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Communications technology, often hailed as the answer to most problems and recently damned as the cause of many, is frequently a neutral agent subject to use and abuse. The central issue is really not the technology, but control. Cable TV is one of the areas in which the choice with respect to control seems not yet to have been made.

Amitai Etzioni

CABLE TV: Instant Shopping or Participatory Technology

Cable TV has been in existence for at least two decades. However, until recently it has been used mainly in rural areas, especially where great distances exist between the source of the TV signals and the receiving sets and where natural barriers, especially mountains, impair reception. But since cities often have better over-the-air reception than rural areas, CATV's attractiveness to most urban dwellers will probably depend on what else, other than a clearer picture, the cable can offer them.

Although various market projections indicate that urbanites will use Cable TV extensively, the public has as yet no clear view of its potential promises and/or dangers. As on most national policy issues, those who are informed and give a damn are either optimists or skeptics. The optimists see in Cable TV a very significant new technology. Skeptics, like me, believe CATV will end up doing little more than adding to the number of local TV stations through which we cannot expect improvement in the cultural level of the programs, but through which we can expect a loss of technical quality.

My skeptical view is based on the assumption that CATV will continue to be in commercial hands in which profit, not quality, rules.

The fact is, of course, that even though technology is the object of dramatic hope or despair with respect to most problems, it is frequently only a neutral agent subject to use and abuse. Before discussing abuse and ways of avoiding it, we must first understand clearly what Cable TV can do, what its main technical features are.

THE TECHNICAL POTENTIAL

There are three main technical features: amplifiers, which are already in use; two-way systems, which are about to be made available; and "head-ends," of which CATV already has some, but could get many more.

Amplifiers

The TV signals travel from the broadcasting antenna (e.g., the one atop the Empire State Building) to a CATV antenna; from there the cable network carries it to neighborhood homes. To keep the signals powerful, various amplifiers are introduced along the way between the antenna and the homes.

The extraordinary potential of CATV, to which the optimists point, lies in the capacity of these amplifiers to do more than simply amplify the signal; they can permit the compression of more channels into the same old wire than over-the-air TV ever had. Whereas over-the-air TV offers from 6 to 10 channels only, homes hooked up to the CATV system in New York City already receive 17 channels and are to receive 24 by 1974. Some engineering firms are reportedly working on amplifiers that could compress 48 or more channels into the same cable. Thus Fred Friendly is not exaggerating when he states that Cable TV is as different from over-the-air TV as a "16-lane highway from a towpath."

Some CATV enthusiasts believe that this new capacity will more or less automatically transform the present TV "wasteland" into a "whole stack of magazines," a full array of pro-
grams, for each taste and level of sophistication. According to Ralph Lee Smith, the reasons for this promise are that producing a program for cable will be much less expensive than producing for national networks and that even small audiences, such as those of a university community, could have a channel of their own.

At the same time, as I see it, no assurance exists that even the more elementary features of the new capacity will be utilized, let alone that our TVs will be turned into educational, informational, and cultural gardens. The engineering firms may develop more powerful amplifiers, but they may not be installed if there is no demand for more channels. At this moment, some of the CATV channels already available are not being used, and those that do carry programs "broadcast" for only a fraction of the day. As the number of subscribers to CATV service rises, the "extra" channels may be used to carry Shakespeare, Spinoza, and Shaw. But it seems more likely to me that they will offer reruns of "Dr. Kildare," "Dr. Welby," and "Hee-Haw." Shaw being added early Sunday mornings.

As of April 1, 1971, all CATV firms serving more than 3,500 subscribers will have to provide, according to a new FCC ruling, "significant," original programs. This may prove to be the turning point that would lead to the appearance of many new programs. When there are larger networks, as the experience in Vancouver and Montreal suggests, a larger variety of programs may evolve, including some of considerable value.

Possibly we may even reach a state—in areas such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and New York, where talent is abundant—in which CATV could become the off-Broadway of television. But, so far, good stations or quality programs are exceptions that do not invalidate the rule.

