granted a first-class television picture, it's unusual to find anybody watching a channel whose picture quality consistently duplicates that of television's earliest days. 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. To these viewers, their very presence is a crazy miracle, a chance to help change the course of the nation's most promising—and least fulfilled—mass communications medium.

Public Access channels can be defined as those set aside by the cable operator for direct

use by the public, with no control exercised over program content, other than that necessarily imposed by libel and profanity laws. Cable time is made available to groups or individuals, free of charge (i.e., at the cable company's expense), on a first-come-first-served basis.

The Public Access concept provides what may well be our first experience with an electronic mass medium through which people may talk to other people, unmanipulated by media professionals. To illustrate, instead of learning about a West Side New York rent strike via 60 seconds of film squeezed into the evening news—and "reported" by a smooth-talking 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)—with Public Access one could learn about the event by looking at a tape of a meeting, made in the apartment of the rent strike organizer.

Such a presentation on the Public Access channel costs the group \$15 for 30 minutes of half-inch videotape. The tape communicates something about the lives of the people

Ms. Arlen is a videotape producer and independent cable consultant.

in the room and, watching it, one gets a sense of why they are desperate to make changes. What's more, the tape is *not* made at the point in the strike which would be most attention-getting, most "newsworthy"—the point of heated confrontation, on the picket lines. It's presented *pre-event*, when people are trying to call attention to their plight and get something done.

The illustration highlights an important difference between Public Access and commercial television. When one sets the two side by side, one realizes that the meaning of events and experiences must be altered on commercial television to be salable as "news." In marketing such events, commercial television alters our perceptions and exploits our need to know, however unintentionally. We are wooed by competing news shows, but neither we nor, probably, the people who produce the shows fully realize that the "news" we receive has little meaning for us because it has little to do with the events reported or with our own experience. Public Access, operating free of the necessities of the news-marketing format, gives us the sense of what the communication of the events of our lives can really be.

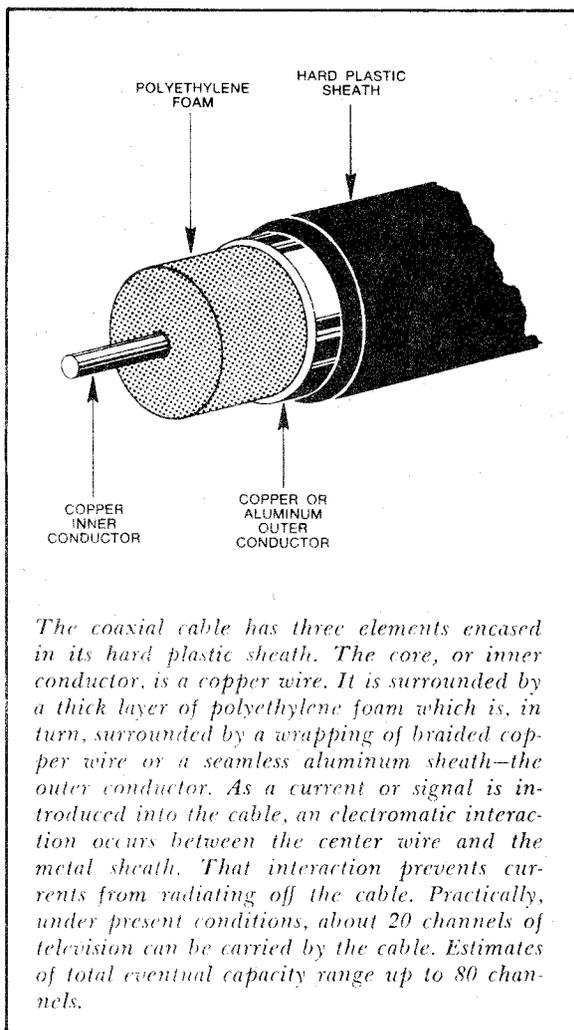
Edward R. Murrow succinctly described another aspect of news-marketing when he said, "Good news is no news." Some of the tapes shown on Manhattan's Public Access channels have documented people's pleasures and the beauty they find: a group of people getting together to make music, just for the fun of it; an Armenian grocer who clearly enjoys the Greek and Armenian specialties he sells; a half-hour tape of a running brook, just because it's 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 of life, providing an input

for many people into the collective bank of knowledge that we form with mass media, rather than leaving it up to a few networks to form our collective awareness.

