

4
BARRY: Do you think that the phone-in concept, participating over the airwaves like open mike shows on radio stations, does this take care of what you're talking about?

THEA: You're talking about feedback now. I think that the fact that radio stations are utilizing this now, and are doing well, which they are, is a statement about what people are asking and wanting in terms of media, just as they're asking for more participation on every level of society. However, to go to the extreme—it is still not total control. It's still somebody else programming the show and making decisions as to whether the show should continue to be carried. Usually the phone calls are pre-screened, again maybe for good reason, but it does bring up the issue of professionalism and that the ultimate control and choice is still in the hands of the operator.

BARRY: A common carrier would not do that. In the current proposed rules the common carrier will be encouraged on CATV. Maybe this is the answer to it. From our point of view, the cable tv point of view, is honestly to try to do a job at the community level and see as many different points of view are put on the air as possible. And so far in communities we've worked with it does work fairly well, and I've got as far as getting pros and cons in four ways on visivation, which was a very touchy situation. It got very wild for a few hours, and I wasn't sure I'd get out alive because I was the programmer and the people were pretty violent when they got done with the program. But I personally felt that as the programmer in that community, that particular program did do the very things you're talking about.

BERYL: Specifically, what does common carrier mean?

BARRY: A common carrier is that your lines, your transportation system, is open to any persons that want to lease that facility and you have no right to dictate or alter in any way, shape or form what that is. The input and output are none of your business. You are the common carrier getting it from point A to point B, like the telephone company. Let's take the UPI as a case in point. They sit in New York and they report and type the news in New York. They put their information together and lease common carrier lines, in this case American Telephone Telegraph, the phone company, and they in turn cannot alter news nor can they do anything with the information as it goes through the wires. In regards to CATV a person would buy accessibility to our video lines.

JEFF: The telephone company to some extent has flexibility as to what they can charge for access to that common cable. In the case of UPI they can afford to spend the money to pump it through the system. But there are few individuals, groups, whatever, that can afford that.

BARRY: Why can't it be looked at from another point of view—that if it takes this kind of money and that type of organization to reach that large a segment of the population, shouldn't it be more difficult than touching a button somewhere?

JEFF: Barry, maybe this says how big cable is going to become. If the demand is there for the information, and if information is a primary commodity like food, and necessary like food, and people finally express this to the powers that be, this thing could become a monstrous system. And in fact the technology may provide that.

BARRY: Don't forget that the cable tv situation itself still stops and starts in every neighborhood.

THEA: But that's not going to last for very long. Look at the merger between Teleprompter and H&B. How many systems throughout the country do they own now?

ARTIE: And think about when they have microwave and satellites on a common-carrier basis.

STEVE: I've never heard this CATV stuff before, but it seems to me you can draw distinction between information that's going to be put across networks like this that's going to be compatible with the existing communications systems—structure as it exists in this country, and other kinds of information that are going to be incompatible with the existing structure and systems of this country. If you don't have something that goes beyond the common carrier notion you're going to have the private citizen accessing common carrier, who is a part of the system, let's say the private entrepreneur who put up the system to begin with, who is at least going to be monitoring the same way the greyhound bus monitors who comes on the bus and who doesn't come on the bus, in the area of information. So isn't it really necessary, if you're going to have a full interchange of ideas, if you're going to make this viable in a sense that you're going to present viewpoints and information that have never been presented before, to totally take it from the hands of the guy who is putting up the capital, and functioning in the profit making mode, or any monitoring mode? Don't you need the FCC to say you can't keep the Weathermen out because you think their views should not be presented for whatever reason, or anybody else? Don't you have to build in legal restrictions on that guy doing the monitoring in the first place? Don't you have to take the power away from him?

BARRY: As long as the guy who owns the bus is protected from who drives the bus.

JEFF: What you're talking about is complete cultural freedom. I don't think the culture can handle that. That amount of information, of free access, will bust apart the culture. It could. That's what the resistance is—"Let's do it slowly." Otherwise the whole thing may go zap.

