OFF THE WALL

CABLE TELEVISION & YOU

BY RICHARD LEVINSON

DAN EICHOLTZ

This has been a watershed year for cable television. After floundering for eons in an ocean of government regulation, and bouncing down the rocky rapids of political favoritism, cable TV is now riding the rising tide of public acceptance. The question, of course, is this: What does the future hold? Will the next decade find cable television calmly sipping a gin and tonic by the Swimming Pool of Institutional Complacence, or will it be hurled from the Cliff of National Ennui to be smashed on the Rocks of Advancing Technology next to its earlier counterpart, Network Telegraph? Perhaps this article will throw some fresh water on the Fire of Uninformed Opinion, dry up the Reservoir of Doubt, and Wet the Whistle of Unwarranted Optimism.

What Is Cable Television?

Let me answer that question with a question: Who wants to know? Presumably, we all would like to be as well informed as possible on the issues of the day, but, amazingly, only 14% of the voting public will even open up a newspaper today. Of those who do, 67% will read only one section. Only 20% of those people will read the front page, and only 6% of those will read past the headlines. But of that 6%, an astounding 98% will, 3 days out of 5, accidentally dip the edge of their paper in their coffee cup.

Who wants to know? Less than one-quarter of 1%, that's who, at least when they're not too busy ruining the day for everyone in the restaurant who has to watch them dip one of our most sacred institutions in a cup of coffee.

Where Did Cable Come From?

Cable, (an acronym for **a**Ctual tr**A**nsmission **B**e**L**ow ground lev**E**l) was named for Edward Cable, who piloted the first experimental lighter-than-air cable flight, and who was unfortunately killed when the cable suddenly whiplashed and shot him 600 feet in the air. His final words were, "The vector's all wrong! The numbers are crazy! That's it! No wonder! It'll fly! I know it will! Just reflap the . . . *boooomph*" Ed was buried, and so was the cable. Now, of course, cable transmission is made over telephone wires. This causes occasional problems.

"Ahhh. Think I'll just curl up here with a bowl of popcorn and watch *The Sting* on the ol' HBO."

Click.

"Hello, Susan? This is Tad, the guy who sits behind you in Chemistry. I was wondering if you'd like to . . . yeah, the guy with glasses, listen, I was wondering . . .

Click.

Rzzz Rzzz rzzzzz RzRz RzzzRzzzzz Brrrrrrringgggggg.

"Hello, Sharon, this is Tad . . ."

Public Access And You

First of all, let's define our terms. "You" means "you," the reader. "Public access television" means "Public access television," i.e., the one or two channels on your cable selector box that always look terrible, cheap and kind of stupid. Since some of "you" look terrible and cheap and kind of stupid too, it is sometimes necessary to further differentiate. "Public access TV" is sent over a cable and appears on your TV set, which has a long black cord coming out of it which is plugged into a wall to obtain electric power. If "you" are not plugged into a wall you are not "public access TV." If "you" *are* plugged into a wall, further delineation is called for. "Public access TV" survives because there are laws that don't permit it to die a natural death. If "you" survive because of laws making it impossible for "you" to die a natural death, "you" *might* be "public access television." The final test is easily applied through simple logic: if A=incurable disease, B="You," and C="Public Access Television," and we assume that A=B and B=C, then it becomes clear that if, and only if, "you" have an incurable disease, "you" are "public access television." If "you" don't, "you" are not.

What's So Great About Cable?

Remember the good old days, when gasoline was free and cigarettes didn't cause heart disease? When the whole family used to watch *Disney* to see how a pack of mongrel dogs could solve crimes that baffled Scotland Yard? When the choice on TV was limited to *Hogan's Heroes*, *Gilligan's Island*, *Twilight Zone*, and *Get Smart*? Well, those days are gone. Now, with your channel selector, you can get an almost limitless array of programming from all over the country. For example, here is a small part of what was available in L.A. last night:

- 15 NBC *Mrs. Ed — Tragedy or Outrage?* This docu-drama follows the life of a Hollywood wife, showing the problems of living in the shadow of a famous spouse.
- 16 *Armenian Folk Dance Party*
- 17 ABC *Celebrity Execution* — Jamie Farr and Richard Dawson are "on the block."
- 18 *Twilight Zone*
- 19 *Hogan's Heroes*
- 22 Chicago Superstation — *The Cubs' Year in Review*. Jack Brickhouse swallows a bottle of Sterno and dives on the third rail.
- 23 *Norwegian Folk Dance Party*
- 24 MOVIE — (adult) *Choppers and Breasts*. A motorcycle gang comes to a small town with a big secret.
- 25 *Korean Folk Dance Party*
- 26 CBS — Special *Gotta Quarter?* A young boy goes to the city to find his Grandpa, who is a bum. Grandpa: Jamie Farr. Boy: Richard Dawson.
- 27 *German Folk Dance Party*
- 28 *Get Smart*
- 29 *Hogan's Heroes*

These days, there really is no excuse for ever leaving the house. And soon, we will all be able to push a button on our TV set, and a corned beef sandwich will automatically appear on our table, just like in *The Jetsons*. I, for one, can't wait.