Public Access 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 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 thinking which probably will never permit the realization of its great promise.

Cable television didn't grow up in answer to a need for more and better programming. Rather, it was fostered by a need, in bad reception areas, for a better picture of *the same programming*. Entrepreneurs saw money in the system, and they developed CATV, as it is often called (for Community Antenna Television), tailoring it to include services and programming not offered by broadcast television.

People who receive television over-the-wire instead of over-the-air pay about \$6 a month for the service and expect to receive, in return, a pretty good picture of network programming, plus, perhaps, some local sports events and local news. What they do *not* expect, yet what is predicted for the cable from many communications quarters, is a communications revolution of major proportions. The unique construction of the coaxial cable permits it to carry information in unprecedented amounts and variety. For example, through a broadband cable network one could order and receive, in print-out form, mass appeal periodicals such as books, magazines and newspapers, as well as specialized 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 one's bank balance.



From an historical perspective, this is a strange period for communications. Given the free enterprise nature of our country, there seems to be little question that the cable *will* cause profound changes in our lives, whether we wish it or not. Yet those of us who work with it today are dealing with quite a prosaic medium. It's hard to keep remembering that cable 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.

Yet, Public Access itself 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. Since they are the first ones, the Manhattan channels are naturally regarded as the test of whether or not Public Access channels are needed and whether they can work. The difficulty in using them as a test, however, is that the concept of people appearing on television in an everyday way 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." It must first succeed in making itself known to potential viewers and users; then 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.

If Public Access is to become a reality, people in towns and cities across the country which are now issuing franchises to cable operators need to know that the franchise agreements can include a requirement for free Public Access channels. The Federal Communications Commission's rule-making on cable television, issued Feb. 12 (see bibliography), includes a requirement that there be one Public Access channel in each CATV system within the top 100 television markets. Yet, the new ruling does less than it might have to promote Public Access television. For one thing, it requires only one Public Access channel per franchise, whereas the Manhattan franchise requires two. The latter, up until the February rule-making, had been regarded as a possible Public Access standard for the FCC. In addition, and perhaps more important, the requirement that there be but one Public Access channel *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 for Access

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 100 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 100 markets.

Beyond getting Public Access programming "on the cable" there's the problem of building an audience for it. This requires commitment on the part of the cable operator. Currently, the most immediately available way of letting people know about Public Access is by publicizing it over the cable system's own channels. The operator can also promote it in mailings to subscribers. (Newspapers should 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 to maintain picture quality adequate enough to attract viewers. There are special technical problems presented by cablecasting half-inch videotape—the only videotaping process suitable, at present, to the particular needs of Public Access, by virtue of its low cost, portability and easy operation. The chief difficulty concerns the speed at which the tape passes the recording-playback heads on the half-inch machines. It tends to vary, 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 flaws in the cable system's own signal, the picture on the home receiver can be totally unintelligible.

It's useful to compare the handling of the Public Access channels by the two Manhattan-based franchises. Although they were officially opened only last summer and did not really



Photo by John Flatau

get started until fall, both companies are receiving considerable public channel programming. Of the two, Sterling Manhattan (Time, Inc. is the major owner), which has the middle and lower portions of Manhattan, has attracted the most. Sterling Manhattan got off to a slow start by charging a maintenance fee per program for the use of its playback deck, but waived the fee when it became clear that would-be users could not pay it.

In general, Sterling Manhattan has made a solid and effective effort to work with the problems of cablecasting half-inch videotape. Program manager John Sanfratello says he would rather not have to work with half-inch but, recognizing its necessity, and with the backing of the company's president, William Lamb, he and the company's engineers have begun to find solutions. The result has been a noticeable improvement in their Public Access signal. Now, on days when equipment is functioning well, and in the sections of the city where the cable is newer and better, it is possible to see a Public Access cablecast on half-inch tape and not be able to distinguish it from any other good cablecast. Recently, Sanfratello devised a modification which, he says, makes even the most "technically impossible" tapes viewable. The part for the modification costs 50 cents.



Photo by Ann Arlen

John Sanfratello, Program Manager, Sterling Manhattan CATV.

"I have to split my head two different ways. One to deal with something that is strictly nonprofit, the other to handle something that has to show a profit. . . .

