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ABSTRACT

The nation's communication system of the 1980s--being developed now--will be dominated by a cable television (CTV) and public access to mass communication channels, promising a tremendous enlargement of the country's communication potential, will be a reality. At present, however, the Federal Communication Commission's operational definition of the term "public access" is limited to the single act of opening a channel at the head end of all CTV systems. A rich future of creative human interactions through enlarged channel activity is possible only if there are human receivers in the system and if a portion of the public is skilled in producing quality video programing material. The education industry, especially teachers and civil liberations, must play a major role in defining public access. Educators and others can influence the wiring of new cable systems and speech teachers can increase their students' familiarity with video equipment and with ways to use it to communicate. (JM)

CABLE TELEVISION, PUBLIC ACCESS, AND THE SPEECH TEACHER

A report on the status of the Federal Communications Commission's Cable Television Report and Order of February, 1972, with a discussion of the implications of public access for the speech teacher.

Submitted to the Mass Communication Interest Group Contributed Papers Session, Western Speech Communication Annual Meeting, November, 1975 by Michael V. Sedano, California State University, Los Angeles

Public access promises a tremendous enlargement of this country's communication potential. Federal Communications Commission rules require all existing and future cable television system franchisers to open at least one television channel to anyone, at no charge, on a non-discriminatory basis, at any time. In the near future therefore, public access to mass communication channels will be a reality.

The FCC's operational definition of the term "public access" is limited, however, to the single act of opening a channel at the head end of all CTV systems. Whether communication takes place is unmandatable: the FCC can not force viewers to watch nor are cable operators obligated to provide production assistance beyond an open camera, nor to influence programming.

The concept of public access promises a rich future of creative human interactions through enlarged channel availability in communication, but only if there are human receivers in the system and if a portion of the public is skilled in producing acceptable quality video programming material.

The education industry must play a major role in defining public access in such a way as to prevent a widening of the developing gap between what public access cable television is, and what public access cable television can be. This paper reviews current FCC public access regulations and suggests

some steps that students of communication and teachers of speech can take toward a realization of the concept of public access.

How near is the future? 1980 could mark the start of this country's first decade of "wired-nation" status. Cable television currently has only meagre penetration levels and the recent economic decline has severely curtailed cable's growth. But recent technological improvement of pay cable systems has made it possible for cable operators to offer more than a better picture and cable systems are once again anticipating growth. In Los Angeles for example, Theta Cable's penetration grew in two years from 18% to 25%[1] (a sign of the industry's optimism is seen in the unlikely penetration level reported for this market in a pro-cable source of 42%)[2].

Nationally, pay cable promises $100 million a year revenues to system operators[3] in two years, in 1977. In 1977 these cable systems will also be required to offer 20 channels of cable television with limited two-way potential and public access. The FCC Report and Order, of March 31, 1972, requires that all currently established cable companies and all future companies will install systems capable of at least twenty channel delivery. Highlights of the R&O include the following (Federal Register 2/212/72 @3262):

--CTV systems must offer all local signals and certain other regional broadcast signals that meet FCC viewing tests.

--CTV systems must offer all Grade B (a reception quality) signals of educational television stations.

--CTV systems may carry additional signals that will provide three network stations and three independent stations (both subject to leapfrogging restrictions).

--CTV systems must carry certain dedicated channels, the public access channels that potentially open mass communication channels to public use. The R&O explains that

> cable television systems will have to provide one dedicated, noncommercial public access channel available without charge at all times on a first-come, first-served nondiscriminatory basis and, without charge during a developmental period, one channel for educational use and another channel for local government use.

The term "television of abundance"[4] has been used to describe the television communications future that CTV offers. The differences between cable's twenty or forty channel future and the over-the-air channel availability of existing television reveal just how abundant:[5]

NUMBER OF OVER-AIR CHANNELS AVAILABLE	PERCENT OF US POPULATION SERVED
10 or more	17%
9	9
8	11
7	20
6	9
5	13
4	11
1-3	7
0	3

(The botton 10% will probably continue to rely upon over-the-air signals as the figure represents areas so remote or scattered that cable installation is prohibitively expensive)

The Sloan Commission predicts that twenty channel cable penetration will achieve the 40% level by 1980, a prediction being made happen by paycable's advent. However, cable operators

do not appear anxious to provide the television of abundance--specifically they resist the public access concept as "unnecessary regulation on [their] consumers."[6]

At one time, the FCC seemed ready to prod cable operators to offer the public enlarged communication access. Dean Burch, former FCC Commissioner told the National Cable Television Association in May, 1972 that

> it's up to you whether cable is going to be just another way of moving broadcast signals around (hardly worth the ulcers involved) or whether it is going to become a genuinely new and competitively different medium of communications, offering everything from entertainment and sports and movies to classroom instruction and commercial services and public 'rap' sessions. That was up to you. It still is.[7]

Richard E. Wiley, current FCC Chairman, relates a different conception of the future. Speaking to the NCTA 1975 convention, Wiley notes that "The public interest is simply not served if our regulatory demands so far exceed public need or demand that the surplus becomes a leaden weight which slows the growth of the entire industry."[8]

It will be a tragic loss to society if public access cable television is allowed to be unmandated, especially tragic if we are denied public access for purely economic reasons. The education industry, including teachers and politically active civil libertarians, would do well to consider their responsibilities in the face of public access cable's potential. In general, educators and others can seek to influence the wiring of new cable systems, and speech teachers, specifically, can work to increase their students' familiarity with video equipment and ways to use it to communicate.

