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ABSTRACT

About 30 educators, cable operators, and foundation and government representatives discussed cable television and continuing education at a conference. They concluded that cable has great potential for education, because of the following features: 1) multiple channels, 2) controlled access to cable channels, 3) an educational access channel, and 4) eventual two-way capability. Barriers to the greater use of cable include: 1) lack of high quality educational materials suitable for televised use and a shortage of skilled personnel to produce them; 2) need for means to evaluate media-based education; and 3) lack of adequate and equitable funding means to support continuing education. The panel's recommendations were: 1) establishment of close liaison between educators and cable operators; 2) a campaign to educate educators to the potential uses of cable and other technologies 3) a major study of the means for financing expanded access to continuing education; 4) development of a national system for the collection, assessment, and distribution of instructional materials for post-secondary education; 5) a continuing overview of progress in the use of cable and other technologies for continuing education. (JK)

Communications and Society

Douglass Cater
Director

April 9, 1973

SUMMARY REPORT ON THE CONFERENCE ON THE CABLE AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

ASPEN - MARCH 14-18, 1973

The development of cable television is creating a new communications system of great potential importance to education in the United States. Cable's many channels can transform television from a wholesale to a retail business -- that is, from a mass-oriented, advertiser supported medium into one supported directly by users with a wide variety of special interests. This system promises to be particularly valuable in serving the growing needs of continuing education, which currently involves over 30 million adult Americans. Cable represents a wholly new means for extending access to education beyond the confines of the classroom, to create a humanistic, learner-centered educational system. Cable, however, is only one of a number of alternative delivery systems -- including the videocassette, satellite transmission, and open circuit broadcasting. Educators must understand the advantages and limitations of each in order to use them effectively.

These are among the major conclusions of a group of 30 educators, cable operators, and foundation and government representatives who met at Aspen, March 14-18, 1973, at a conference

on The Cable and Continuing Education. Sponsored by the Aspen Workshop on Uses of the Cable, the conference represents the first major assessment of the role of this new medium in continuing education. (Specific recommendations from the conference are listed on pages 5-7.)

Cable, the conference was told, has four unique capabilities which will contribute to its usefulness for continuing education:

1. Multiple channels which permit repeated showings for programs of wide interest as well as "narrow-casting" of specialized programs to smaller audiences.
2. Controlled access to cable channels, which will permit direct user support for course programming via pay cable, and experimentation and accurate assessment of course utilization with controlled target audiences.
3. An "educational access channel" which the Federal Communications Commission has required be made available free for a five-year period on all new systems in the top 100 television markets. The availability of this channel at no cost represents a mandated contribution to education, although precisely who will use this channel and for what purposes remains to be determined.
4. Eventual two-way capability, which would permit the creation of an interactive, individualized learning system in conjunction with computer-assisted

instruction. However, two-way uses of cable on a large scale remain at least a decade away and will require substantial investments in terminal and software development.

Cable television has historically had very little to do with education. It began and has developed up to the present almost entirely as a commercial service for enhancing broadcast television reception. On this basis cable has grown to serve approximately 7 million subscribers, or 10 percent of all American households. If cable television is to continue to grow, however, it will have to offer new services to attract additional subscribers

At present, as one cable operator stated at the conference, the technology of cable is well ahead of its actual utilization. A pre-conference study conducted by the Workshop revealed few current uses of cable for the delivery of continuing education. A major concern of the conference, therefore, was to identify the areas in which cable could contribute to continuing education, and to determine how such uses might best be developed.

The cable operators agreed that they are largely preoccupied with winning new franchises, financing and building systems, and coping with the growing array of federal, state, and local regulations. The operators emphasized that their principal business is not producing programs, but providing a controlled distribution service between program originators and their audiences. Some also expressed skepticism as to

whether educational programming will be a significant factor in increasing their subscriber base.

Although the operators expressed their willingness to cooperate with educators, it was clear that the responsibility for identifying educational needs and developing and implementing programs to meet them will remain with the educational community. However, pay cable distribution may offer the possibility for expansion of proprietary education on a commercial basis, resulting in increased competition for traditional institutions.

No matter which institutions take the leadership, if continuing education is to reach a larger, more diverse clientele, the use of media will inevitably play an increasingly important role. But a number of barriers remain. Among those discussed at the conference are:

--The lack of high quality educational materials suitable for televised use, and a shortage of skilled personnel to produce them. Special emphasis was placed on the need for personnel trained to mediate between faculty members concerned with communicating their particular subject matters and technicians concerned only with the mechanics of production. Technologies which are perceived by educators as mysterious and difficult to use are likely not to be used at all.

--Assuring the quality of media-based education. New methods of evaluation must be devised to maintain educational standards and to monitor the relative

effectiveness and costs of various distribution methods. Using technology in education makes sense only if it leads to increased productivity or to more effective learning.

--Developing adequate and equitable funding mechanisms for the support of continuing education. The emergence of new forms of non-traditional-study provides an opportunity to re-think the means of financing education. Pay cable and videocassettes will permit the development of a directly user-supported system, but several participants warned that such a system could exclude the economically disadvantaged who have the greatest need for further education. One suggested solution was the creation of a national Trust Fund for Adult Education based on a small payroll tax. Several countries, including France and Mexico, already have such funds.