**Two-way Systems**

When you watch your regular, cableless TV, get really mad, or simply wish you could tell the speaker on the set—whether it be Agnew, Cleaver, or Bob Hope—what you think, there is now no way you can do so. You may, of course, call the station; but even if you get past the busy signals and the switchboard, you will be unable to reach the speaker. And there is usually no way to share your views with everyone else who is watching; nor are the viewers' responses usually tallied and later reported in some summary form. ("The Advocates" is an exception.)

CATV technology potentially could allow citizens to have a dialogue with those in the studio and with the other viewers in their homes, and could permit the viewers' responses to be easily tallied and reported back on the TV screens, somewhat like election results. The technology needed for the cable to send signals, not only from the studio to the home but also from the home to the studio, is in an advanced stage of development; three engineering corporations already are offering part of the necessary hardware. Most CATV corporations seem to find these early models not yet "fully operational"; but, as one engineer noted, "two-way" is "practically around the corner."

The remaining technical difficulties yet to be overcome differ according to what you wish to send from your armchair to the studio. If all you want to put on the wire is a "vote," then the technology required is simpler than if you wish to have your voice carried over the cable to the studio and then to all the TV sets of those viewing the same program. The greatest technical difficulty is posed if you wish to be seen on the set as you are responding; this would require broadcasting your image from your home. However, even this is possible in the near future. According to a plan developed by a Southern California group of communication specialists, a citizen could rent an inexpensive television camera for the evening and thus could broadcast from his home.

**Local Networks ("Head-ends")**

The TV cable network can be arranged in such a way that a neighborhood can be isolated from the total network and can broadcast a program of its own. The point (or points) at which one can enter the cable system, subdivide it, and initiate a program is referred to technically as "head-end(s)." This capacity makes it possible to play soul music to Blacks in Harlem, Latin music to Spanish Harlem, and electronic music to Morning-side Heights, all on the same channel at the same time. Ten such "head-ends" are projected for Northern Manhattan alone.

Although these local networks may be used merely to provide instant shopping at local stores (thus helping them to maintain their competitiveness with Macy's and Gimbel's), these head-ends may also be used to allow the local schools' PTA or community action board to hold its meetings on the "wire." Thus people in the neighborhood who, for various reasons, were unable to attend, could follow the meeting at home; and, once a two-way system that could carry both signals and voices was operational, people would be able to participate in the dialogue from their own homes.

The inclusion of a large number of participants in such dialogues is significant. A major reason traditional participatory democracy was considered dead until CATV came on the scene was that no mechanism was available, in mass society, that would allow, say, 50,000 citizens to hold a dialogue and...
routinely express their views in a summary form.

In the future, this same technological capacity could be used in "piecing" together neighborhood networks (and polls) in order to form larger networks. For instance, all the suburbs of a city or two minority communities could be linked for an evening's give-and-take.

Such electronic town hall meetings may reduce the alienation of large segments of the public from the political and intellectual life of the country, alienation generated precisely because people feel they have no opportunity to talk back, to speak up, to be heard, or to take part in shaping public policies in the many matters decided between elections.

Such predictions of citizen participation may be somewhat utopian in light of the present level of such participation. Most citizens, it seems, do not choose to participate even when given a chance, for example, in elections for school or community action boards. The reasons for this low level of participation are still to be discovered. It is uncertain whether lack of participation is a result of feelings of powerlessness to affect the political process, or of a wish to relax at the end of the work day, or of infrequent exposure to local affairs (a deficiency CATV could correct). If the head-ends are used for town hall meetings, at the minimum, CATV could at least allow us to gauge people's needs and aspirations.

POTENTIAL ABUSES OF CABLE TV

Choices range from a replication of the present privately owned, gingerly regulated system (à la television and radio), to public ownership and operation, to public-interest networks funded by the Ford Foundation or similar sources.

