CATV: High Potential, Many Problems

By Amiat Etzioni

The much-maligned TV box—"wasteland," "boob tube"—may yet be the fountain of culture, education and information in the American home. While major magazines have folded or are reported financially strained, community-antenna television, or CATV, promises to carry 24 channels of diversified programs, including some devoted exclusively to educational and public affairs broadcasts. "Like a whole stack full of magazines," says Ralph Lee Smith, the author of "The Wired Nation" and one of the few writers who specializes in the area.

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The 8% of Americans whose TV sets are already wired to a community antenna may wonder what the fuss is about. Most of them live in rural areas and use the CATV wire only to get a clearer signal; it's the same "Banana," only more brightly lit. But, as the enthusiasts, CATV is about to take off. It is now breaking into the "top hundred markets," the greater urban centers, which could pay for major new programs. And new technological breakthroughs are about to allow the compression of 24 channels on the same old wire. This development would allow service to a large diversity of audiences, including relatively small and highly sophisticated ones, they say.

CATV does indeed have the technological potential to revolutionize television broadcasting, by moving from a world dominated by national networks and great scarcity of channels to one abundant in local networks. But, if, when and how the technology will be used remains to be seen.

The demand for high-brow, and even middle-brow (a cut above the Fossey Saga) broadcasting is far from clearly established. A major audience study shows that educated viewers prefer the same low quality entertainment as viewers in general, so, only more guiltily about it. Many TV public affairs programs are dull or fairly low brow, and have very small audiences to boot. Whether continued exposure to higher quality entertainment will develop an audience sufficiently large to pay for specialized programming for their CATV channels is far from self-evident. This brings us to the question of who will pay for CATV programs.

CATV systems are created by government franchise awards to private corporations that pay the cable, and get their income from service charges to the CATV set owners hooked up to their cables. It is the CATV companies that currently decide what programs to feed their audiences. That is, the companies are required by law to carry all the over-the-air TV programs, free of charge to the program origination, but may decide for themselves what to put on the remaining channels. So far they frequently put nothing. As long as the audience is small (40,000 subscribers in Manhattan, only small fees, if any, can be collected from those who programs are put on the wire. But if CATV spreads to, say, a third of all homes, as is widely predicted, CATV companies would be able to charge substantial fees for time on their wires.

Who will be those able to pay those fees? Why naturally, those able to sell a mass product—like those who do so on over-the-air TV. They may well promote here "Hee-Haw," "Playboy After Dark" and other pillars of entertainment. As the air has gone, so will the wire. Those who feel that CATV could not fill 24 channels with soap operas, wrestling, dating games and reruns of old movies underwrite Yankee ingenuity and the many forms and faces cultural junk takes.

If more cities would rule, as New York City has, that some channels must be reserved for public and educational material, this would provide some room for non-commercial programs. But lacking a source of funds to support public and educational CATV programming, these channels may be incredibly dull.

Several schools of thought are competing over what is to be done to insure CATV will be filled with "Sesame Street." Laurence Olivier's rendering of Hamlet, and prize winning public affairs programs in addition to the traditional TV diet. Some see a cultural savior in public ownership of the cables and of the program initiation, which is tantamount to nationalized CATV. The country, however, is hardly in the mood for state television; the capital seems unavailable from public sources, and experience from the Soviet Union to Israel shows how public control is no assurance of quality, but of censorship and monopsony.

Leaving the CATV producers to their own devices has brought to our homes so far a broadcast of the newsmore services lecture, weather reports and the Knickerbockers' games, a welcome addition but hardly the one the CATV advocates promised. As more channels and subscribers become available the diversity and the quality of the programs may rise, but, as already indicated, it cannot be assumed that this will take place automatically; there are many "Mission Impossible" and "Dean Martin" programs to re-run.

A third alternative is a piggy-back system, in which private corporations would own and operate the cables as well as initiate the programs, under a requirement that they set aside a number of channels for educational and public programs. And set aside part of their revenue, say 5%, to finance them. This may not be unreasonable in view of the fact that the CATV firms draw on public revenue generally by the license for the origination. At the same time, it must be noted that if too many demands are imposed on the CATV operators they may find the market so unattractive that they fail to wire a city (a course of events reported to have taken place in Connecticut). Given such revenue, there still is the tricky question as to who would decide which public, educational and cultural programs to support. And, of course, this refers only to some of the channels; the majority would still carry commercially financed programs excluded on the public-owned system.

Public affairs and education programs on CATV could draw on "public" funding, ranging from foundations to Congressional appropriations, but if past experience is a guide public programming has a hard time competing with other national needs. Such public subsidy also tends to foster programs that stay away from controversial issues—which most things these days are.

If, on the other hand, the subscribers were asked to pay for specific channels or programs, this would encourage many people—especially the less well off and the poor—to view free trash and avoid pay-as-you-view quality programs.

CATV technology can also be adapted to two-way communication; that is, the people at home may be able to respond to what is sent to them over the TV set. What this capacity will be used for is again far from self-evident. It could be used for instant ratings, for placing shopping orders for products shown in commercials, or for community dialogues and public-opinion surveys. These latter functions would provide the electronic equivalent of the New England town meetings.

Further in the future, the CATV home set may be hooked to a central facility, which would allow the subscriber at home to "print out" the daily newspaper, letters and data stored in information banks. For example, a lawyer working at home could have instantly at hand all the precedents needed to prepare his brief. Again, there is little question that the technologies needed will be developed in the near future.

The size of the potential market for these developments and the purpose for which they will be used are difficult to ascertain at this point. One may be certain, however, that the old TV box will never be quite the same.

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