Cable: The Future Challenge

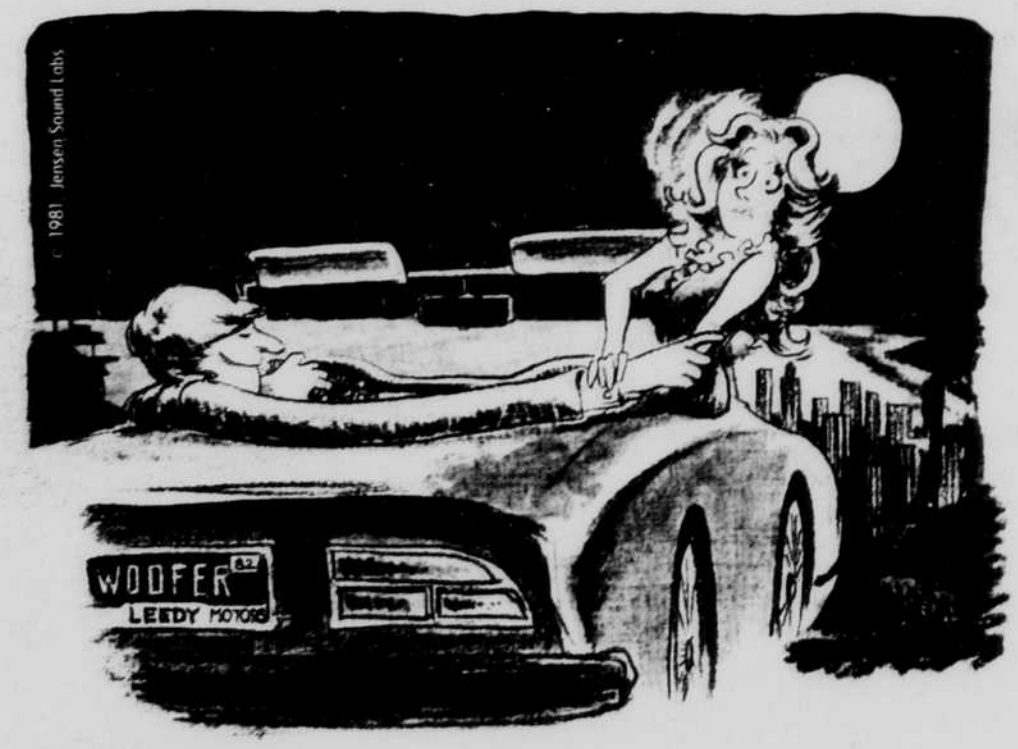
Yes, cable television is with us, and more than ever, we are living in "a global village." Modern technology transmits images at a frightening clip, like some big electronic blabbermouth eager to fill up everybody's brain with half-truths and misinformation over the global back-yard fence (the Atlantic Ocean). In some respects, this bodes well for world stability. Take agriculture, for example. The old saw asks "How do you keep him down on the farm after he's seen Paris?" Well, with the aid of modern communications, he can see Paris any time he likes, and not have to leave the farm at all. And with the coming of advertising to cable TV, keeping him on the farm will be even easier. An ad agency could produce a "travel" commercial in which a voice asks, "How do you keep him on the farm after he's seen . . . Teheran?" Or "Gary, Ind?" Or "The Sahara Desert?" You can bet he'll *want* to stay on the farm, thereby increasing food production and solving world hunger.

In Conclusion

Cable television is like a chocolate candy bar: if you don't eat it fast enough, and it's hot out, it will melt and make a mess. Let me explain that analogy. Cable television is here to be used (eaten), to its full potential (eaten fast enough). If it is not used to its full potential, and the political climate is unfavorable (it is hot out), cable television will become a tangled web of special interests fighting for a piece of the cable-waves (melt and make a mess).

It's really up to us. We can turn our TV sets "On" and stare blankly at whatever the Programmers decide to feed us, or we can turn our sets "off" and abdicate our responsibility as citizens. It's their way or not at all, and don't go looking for a third door to slink through.

The time has come to squarely face the situation and back down, or stand up and be discounted as demographically unimportant. An error. A fluke. That's the choice and the challenge. As I.F. Stone once said, "Owww. I caught my finger in the printing press. Damn." *Our* fingers are caught in a printing press of a different kind, and we can grin and bear it, or amputate quickly. Will we? History says we won't. I'm betting we will. But either way, win or lose, we'll watch the battle, in glorious color, on cable television.



"If he didn't have a Jensen, I wouldn't be in this position."

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