As a beginning, the term "public access" should be understood in both its FCC definition and in an enlarged, public-oriented definition. For example, consider the two types of public access created by the R&O. The R&O creates two types of public access channels. Class II channels allow the public access to the technology of video transmission; Class IV channels allow interests at the head end of cable systems access to the cable subscriber's home or office environment.

Class IV channels are the "return" or "response" channels of two-way communications. The R&O foresees their uses in "a relatively narrow band of frequencies that will be used to return limited amounts of information from subscriber to control point." (@3273)

It is important that the "limited amounts of information" not violate the privacy of CTV subscribers. For example, cable operators can sell accurate and complete information on system-wide viewing habits by means of electronic inquiries to viewer equipment that determine what channel viewers are using at a given time. Does this "instant Neilsen" capacity constitute a threat to privacy--it is, after all, a form of electronic surveillance. Cable operators will likely employ Class IV channels for billing procedures--once again the question of privacy arises: should viewers be forced to pay for electronic surveillance merely for the billing efficiency of the cable operator?

Class II channels provide the more commonly understood type of public access. The FCC does require that CTV operators provide production facilities but even with availability of

equipment, will citizens have the knowledge that makes it possible for them to produce messages of affect and effect? The FCC suggests the connection between the educational system and public access programming is of prime importance:

> It is apparent that our goal of creating a low-cost, nondiscriminatory means of access cannot be attained unless members of the public have reasonable production facilities available to them. We expect that many systems will have facilities with which to originate programming that will also be available to produce program material for public access. Hopefully colleges and universities, high schools, recreation departments, churches, unions, and other community groups will have low-cost videotaping equipment for public use. In any event, we are requiring that the cable operator maintain within the franchise area production facilities for use on the public access channel. (@3272ff)

However, the connotations of public access extend beyond access to head end equipment; there must be an audience to address, i.e., CTV systems must be wired into those areas of need for the services public access channels offer:

> cities in the top 100 markets have, as a general rule, more diverse minority groups. . . who are most greatly in need of both an opportunity to express their views and a more efficient method by which they can be apprised of governmental actions and educational opportunities. (@3272)

Clearly the poorer urban areas need the communication channels CTV offers. Due to the low profitability of these high need areas however, it is unlikely that commercial CTV operations will wire these areas early. In this matter the FCC has adapted a hands-off policy:

> As a general proposition, we believe that energized trunk cable should be extended to at least 20 percent of the franchise area per year, with the extension to begin within one year after the commission issues its certificate of compliance. But we have not established twenty percent as an inflexible figure, recognizing that local circumstances vary. (@3276)

Thus who will benefit from a two- to four-fold increase in

television channel capacity-- people who will barely afford $60 per year for "free cable," or the networks and major independents whose advertising revenues multiply as CTV systems interconnect and offer a truly nationwide audience, or people who can afford an extra $100 million a year for paycable, the real television of abundance?

The public has not yet lost its access potential. However slowly the inner cities are wired, free channels on cable systems must eventually become available in these areas of greatest need. Speech teachers can keep the issue alive through organized action by its national and regional associations. WSCA, for example, should consider urging the FCC and President Ford not to rescind the public access provision. Individual WSCA members can develop video awareness in their students. Especially in fundamentals of communication courses students can be taught to control both video hardware and software, the equipment and message design of video communication.

Video equipment in the fundamentals classroom will not convert speech teachers into engineering or broadcasting instructors. Video equipment is simple to operate and master. Video messages must be more carefully developed and presented than face to face messages. The speaker must learn to control the flexibility of video channels:

--multimage presentation (multimage; "live"; film; kinestasis).

--editability of audio (sound on sound; music; voice over).

--focus (both graphic and psychological components of messages).

--Reviewability by audience and other aspects of interposed communications.

It is appropriate and necessary that speech teachers undertake to teach video awareness and to work for creation of a public access cable television system. As "public address" assumes an increasingly electronic dimension, speech teachers must eventually adjust to its changing definition. Public access and cable television provides impetus for doing so now.

The responsibility lies not solely with speech teachers. The next decade of cable television development poses the questions outlined in this report for all members of the education community and concerned consumers everywhere.

How near is the future--will it be any different from the past? The nation's communication system of the 1980s is being developed now. It will be dominated by cable television. The beneficiaries of that system are being trained now.