"I think that the cable companies are going to have to realize that public channels are an obligation, and that the same care should be taken in the broadcast of the public channels as is taken with commercial channels. . . . I think that any CATV operation that may not have voluntarily said that it would have the public take an active part will be a little untidy about the type of signal it puts out on the public channel. . . .

"If I had a foundation, I would give money to people who produce programming. I would stop funding organizations that make information on the public channels available. I think that was started because it was felt that the CATV people 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 Public Access very, very hard."

Teleprompter, on the other hand, got off to a good start by charging no equipment-use fee. For a while it 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. Teleprompter promised improvements by the end of 1971, but programs on their channel still look bad. The most reasonable explanation, given by Teleprompter officials who preferred to remain anonymous, is that they have changed engineering directors several times and each time have changed the system; also 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.

With few exceptions, people involved with program production for Public Access receive little or no pay. They are a dedicated lot, and many 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 programs for more than 80 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 music "special" from a Harlem church.

One of the most active organizations, Alternate Media Center (AMC), at New York University's School of the Arts, received substantial support from the Markle Foundation. A three-year grant of \$275,000 is intended to help AMC promote community and non-professional use of the cable via half-inch video. AMC, under the direction of Red Burns, has been helping groups around the country, as well as in New York, create their own capability to produce half-inch video



Photo by John Flattau

programming. In general, AMC, with the aid of students and paid professionals, contributes the technical know-how and cable experience; the groups being assisted find their own funding for equipment, tape and other expenses. AMC is helping to start a Public Access center for Reading, Pa., 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). AMC will train resource personnel in Reading for one year, then the people of the community will take over. They have also undertaken the planning of a similar project in Manhattan, to be financed by Sterling Manhattan and housed at Alternate Media Center, where equipment and technical help will be made available to people doing Public Access programming.

Foundation funding has been helpful in other ways. 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 for and about old people and its programming has included 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, called "The Elders," was

produced by David Othmer and taped by students from AMC. As with the programming of other special interest groups, these tapes have had a strongly enthusiastic audience. The other series, for the deaf who use sign language, was produced by the Deafness Research and Training Institute, a Federally funded rehabilitation center affiliated with New York University. It 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.

Some of the most varied and creative programming has been done in considerable amounts by 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 mass communications system pre-dates Public Access by several years and has been of the greatest significance to its development. All of them have received funding from the New York State Council on the Arts, but, since the noncommercial use of half-inch video is for the most part nonre-

munerative, most of the people involved live and work on a shoestring. Although they have sought foundation support, few of these groups have received it, despite the fact that their accumulated body of work is impressive. One reason may be that their commitment to alternatives includes their own lifestyles, and this may be misleading to foundation people.

There's one very encouraging aspect to the Public Access financial picture: Much has been accomplished on relatively little. But, it is clear that, if our communities are to have a chance to experience Public Access, even as an experiment, a substantial commit-

ment of money and people is needed, probably from philanthropic, commercial and government sources.

I have mentioned in this article some of the areas in Public Access which need attention. Obviously, most of them will require funding, sometimes not very much. Here are some other ways in which Public Access could be assisted:

I. Establishment of a video access center to teach nonprofessional, noncommercial groups and individuals, who wish to do their own Public Access videotaping, how to use portable, half-inch equipment. The center would be equipped with and rent half-inch



Photo by Ann Arlen

Thea Sklover, Executive Director Open Channel.

"I would like to do more training in high schools on use of video equipment. I feel that working with young people is a logical place to begin getting more and more community people to know how to make video on their own. It's a

responsibility I feel that we have now—to see that every young person has video skills, just as they have writing skills. Video is one of the chief means of communications within their lives, and if they have no control over it then it's always being used on them. They have no defense for it, no understanding of it, and they have no way to communicate with it. Communication goes two ways; right now, in terms of television, most people can only receive it, they can't give it. . . .

"We need money for equipment and for people; people to man the equipment, people to train others, 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 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, in terms of the audience, there are very few people who know it's there, know it's on, when it's on, where it's on, how they can see it. . . ."

cameras and recording decks and videotape. (The total cost would be about \$1,300.) Part-time personnel, to keep the equipment up to "cable-use" standards, would also be available at the center.

2. Commitment by equipment manufacturers to produce good quality recording and playback machines. Also, concerted efforts on the part of the cable companies to bring the signal of the Public Access channels up to the standard maintained for network programs (this should be a franchise requirement). The companies should also make modifications to adapt existing equipment specifically for half-inch videotape.