BERYL: How do you insure that free access is implicit in the cable system? How do you avoid the power grab so people can determine what they want to see?

THEA: There is the concept now that media in this country—thanks to Mr. Agnew—is the most powerful way of speaking to the people. It is the way that information is passed and processed. Television as opposed to print is that much more powerful. I think in answer to Beryl's question that one way to deal with this is legally.

JEFF: But I think there has to be some kind of valving system. Otherwise a lot of people won't be able to handle this, whether it's the federal government or people who can't accept seeing themselves.

THEA: Take the constitution for example, you know what is guaranteed. It has all been written. But the translation from that, from print into this new form of giving information, has not been written. And it has to be more than a rediscovery process. It has to be guaranteed or else I don't believe the choice is really there, as indicated by the way that the FCC and the states and the cities are going about con-

structing the rules by which cable systems will be governed. Unless there are certain guarantees of open access it seems as if the system will develop according to who is the most powerful right now, or in the immediate future, and not taking into consideration drastic changes going on in our society that are becoming more and more a reality.

BARRY: Who is to guarantee this—the FCC?

STEVE: I think what I was saying is that freedom of the press, first amendment rights are still in existence to the point where you can write about certain things that are antithetical to the system, that are self-destructive to the system, because they're self-revelatory about the systems' weaknesses, but it's one thing to see that on the level of abstraction of print, which people are used to—and say, oh gee, and that sort of thing—and it's another to drop down levels of abstraction so that you see it happening in the real world. If those guys who are making the decisions about what you can read and what you can see and do are tuned into the view of reality as being destructive of many rigid systematized things that they are functioning in, I'm not sure you're going to get people dropping levels, no less broadening out into new areas of what you can and can't see. For example, Agnew might say—ok, keep it in the New York Times because we know how human beings in this society function on that level of abstraction—they'll deny it, or it'll shake them up a little bit, but if you put it on television or CATV it'll present major problems because that's shaking somebody and saying that's the real world.

THEA: You see what I'm saying in addition to this—you say project, go ahead—is that if you begin to realize the impact that the visual has now in terms of television as opposed to the print medium, it will indeed change drastically in the next five to ten years. Then if you do open up and have free access and allow people to experience all these different things, I think what begins to happen there too is some leveling process; that it will not be as earth shattering as we think of it now. The individual will adjust and acclimate.

JEFF: I also think that a new impact on the scene is the home cartridges and cassettes, video recorders. If it's successful, and there's a tremendous amount of capital being poured into it to almost force it to be successful, if a couple million recorders reach the homes in the next few years which seems likely, the amount of video programming, software, that's going to be around will be immense compared to what it is today, and the broadcasters have no possible way of putting this over the air, and the cable guys do, because they have all these available channels—it'll make cable grow faster because you can't get the information any other way, and people can't afford cassettes in any great quantity compared to the information that's around. And also it's going to change the broadcasters much like Hollywood has changed as a result of the movies. I think you're going to see that happen, which again is that gradualism, and that as the broadcasters change, people will begin to watch television a little differently so that they can handle the kinds of information you're talking about better.

BARRY: I think what you'll find is that television, cable television, is going to play an extremely in-depth role in this thing.

BERYL: How are you going about creating these changes in Bedford-Stuyvesant?

