

CABLE TV:

The Right Thing for the Wrong
Reasons by John Hopkins,
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In trendy circles *Cable TV* is an 'in' word. It has about the same pulling power on the liberal bourgeois fringe as *Squatting* or perhaps *Social Sex*, but with far less to recommend it.

It should be pointed out that the word *Cable TV* has several different and overlapping meanings depending on who is speaking about it. The liberals have some idea that cable TV is going to solve the communication and social problems of our cities, by giving citizen groups 'access to cable broadcasting'. The educationist, on the other hand, means the wired TV systems in university campuses and buildings that relay educational material for teaching purposes. He may also mean systems like the ILEA network, which connects hundreds of schools and colleges in the London area to central educational TV studios. The industrialist, who manufactures the hardware can include other uses of cabled TV distribution with equanimity, such as use for conferences, in hotels, and airport information delivery systems. The entertainment corporation, of which EMI is a prime example, can afford to look at all existing and proposed systems and simply ask: 'does this constitute a possible future market for our software banks.'

For the moment I would like to make a few personal remarks about the cable TV which is greeted so enthusiastically by the liberals, whose cover story is that it is "good for the community." Let us be clear what cable TV this is actually referring to: the 5 local programming experiments licensed by the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications in 1972 and 73, at Greenwich, Sheffield, Swindon, Bristol and Wellingborough. Out of the 1500-odd cable TV systems serving over 2 million homes¹ in England, 5 have been granted the right to operate local programming experiments under strictly controlled conditions. Each of these experiments is set up roughly as follows. There is an annual budget to cover the cost of running a local programming facility including the employment of salaried staff, plus some initial capital investment for studio and hardware necessary for origination.

Can we make any estimate of what local programming means to the public? Attempts to find out from the cable operators themselves at the Standing Conference on Broadcasting in November 1973 drew coy responses—but the meaning was clear. Local programming operators can show hardly any response from the public to their cable TV experiments. Technically, cable TV, like broadcast TV, is at present a system with very low feedback. As such it is eminently unsuitable for any sort of community work or animation by virtue of it being a *significant* delivery system.

However, this isn't the whole story. At the recent Standing Conference on Broadcasting, which dealt with cable TV in some depth, both Nicholas Garnham

(Central London Polytechnic) and Audrey Bronstein (Inter-Action) made the point that cable TV is not the same as community television². Community television is what happens when video equipment is introduced into a 'community' and people get the chance to express themselves collectively by means of it. This set of video applications is quite well documented to date³, and it is evidently growing in its possibilities as more modes of operation are discovered.

We may now ask what is the connection or overlap between cable TV and community television, in the towns listed above. In Greenwich, there appears to be little spontaneous activity on the part of the 'community' in using video for self-expression. In Swindon and Bristol, there appears to be widespread interest in the use of video for community purposes by a number of groups. In Bristol, the cable TV operators, Bristol Channel, have actually started a community television scheme which doesn't have a strong link with cable broadcasting. In Sheffield, someone who should know better has decreed that half-inch video is unsuitable for cablecast programmes. As for Wellingborough, I'm still waiting to hear.

To summarise, it looks as if community television activity which has originally been stimulated by the existence of the cable TV operators in Bristol and Swindon is currently the most significant development. I wonder if the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications can see the irony of this.

What is the significance of cable TV to independent video users? From my own point of view, I have been able to use 1" editing equipment at both Swindon and Bristol Cable TV stations for editing software *not primarily intended to be used for cablecasting*—due entirely to the accommodating and open-ended attitudes of the staff at these places. In fact some of the resulting software was shown on the cable, and the experience led Cliff Evans and myself to some conclusions on editing equipment that have been recently reinforced by examining half-inch editing decks. We now think that at this point in space-time (England Spring 1974) half-inch editing will not produce a disturbance-free (and therefore generally acceptable) result, and that we must currently opt for 1" editing.

There may be another positive relation that independents can reach with cable TV operators, and that is payment for software used on the cable. What we already know is that the cable operators don't have much money and that they are heavily constrained to use only software of local interest. Nevertheless, if independents can make software that *is* of local appeal (and Greenwich considers that programmes on snooker, for instance, meet this criterion although they haven't been locally originated), the expansion of cable TV local programming could constitute a low-level software market. EMI apparently have a similar longterm view.

There are two other main and overlapping types of installation that could be very important to independents. One is cable TV installation used for educational purposes, of which the ILEA Channel 7 is the most promising I can find: there is a good chance that it can be used as a distribution system for software that fits the 'further education' and 'adult education' brackets.⁴

The other is the editing installations found in all universities, and some college and polytechnics. Because many of these places make teaching programmes for internal use they have editing equipment which should produce good quality results.

All this has been about hardware. It would be sensible to say that access to the hardware depends on having a good relation with the people in charge of it. Often these people have expertise and technical information that is very useful, and they sometimes welcome the opportunity to handle software that is a little different from their routine operations.

Finally, I should point out that these remarks apply only to the situation in the UK, which has the peculiar status of being one of the most backward of the advanced technical nations. Video use for instance and the administration that goes with it is more truly embryonic here than in Canada, USA and several European countries.

References

¹ Figures can be found in *Cable Television*—a paper presented to the Royal Television Society Convention, Cambridge, on 7th Sept 1973 by Maurice Exwood of Rediffusion Ltd reprinted in Vol 1 No. 4 of *Cablevision News* edited at 295 Regent St W1; Tel 637 4591

² *Cable. An examination of the Social and Political Implications of Cable TV* Report of a conference held at the Royal Festival Hall November 1973 organised by SCOB, 9 Poland St W1; Tel 437 8954.

³ For example, *Video In Community Development* by Hopkins Herman Evans and Kirk, CATS, 15 Prince of Wales Crescent NW1 Tel 834 6524 ext 758.

Also *Access* obtainable free current copy from National Film Board of Canada, PO Box 6100, Montreal Quebec Canada

⁴ More information may be obtained from the University of London Audio Visual Centre, 11 Bedford Square, London WC1, to whom enquiries should be first made in writing

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Cable and the Community by Audrey Bronstein of Inter-Action's Community Video Division. Paper delivered to the Standing Conference on Broadcasting, November 1973.

Community action or community development is about the extent to which people have control over the decisions that affect their lives and the degree to which they can participate in determining