Specific recommendations from the conference participants were directed at both the national and local level. Nationally, the conference called for:

1. The establishment of close liaison between educators and cable operators, through such agencies as the Joint Council on Educational Telecommunications and the National Association of Educational Broadcasters, and the National Cable Television Association.

2. A campaign to educate educators to the potential uses of cable and other new technologies. The American Council on Education is currently planning an informational campaign about cable aimed at its member institutions. Other educational associations should be involved in this effort as well.
3. A major study of the means for financing expanded access to continuing education. This was suggested as an appropriate project for the Aspen Institute's new Program on Education for a Changing Society (APEX).
4. Development of a national system for the collection, assessment, and distribution of instructional materials for post secondary education. Such a system would not serve cable or continuing education exclusively, but would aid both. The purpose of the system would be to promote the sharing of high quality materials and to avoid duplication of effort. Conference participants felt that the creation of a new agency was not necessary now, although this might eventually be required. It was agreed that these functions could be served best by the expansion of one of the 3 existing ETV libraries already experienced in the distribution of materials on the elementary and secondary levels.
5. A continuing overview of progress in the use of cable and other communications technologies for continuing education to be carried out by the Cable Workshop.

Locally, participants called for:

1. A practical guide to the use of cable for education, and the educational access channel in particular, to be produced by the Cable Television Information Center.
2. A commitment by the largest multiple system cable operators to identify one or more target cable systems to cooperate with local educational institutions in offering continuing education courses via cable. Educators in these communities would work with the national ETV libraries to explore the suitability of existing courseware for local use. An effort would also be made to survey and catalog existing materials in these libraries and other commercial sources.
3. A high-visibility pilot project which would test the usefulness of cable for continuing education. The project would be carried out in a community with a sizable cable system and several educational institutions already offering continuing education. The project would survey expressed interest in further education, develop and offer courses in response to those interests, and measure the response to the courses and their effectiveness.

The Workshop on Uses of the Cable will publish in Summer, 1973, a Notebook on Cable containing studies and readings prepared for the conference and a summary of conference proceedings.

The Workshop also plans to provide an update within the next year on developments in continuing education and cable since the conference.

The Workshop on Uses of the Cable is a part of the Aspen Program on Communications and Society. The purpose of the Workshop will be to deal with the vital issues affecting the development of cable communications and related technologies. With funding from the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Workshop is designed to provide a continuing overview of problems that are not susceptible to short-term solution. Its goal is to ensure that the new communications media are developed to serve man's needs.

The Workshop is directed by Walter E. Baer. It is located at 770 Welch Road, #453, Palo Alto, California 94304. Telephone: (415) 327-2270.

PARTICIPANTS FOR THE CONFERENCE ON
THE CABLE AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

March 14-18, 1973 Aspen, Colorado

FORREST CHISMAN
Executive Assistant
The Markle Foundation

GENEVIEVE CORY
Canada College
Redwood City, Calif.

BOWMAN CUTTER
Director, Cable Television Information Center

ROBERT T. FILEP
Assoc. Commissioner for Educational Technology
U.S. Office of Education

W. TODD FURNISS
Director, Commission on Academic Affairs, American Council on Education

JAMES GIBBONS
Stanford University;
Newman Commission member

SAMUEL GOULD
Chairman, Commission on Non-Traditional Study

JESSIE MANTLINE
Dean, University College
Director, Open University
Rutgers University

DAVID HILL
Attorney, Cleveland;
Ohio Board of Regents

AMOS B. HOSTETTER, JR.
Executive Vice-President
Continental Cablevision

CYRIL O. HOULE
Professor of Education
University of Chicago

ARMAND L. HUNTER
Director, Continuing Education Service, Michigan State University

THOMAS JAMES
President, Spencer Foundation

CHARLOTTE JONES
Director, Community Programming
Teleprompter Corporation

GERALD LESSER
Harvard School of Education;
Board of Advisors, Children's Television Workshop

JACK McBRIDE
Director, State University of Nebraska

MICHAEL McCRUDDEN
American Television and Communications

SIG MICKELSON
Professor of Journalism
Northwestern University

JAMES MILLER
Vice President
Academy for Educational
Development

SHAFEEK NADER
American Association of
Community Colleges

FRANK NORWOOD
Executive Secretary, Joint
Council on Educational
Telecommunications

JAY RAEBEN
President, Visual
Information Systems

JOHN SCHONLEBER
National Endowment for
the Humanities

STUART SUCHERMAN
The Ford Foundation

NORMAN WATSON
Chancellor, Coast
Community College
Orange County, Calif.

BARRY ZORTHIAN
President, Time-Life Cable

Observers:

MERRELL CLARK
The Edna McConnell
Clark Foundation

FRANK DOBYNS
The ARCA Foundation

RODERICK McPHEE
President, Punahou School
Honolulu, Hawaii

Staff Participants:

DOUGLASS CATER
Director, Aspen Program
on Communications & Society

WALTER BAER
Director, Workshop on
Uses of the Cable

RICHARD ADLER
Associate Director
Workshop on Uses of
the Cable