

WHAT CABLE TV COULD MEAN

364

Newsday

By Amitai Etzioni

NOVEMBER 20, 1971

Cable television provides a technology which could radically alter many aspects of our lives. Its ownership and management—and hence its use and fate—is presently being determined. A White House task force is reviewing the position of the President on the matter, and the Federal Communications Commission has promised to announce new rules by the end of the year. The issues at stake deserve more attention from the public and from the legislatures, who, understandably, are preoccupied with other subjects.

At present, CATV is chiefly a way to provide a better reception of TV pictures by bringing them into the home by cable rather than over the air, at the cost of \$6 a month. CATV is almost exclusively provided by the commercial firms who make a buck by capturing over-the-air TV programs, delivering them via cable to the home, and adding a few original programs. The cable is regulated by the government primarily to protect the over-the-air TV stations from unfair competition, but what we really need is regulation to secure the full technological development and application of cable television.

Given more powerful amplifiers, CATV could bring to the home at least three times as many channels as over-the-air TV now provides. Channels could be supplied for a much larger variety of tastes and needs than are now being accommodated; thus, there could be one or more channels for cultivated tastes (Shakespeare, around the clock?), for instructional purposes (an open university, on the home set), and for a full range of recreational activities ("Laugh-In" and "Hee Haw").

Provided with a hook-up with computer memories, each home and office set could be readily turned into an information retrieval center. The viewer would then be able to check on latest flights, menus at restaurants, movie schedules, ballot places, etc. The lawyer could review precedents for his briefs, the doctor could check the symptoms of a new case against those of others, the student could have at his disposal a complete reference library.

Equipped with a two-way capacity (signals can be sent from the home in addition to receiving them), cable TV could provide individualized programs (put on your own show), accept shopping orders, and conduct public opinion polls.

Provided with a neighborhood "head-end" (the division of the cable into a neighborhood sub-network) and store-front studio, CATV could be used for a continuing dialogue among the members of a community,

and between them and their leaders, and for the origination of neighborhood programs.

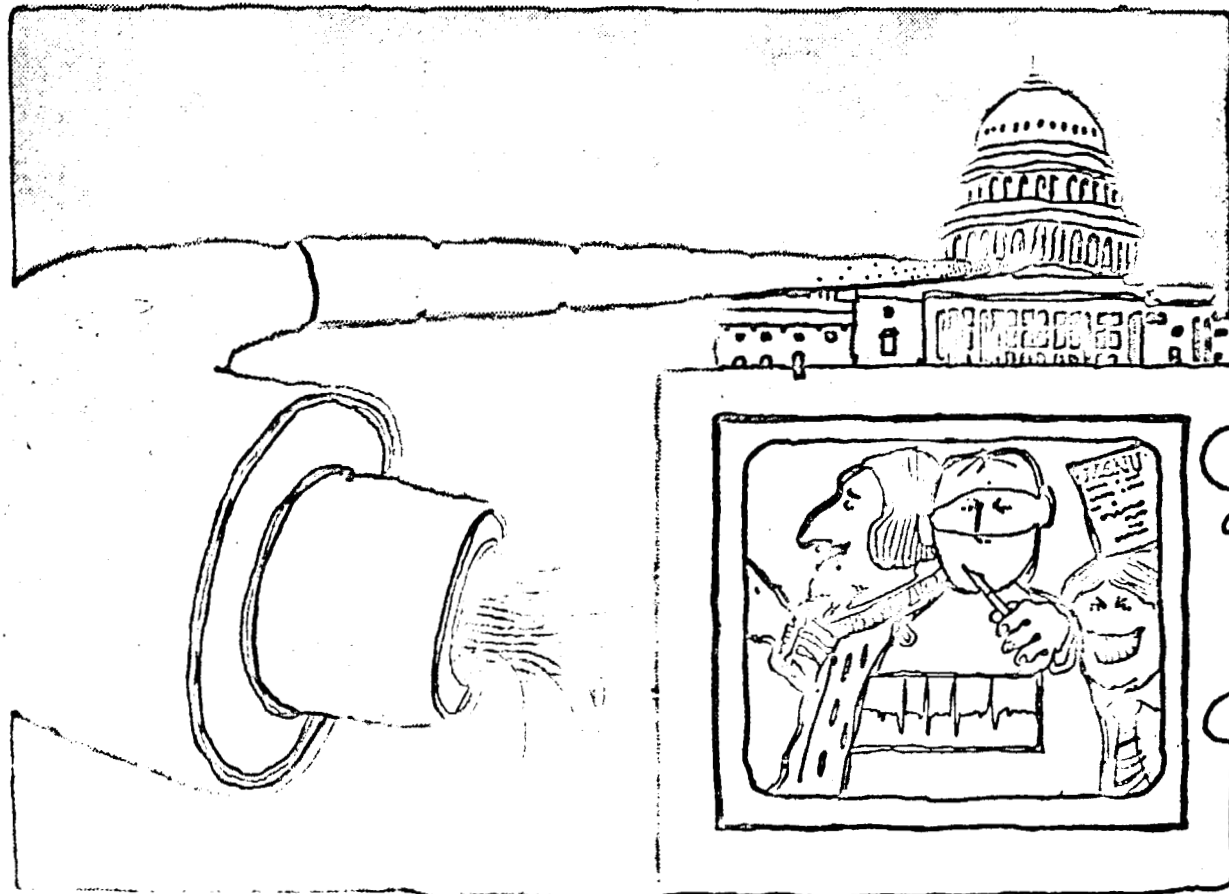
None of these features are pie in the sky. A computer-linked CATV system is on display in Reston, Virginia. A primitive two-way system is used by shoppers in Dennis, Massachusetts, "head-ends" and community accesses are being assembled in Manhattan.

But technologies do not develop in a vacuum. Their development requires funds available so far only for space vehicles and weapons. Their availability requires the kind of regulation that stresses a wide and public-minded use, rather than a focus on those services in which profits flow easiest and most quickly.

A truly community-oriented cable TV might be achieved by a new set of government regulations

which would require the commercial companies to enrich their service and finance those applications which most benefit the public. A favorable alternative might be publicly owned and operated cable systems, following the model of the world-renowned British Broadcasting Corporation. In any event, citizens and community leaders ought to start stifling the yawn CATV now elicits, because an extremely significant decision is about to be made: Will cable television merely widen the commercial-dominated, entertainment-oriented lowest-common-denominator "waste land" of television, or will it transform television into our most valuable educational, cultural, and public tool?

The author is director of the Center for Policy Research at Columbia University.



Newsday drawing by Bob Newman