3. Publication of illustrated literature, simply written in English and Spanish, on how to use half-inch video equipment, with specific instructions for cable application.

4. Creation of a "spot" advertisement for commercial television informing people of the existence of Public Access and telling them how they can use it. Posters with the same information for display in mass transit facilities should also be prepared, as should newspaper display ads.

5. Formation of 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

Will two-way cable boost the job market for snoopers?

You'd better start being good to your television set. All these years it's been the subject of derogatory references like "boob tube" and "idiot box." Soon, the TV set may be able to get revenge by becoming a secret agent in a network of master eavesdroppers.

Of course, it won't just happen. Your set will need some "connections" to join the ranks of the "super snoopers." According to a story by the Associated Press, that's just what may happen in the years ahead with the installation of two-way cable television.

AP writer Margaret Gentry reports that "spies armed with sophisticated listening devices . . . without your knowledge could listen to and record the programs you watch, your transactions with department stores and banks, even your living room conversations" by tapping your TV set if it's hooked to a two-way cable. Miss Gentry notes that "devices

to prevent such spying are technically possible, but specialists interviewed said the technology for converting television sets into pervasive spies has outstripped development of legal safeguards."

According to the AP dispatch, neither public nor private cable agencies have devoted enough attention to the matter. Sol Schildhouse, chief of the FCC's Cable Bureau, says that the tapping possibility will be looked into after committees are appointed on technology and on state and local regulations. Henry Geller, special assistant to FCC Chairman Dean Burch, says the committees will "deal with emerging problems and if this becomes an emerging problem they will deal with it." Mr. Geller noted that two-way systems are "in a rudimentary stage" and he further observed "no one would dream of (tapping)."

In so many words, the American Civil Liberties Union says "baloney" to that. "Cable-tapping is no less a threat than wiretapping," says the ACLU in a recent edition of its newsletter.

Would somebody mind proposing a "Be good to your television set week?"

cable companies using half-inch on their own originating stations, and it should set up a system for the ongoing exchange of such information. An inexpensively printed handbook of the research results would be sent to everyone involved with Public Access.

6. Encouragement of franchise acquisition. If a number of foundations pooled resources to acquire a franchise, then set about to establish a model cable system with a fully developed Public Access facility, that system could greatly influence the development of CATV.

These suggestions just begin to illustrate ways in which funding could be creatively

integrated into the Public Access situation. An involvement with Public Access really is an involvement with change. Foundations continually debate the question of whether or not to involve themselves directly with fostering changes in our society. 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?

Technology is really nothing—a piece of equipment lying around—until somebody picks it up and uses it. And it is what we



Photo by Ann Arlen

Red Burns, Executive Producer, Alternate Media Center.

“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 to believe and understand is that it’s terribly necessary for 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. We have evolved a way of working in which we attempt to set up projects which can be self-generating. We will go into a community with resources, expertise and advice; ultimately, the project has to be taken over by the community. . . . Our concept is based on the fact that there are community resources available, 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 through cable companies that may make a contribution, or community planning boards, community colleges, or neighborhood groups. . . .

“. . . the capacity for replication and self-generation—those are the kinds of things I think about all the time when we’re setting up working relationships. . . . This is something that Forrest Chisman (Executive Assistant at the Markle Foundation) taught me.”

For Guidance into (if not through) the CATV Maze:

Cable Bureau
The Federal Communications Commission
1919 "M" Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C.

Cable Television Information Center
The Urban Institute
2100 "M" Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

The National Cable Television Association
918-16th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C.

The United Church of Christ
Office of Communication
289 Park Avenue South
New York, N.Y. 10010

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 capability to hasten the day when "big brother" can indeed "watch you," aided by a total surveillance system of two-way, individual access cablevision into homes, bank accounts and business transactions. Every TV set cablecasting the football game in the local bar could be able to transmit as well.

But, cable technology also has the capacity to let us talk to each other. It can serve people who, in an earlier time, might not

have been able to understand one another, or didn't try; who might have been too frightened to listen to each other face-to-face.

Even more important, 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 of the promises of cable television, this chance at true communication is the most immediately realizable. It is here—but to grow it must have our commitment.