To learn how well people are adjusting to the potentialities of public access cable it is necessary to examine an actual instance of cable management in the public interest. A case study is provided by a city in Southern California near Los Angeles. To compile this information, the author interviewed[9] a public official of the city. His responsibilities include policy administration for the city's relations with the local cable operator. The city does not have a full time position to handle its cable system relations. The official's name and the city's are deleted at the official's request. Names used are fictitious except for the cable operator's, Theta.

Jim O'Conner has spent about 5% of his working hours dealing with cable matters since 1972, when he became Administrative Assistant to the City Manager of San Amelia, California. Under the City Manager system of government in California, the City Council has legislative power over the franchise that it awarded to the Hughes-Teleprompter owned Theta Cable in 1966-7; the City Manager's office investigates and recommends policy for city council consideration and manages the council-created programs.

Theta is not yet a profitable operation in San Amelia, with only a 10% penetration level in a city that is "cabled in all over." Mr. O'Conner did not have financial or technical information on the Theta cable. All questions of such matters were referred to Theta itself. His ignorance of the information is partially explainable by the 5% work-time figure. However, since Theta has been franchised since 1967 and must offer public access by 1977, O'Conner's ignorance is deplorable. It is a symptom of a general assumption by cable regulators that CTV will take care of itself; a sign that cable regulation agencies do not take an active interest in their responsibilities in cable development.

O'Conner has read the Rand Corporation reports on CTV but little other cable information comprises his reading.[10] The Rand sources provide an excellent analysis of administration of FCC rules thus he is informed about public access. Public access, in fact, is O'Conner's chief concern when he does work "on the legal aspects" of cable in his city.

O'Conner casually mentioned using the government-dedicated public access channels for such programming as city council meetings. When asked about the expense involved he at first did not understand the juxtaposition of "expense" and "public access programming," the air time after all is free. After clarification he noted that the city had not calculated the costs of such programming in terms of wages for a director, an engineer-technical director, a floor manager, and at least two cameramen.

Are San Amelia schools teaching any courses offering video awareness? The San Amelia City College television program is relied upon for equipment and studio facilities--it has an excellent program--but in other public schools, particularly in the area south of city hall in the city's predominantly Latin community, the schools are offering no television related courses. O'Conner noted that such courses are a good idea, and he opined that Title I funds (Compensatory Education Act) could be applied in the creation of such programs.

In sum, the city has little preparedness for public access. The community is not becoming video or public access aware, nor is the city management devoting much time and effort to cable management. The city must be prepared to assess its responses to the following three questions if public access is to become a reality:

1. Can the city realistically finance public access?

--Theta pays 3% of its gross revenues to the city but the city could charge 5%.

--The city owns no Theta stock; Theta pays property tax on its cable plant.

2. Is Theta reticent to allow public access?

--Public access is presently available and Theta has not turned away any tape; O'Conner did not mention whether live programming is available.

3. Does the city possess minimal public access capability?

--A studio is available and SACC presumably turns out competent production people, but the city has not estimated production costs; other public schools do not offer video awareness or production instruction.

--Theta has a small penetration (10%) and growth (10%), but is wired-in throughout the city.

All things considered, the city is not ready for the opportunity that 1977 will present; nevertheless it will present itself. San Amelia's impending entry into "wired-city" status promises to be chaotic and probably short-lived; an experiment in public access. Other cities may be better prepared; other cities may be even more poorly prepared. In this uncertain state the communication professional finds an opportunity to influence the creation of the future's communication system--rather than patiently waiting for the future to happen to them.

Public access promises a tremendous enlargement of this country's communication potential--of people's ability to talk with each other, to expand their control over the systems that are increasingly important in creating new commonplaces of meaning, new standards of behavior, values, attitudes. But public access

is caught in a profit v. service dilemma in whose resolution the speech teacher finds an important opportunity to define the consistency that President Ford seeks in developing cable policy for the foreseeable future:

> though the need for some limited regulation of telecommunications is inescapable, regulation must be consistent with traditional public-interest principles that insure freedom of competition in the economic market-place and freedom of speech in the market-place of ideas.[11]

NOTES

[1]Broadcasting, 88 No. 16 (April 21, 1975), p. 17.

[2]CM/E supplement to BM/E, 11 No. 6 (June, 1975), p. 1. [CM/E: Cable Management Engineering; BM/E: Broadcast Management Engineering magazine]

[3]Broadcasting, 88 No. 16 (April 21, 1975), p. 16.

[4]Sloan Commission on Cable Communications, On the Cable: The Television of Abundance, (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 1971).

[5]Sloan Commission, p. 19.

[6]Broadcasting, 88 No. 16 (April 21, 1975), p. 27.

[7]Walter S. Baer, Cable Television: A Handbook for Decision-Making, (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1973), p. 231.

[8]Broadcasting, 88 No. 16 (April 21, 1975), p. 24.

[9]The interview was conducted in May, 1974. Since then, Theta's Channel 100 has been introduced and its penetration has increased.

[10]There are twelve reports in the Rand series. Recommended are A Guide to the Technology, and Making Public Access Effective.

[11]President Ford's Message to the National Cable Television Association quoted in Broadcasting, 88 No. 16 (April,21, 1975), p. 32.