Cable technology can serve rather different masters. It does provide an unparalleled opportunity; however, the substance they will amplify is not determined by the amplifiers, but by their owners. In the next few years CATV may be used to pipe more cultural junk into our living rooms. In addition, the promise of the "two-way" system can be used in less beneficial ways, for example, to promote impulse buying through instant shopping—that is, once a product is projected onto the home set in a commercial, the subscribers to the cable service will be able to push a button saying, in effect, "Mail this one to me and bill me." The technology needed is not yet fully developed. A present difficulty is the identification of the customer, as many subscribers may place orders on the same cable. However, engineers are working on the problem; and Dr. Stephen Unger, a professor of Electrical Engineering at Columbia University, is quite sure it can be overcome.

Two-way systems may be used to guard homes and apartments in the absence of their occupants. The most advanced of these systems contain a camera at the home that can be left on when one leaves and act as an electronic guard. The apparatus may be mounted on a turntable that enables the camera to survey windows and doors and alert local police to the presence of burglars if need be. Two difficulties stand in the way of implementation of this system: the device may prove to be too expensive for many homes, and the police may not have the manpower available to monitor all the sets. Still, this is considered to be one of the great potential contributions of a fully developed CATV system.

The type of outcome will depend to a large extent on who will own, operate, and regulate the new technology. Theoretically, there are many possibilities, ranging from state-owned and -operated television to unfettered private enterprise. In reality, practically all CATV firms in the United States, which number in the hundreds, are privately owned and operated, like local radio stations. And, as with radio stations, there is a variety of government regulations that to some extent influence what CATV firms can do. The main effects of the regulations so far have been the protection of the over-the-air television industry from unfair competition, since the CATV companies are required to carry all over-the-air broadcasts free of charge, and the securing of a cut of the revenues generated for the cities' coffers.

But the main force now shaping CATV is the quest for profit, since the corporations that own the cables and staff their channels are businesses, like the producers of Dr. Pepper, bubble bath, and self-cleaning ovens. The only difference is that they deal with information, education, and culture. The result is quite predictable: most CATV firms have thus far introduced cheap, low-quality wires and poor amplifiers, in what an engineer recently labeled "slapped-together systems." The firms mainly "bottle" the over-the-air programs, that is, they take these out of the air for free and deliver them to homes by way of a better medium at $72 per year per family. Most CATV firms add few, if any, programs of their own; and those that are added tend to be low in quality, deadly dull, or both. The diversity, quality, and public-mindedness of CATV's own programs may increase as the number of subscribers rises; then again, an increase in subscribers may also make the cables more attractive to commercial firms, anxious to push their goodies, which could crowd out the public and educational programs now being carried. Similarly, so long as the cable is commercially controlled, instant shopping and commercial surveillance will surely be with us long before electronic town halls. Why should one expect a department store to pay for these?

It is often argued that people get what they want out of the system. Whether it is merchandise or TV programs, because they "vote" with their purchasing dollar. It is hence important to note that CATV is not a competitive business.

A CATV subscriber cannot take his dollar elsewhere if he is dissatisfied with the quality of the service he is receiving. CATV firms are, in effect, government-created monopolies; the right to wire an area—say, Riverdale—is awarded by the local authority to one, and only one, firm. The subscribers can choose not to have the service, but they cannot go elsewhere to get it.

The "voting with dollars" may be more effective under a pay-TV system, in which subscribers pay for the programs they wish to see, like putting a quarter in the old stoves or heaters. From a technical viewpoint, Cable TV
could be quite easily equipped with a meter. However, the majority of the people may well select roughly the same fare they are getting free. For the minority with rarefied tastes, to pay for the programs they desire would require a fairly high charge. And people of both kinds have numerous reasons for preferring "to go out" to see a movie rather than stay home in front of their sets.

In short, although some service for a fee cannot be ruled out, it does not seem to me to offer a guarantee of quality TV.