For Additional Public Access Information

Alternate Media Center
114 Bleecker Street
New York, N.Y.
(212) 598-3339

Open Channel
East 68th Street
New York, N.Y. 10021
(212) 472-9006

Sterling-Manhattan CATV
43 West 61st Street
New York, N.Y.
(212) 586-2426

Teleprompter Corporation
1365 St. Nicholas Avenue
New York, N.Y.
(212) 942-7200



Photo by Mimi Pickering, George Stoney

For Further Enlightenment

Books

Cable Television: A Guide for Citizen Action, by Monroe Price and John Wicklein. Pilgrim Press, Philadelphia, cloth, \$5.95, paper, \$2.95. Just what it says it is, with excellent background on major CATV issues. Appendix section (#4), "Production Costs for Public Access Programming," runs a bit high on cost estimates.

Cable Television in the Cities: community control, public access, minority ownership, edited by Charles Tate. The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C. \$3.95. Similar objectives to the above, but oriented toward black ownership. Superb source material, including referencing to helpful organizations and a good bibliography.

Community Access Video, by Herbert Allan Frederiksen (alias Johnny Vidcotape). From the author, 695 30th Avenue, Apt. E, Santa Cruz, Calif. 95060. \$3.00. For those "making their own television," this is the most useful book available. It has detailed descriptions on how to acquire and work with video equipment. It's worth noting that Frederiksen is "doing his own thing" without outside financial support, at a time when increasingly large amounts of money are being granted by foundations for study after study.

Guerrilla Television, by Michael Shamberg and Raindance Corporation. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, paper, \$3.95. Ideas and philosophy of many working within the half-inch video movement, along with some of the lingo, which may seem a little foreign. Useful as a compendium of everything SONY doesn't tell people about how to use and expand the usefulness of half-inch video.

How to Talk Back to Your Television Set, by Nicholas Johnson. Little, Brown & Co., paper, 95¢. Johnson has won an inappropriate reputation for being the only FCC commissioner to champion the causes of the people, but he had some excellent researchers on this book, and the result is some useful insights into CATV, as well as the FCC.

The Information Machines: Their Impact on Men and the Media, by Ben Bagdikian. Harper & Row, \$8.95.

On the Cable: The Television of Abundance, Report of the Sloan Commission on Cable Communications. McGraw-Hill Book Co., paper, \$2.95. Considering that the purpose of the report was to provide guidance to the Federal Communications Commission's rule-making procedures on CATV, some say that this book came too late with too little (it pre-dates the FCC rules by less than two months). But Appendix C, "Public Access Channels: The New York City Experience," by Monroe Price and Charles Morris,

is a good description of what happened with Public Access CATV in New York City circa late Fall, 1971.

Survey of Broadcast Journalism, 1970-1971: A State of Siege, edited by Marvin Barrett, Grosset and Dunlap, paper, \$1.95. Section called "Cable Vision" provides some good positioning on who's where in the politics and financing of CATV.

Television: The Business Behind the Box, by Les Brown. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc. Has won praise of many in the industry who want to see changes.

Periodicals and Other Publications

Broadcasting Magazine, Washington, D.C.

Cable Television, *Scientific American*, October 1971. Somewhat sketchy, technical run-down.

Cable TV: The Endangered Revolution, *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June 1971.

The Coming Shakeup in Telecommunications, *Fortune*, April 1970.

Crossed Wires: Cable Television in New Jersey, Center for the Analysis of Public Issues, Princeton, 1971. The Federal Communications Commission's February 12, 1972 rule-making on cable television. Available from U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. as: Federal Register, Vol. 37, No. 30, Part II only. 20¢ per copy. Dissenting Statement to the above by Commissioner Nicholas Johnson is available from his offices.

Guide to Citizen Action in Radio and TV, by Marsha O'Bannon Prowitt. Office of Communication, United Church of Christ, 279 Park Ave. S., New York, N.Y. Made possible by a grant from the Markle Foundation.

A Guide to Helical Scan Tape Recording, Industrial Electronics Bulletin No. 8, EIA Engineering, Washington, D.C. \$1.40.

Prospects for Cable in the 100 Largest Television Markets, by R. E. Park. *Rand Report*, p-4526, October 1971. This and other Rand publications on CATV may be ordered directly from Rand Corporation, California.

Radical Software, New York, N.Y. *Schools and Cable Television*, National Education Association, Washington, D.C., 1971.

The Wired Nation, by Ralph Lee Smith. *The Nation*. May 18, 1970 (special issue). Definitive handbook.