

6-28-69



Joshua Lederberg

Cable, Pay TV Provide Science-Policy Issue

IN RELATED actions last December, the Federal Communications Commission announced tentative regulations for pay TV and for cable channels (CATV). The guidelines for cable systems have since been the subject of discussion, marked by partial agreements recently among the TV networks and CATV organizers. *

At stake is the allocation of a unique and limited natural resource, the radio-spectrum.

THE TECHNOLOGY of spectrum management rests on firmer scientific principles than that of the social effects of mass media, but both need extensive research for the best answers. Altogether, communications comprise one of the most important frontiers of science and policy today, and a prototype for managing future scientific advances. We are learning that we can manage communications technology for better living, just as we can ask questions about the internal combustion engine or about pesticides.

Freedom of speech is a central issue, but too often as a spurious confusion of

the freedoms of the licensed broadcaster with those of the public, which is legally excluded from his channel. As FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson has pointed out, the censorship of program material would be the most offensive and intrusive way to protect the public interest in the use of the spectrum. But, he continues, this must not deter the public and the FCC from the most vigorous evaluation and criticism of the actual use of a license.

The soundest assurance of free speech is to open the channels to the widest possible extent. The provisional rules for CATV include the exciting opportunity to reserve channels for common carrier use, making them available to all comers at reasonable costs. The networks' uneasiness about the lifting of their program material may be a blessing in disguise, if it encourages more original transmissions on CATV and delayed re-broadcasting of programs of selected and established merit.

BROADCASTING is full of ironies, but none is more

amusing than the contrast between a station's aim to spread its signal as far as possible and its resistance to anyone else's picking it up for further spread. The broadcaster is, of course, afraid that listeners ~~the picking-up~~ might hire some one to filter out the ads and relay only the program. This might become one of the happy functions of pay TV, providing a second way to support programs of wide interest.

Pay TV has been greeted like the work of the devil by the established networks: it may set up a yardstick of quality and an escape for a captive audience. It might undermine the system of "free," or rather advertising-supported, programs.

The citizenry is, however, not so guillible as to believe it ever gets anything for nothing. In his penetrating study, "Television and Society," Harry J. Skornia points out that the low-income budget is now taxed to the tune of over \$75 a year by the costs of TV advertising, passed on in consumer prices.

The consumer is paying the bill, and ought to have a more direct voice in what it buys. His choice should cover real alternatives, not just to whether the clatter coming through the set is just within, or far beyond, the margin of tolerance and sanity.

© 1969, The Washington Post Co.

*Since this was written, the agreements have collapsed. The tentative proposals would have restrained the cable systems from forming a national network of their own.