Most commonly, the specter of pay TV is raised by the opposition to Cable TV, by those who fear that a change will be imposed on all TV programs, a notion promoted by theater owners who wish to maintain their largely exclusive right to show "first-run" movies. Actually, there is little reason to believe that the main film producers will seek to change the present system, which allows them to collect their revenues first in theaters, then from the commercial firms that put the films on the air, and finally, once more, from the operators of cable channels. And it is almost certain that most Americans will continue to prefer TV programs that are "free" rather than see them without the interruption of commercials but with payment for the privilege.

In short, pay TV seems largely a specter used to frighten citizens and legislators. It might be used to finance a few quality programs, but it is very unlikely to alter deeply, let alone replace, the existing system.

In order to encourage CATV to be less "commercial" and more public-minded, without altering the basic ownership structure, governments at the city, state, and federal level have surrounded CATV with so many regulations that it takes a well-trained lawyer to decipher them. First among the unclear issues is the question of who has the right to regulate CATV; the city, the state, and the FCC have been challenging each other's rulings. However, one thing is clear: government regulation thus far has not been effective. Manhattan has one of the most progressive and comprehensive sets of provisions anywhere. In their franchise contracts, Manhattan CATV firms are required to set aside two channels for educational purposes and two for public programs. However, even in Manhattan there are only insufficient safeguards against the invasion of privacy, and no funds have been provided for educational and public programs.

The net result so far is almost indistinguishable from the wasteland of over-the-air TV. If you have never seen the hands of a clock turning to the tune of "background" music, you have see nothing dull yet. And if you wish to get a feel for what will happen to a public CATV program, turn to over-the-air Channel 31 (not 13), New York City's only TV channel, receivable on UHF sets: much of what it has to offer is the best treatment for insomnia yet devised.

The two other main alternatives are for the state to run the CATV systems, the way TV is run in Israel and, of course, in the socialist republics. The state could lease some channels for commercial use while reserving others for educational and public programs. The revenue generated from the leasing could be used to operate the cable system and finance the educational and public programs. But state control tends to entail censorship, which may rule out the presentation not only of works such as Oh, Calcutta (or a discussion of the President's Commission on Pornography report) but also of dissenting views, ranging from those of the Black Panthers to those of the New Left. Like USIA programs, state television provides chiefly a voice for the official party line. In short, it is an unlikely setting for the evolution of rich and varied TV offerings. But one need not worry: the country is hardly in the mood for state television, and the funds needed to set it up would have to compete with other, higher, national priorities.

The alternative I see as both viable and preferable to the present system is to set up CATV corporations as public authorities, on the model of the famous BBC in Britain and, perhaps, the New York City Port Authority.* In the Black community, heightened awareness of the power and importance of communications—both among its members and to the larger community—has led to growing Black concern with the media. Black Efforts for Soul in Television (BEST) has argued that as a nascent industry, CATV offers important opportunities for the Black community in terms of intra- and intercommunity communications, as an investment arena, and for employment opportunities. In an article in the April 1971 issue of The Black Politician, BEST calls for a CATV system characterized by responsiveness, diversity, and accessibility—all qualities found lacking in the present TV system. To assure responsiveness, BEST would require local operation; to assure diversity, a prohibition on ownership by those engaged in other media activities; and to assure accessibility, low-cost air time. BEST's most controversial recommendation is that, unlike the present TV practice (and that most often proposed for CATV) of public regulation but private operation, CATV might better serve the public interest if it were publicly operated.

The initial capital could be raised by the sale of bonds, and the system could be financed by subscribers' fees and the leasing of some channels to commercial firms. In this way the revenue needed for the programming of public and educational programs could be generated, in addition to "free" channels.

A public CATV system should be tried in some part of the country before cable television becomes no more than the revival of the local pitchman, extending and multiplying commercialism—instead of giving culture, education, and mass participation in politics another chance. In the spirit of pluralism, it may be best to encourage a variety of models: community-owned efforts, foundation-sponsored networks, ownership by universities or other institutions, and strongly regulated private ownership by those not otherwise engaged in media activities.

*At least three foundations are on the verge of deciding if they ought to help finance a public CATV system. One of the major difficulties they face is that the estimates of the actual costs and revenues involved are very hard to make.