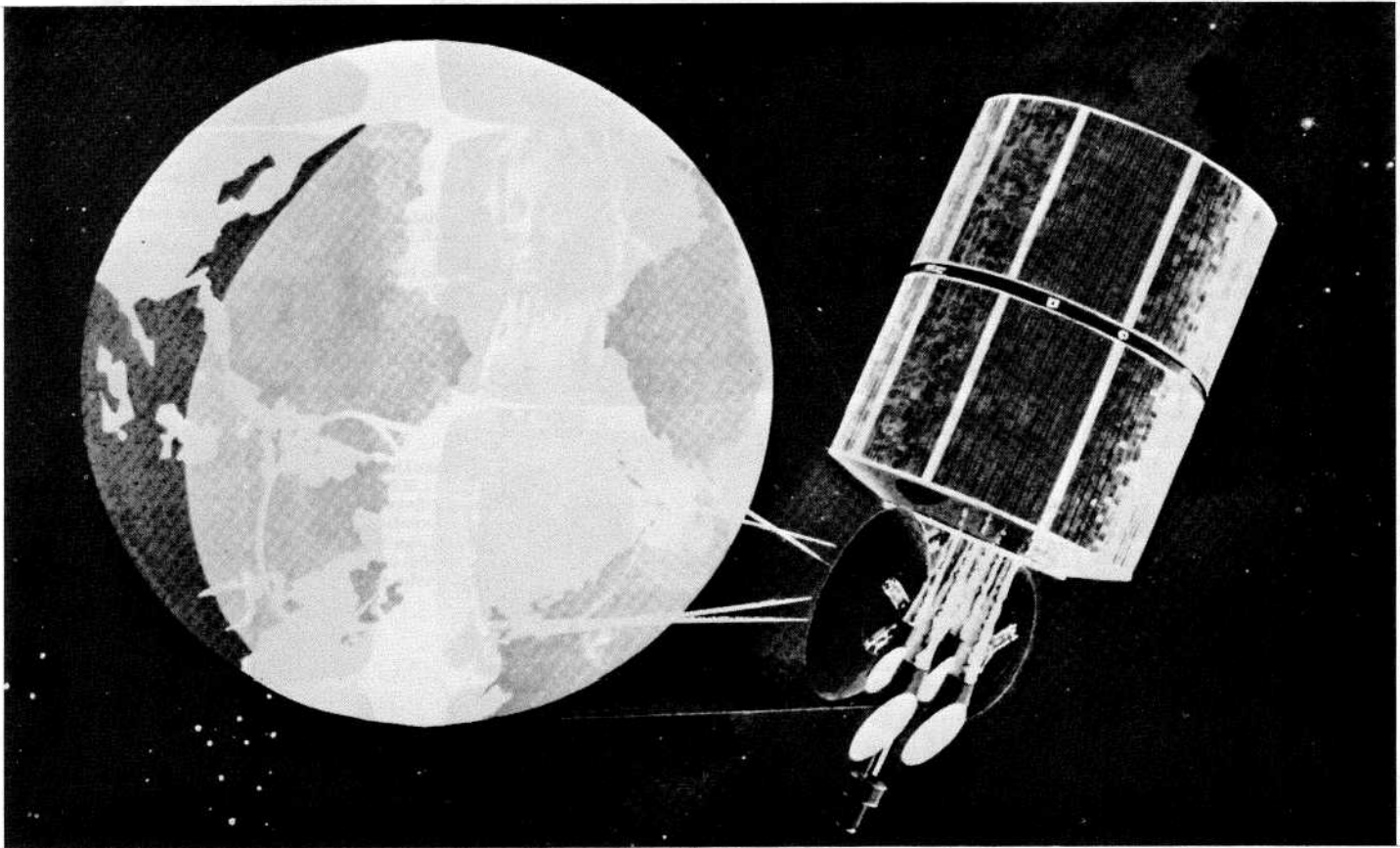


DOMESTIC COMMUNICATIONS SATELLITES



On June 16, 1972 the Federal Communications Commission announced a landmark policy opening the way to the establishment of domestic satellite systems to serve television operators, telephone and telegraph companies, as well as add much to the national capacity for handling and transmitting data. The Commission's plan, which was initiated by the Nixon Administration in 1969 and subsequently the object of vigorous White House lobbying, is referred to unofficially as an "open skies" policy. It calls for almost no government regulation over satellite facilities that will be owned, operated and controlled by the nation's largest communications, aerospace and electronics firms: AT&T, GTE, RCA Globcom, Comsat, Hughes Aircraft, Fairchild Industries, Western Union Telegraph, Western Union International, and Western Tele-Communications. Not only does the policy provide these corporate oligarchs a sizeable public subsidy (communications satellites have been developed with more than \$20 billion in public taxes), but by facilitating the continued concentration of corporate control over the essential means of communications in this country, it effectively denies the public any role in determining the social application of one of the most powerful communications technologies ever manufactured. Further threat to public freedoms and rights is indicated by the fact that satellites are being considered by government and law enforcement agencies and private entrepreneurs to play an important role in carrying out various surveillance activities. The FCC's satellite ruling, as this article documents, must be viewed as a betrayal of public trust certain to have a far ranging impact upon American society and its earlier democratic principles.

by Andrew Horowitz

When the British scientist Arthur Clarke predicted in 1945 that satellites would act as communications relay stations in space, a few took note. The idea that global satellites would interconnect every home and community in the world by telegraph, telephone, television, and data facsimile reproduction seemed a scientific fiction fantasy, as unlikely as radio and television broadcasting appeared to earlier generations of a pre-electronic age. But the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik, in 1957, directed worldwide attention upon a powerful communications technology and the new frontier of space.

From this beginning it was believed that communications satellites would revolutionize the quality of human life and offer unprecedented opportunities for human improvement. Though this optimism persists, it has been tempered by the awareness that satellites can also be used to do enormous harm. Whether the domestic application of this technology will be used to serve people or concerns for economic and political power depends upon who controls and determines the purposes to which they are put. If the military and economic history of the communications satellite can be used as a measure for predicting future developments, it is less likely that the private control of this technology will be used to solve social problems than exacerbate them.

Mr. Horowitz is affiliated with The Network Project, a New York based non-profit organization which conducts research-and-action on the structure, control and operation of American telecommunications.