THEA: the Bedford Stuyvesant project would be owned by the Restoration Corporation which is representative of the community, and the profits which are made off the venture would feedback into providing additional services for the community. It is going to have more community ownership because profits are going to feedback. The thing that's really new about the project is that no television outlet in this country has ever had black ownership, and very often we know that those who own do control. Before, we were talking about a very different kind of system, but given this present system, as it exists, ownership determines control, so therefore, the whole concept behind the Restoration's proposal or hoped for actualization is to have ownership and control within a Black community so the Black man's needs would be better represented. He would have programming that would speak to the needs of that community. Black people in the community would have more access to the system than they do now. The reality and the problem of the system, however, is who's going to buy it? You've got to come up with all that front end bread, an adequate amount of money to put the system in—it's tremendously expensive—and you have to give people something if you want them to purchase and subscribe to your service. Traditionally, the cable companies that have made money have provided better reception or else they have provided importation of distant signals. In Brooklyn you don't have either one of those problems. There is not a reception problem in Brooklyn so people are not going to subscribe to cable to get a better picture, and also in the entire New York market you have a tremendous number of channels available to you now. So you're going to have to provide some kind of a service if you're going to have people pay you. Conceptually, the way this has been set up—first of all I want to say they don't have many things yet, there's been no franchise given out—this is all conceptualization. The Board of Estimate has not begun to entertain bids for cable in Brooklyn. I'm talking about this from a traditional point of view—this is the way a businessman would look at this market. He would also look at the other aspects of it, once you get the cable system in there, there are many other ways of utilizing it to make money—computer uses, facsimile, reproduction—the myriad things that people think are at the other end of a cable system, cable operation. Really, the reason the Restoration is interested in it is the service it can provide the Black community which they do not feel regular television is now providing, and they do not feel that if a traditional company comes in there and owns it, it will provide to the Black community.

PHYLLIS: How can a Black community go about getting access?

THEA: One way is to go about what they're doing, and that is, to own it. Because the feeling is very strong that if you don't own it then you're always the guy on the outside banging on the door asking for it, which is what we were talking about before—someone else is the "we", someone else is in control, and what they're attempting. . .

PHYLLIS: How do they get to own it?

THEA: Right now, the proposed project at this point, is to find a financial partner to go hand in hand with the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corpora-

trying to proceed right now according to the way things have always been done, the way they've been done elsewhere, the way cable franchises were allocated in Manhattan. However, let me digress. The City of New York is in the process of setting up an office of Telecommunications which will come out with specific guidelines for bids for cable franchises in the boroughs that have not been given out as yet so in actuality there really is no blueprint as yet. The blueprint is in the process of being created. On the other hand, the Restoration Corporation feels there are steps that should be taken along these lines which would most likely or most probably be helpful in securing the franchise.

JEFF: Changing the subject a bit, from a straight financial point of view we do not think that the top 50 markets, in the short term, are going to provide as financially successful as some investors feel today, whereas, those cable systems composed of fairly good size small, rural towns of 25-30,000 populations, and the bottom 50 market, cities that don't have multiple network and all the available programming, in terms of cash flow they are going to be the more successful ones. They have the least amount of problems for developing reasons for people to look at cable for other than reception or more of the same standard fare of broadcasting, as would, say, New York City. The reasons for this are two-fold: the research and development and management expertise necessary to come up with practical cable services to attract large numbers of subscribers is going to take a longer time and be more expensive than people think, and secondly, the amount of capital, legal and political maneuvering, to reach all those people who want to subscribe to the services, is expensive and time consuming. Those smaller systems which I categorized before, while they have fewer of the kinds of problems which keep people away from cable, they are on the other hand not taking the longer term risks, but rather, capitalize on those traditional reasons of why people subscribe to cable, i.e., poor reception and lack of complete large city-type, network programming.

BARRY: I've got to leave. Is there anything I can add before I go? I hate to feel like I'm ducking out.

JEFF: Well, one last question—about Aspen. Aspen's on the verge of going to the hands of the freaks. They almost elected a freak mayor; they're about to elect a freak sheriff; they're taking over control of the town. The power of the town is now going into nonestablished interests. What are you guys going to do? Are you aware of what's happening?

BARRY: I can't answer that. I don't really know. I will say this—the cable system there is one that provides a needed service to the people because it's well accepted, beyond that point I can't honestly tell you what is happening at the city level. It's hard to say at this point whether they can or not. At this point in that particular system it will fall beneath the required programming level of the FCC—the 3500 level of subscribers, but that's being talked about to be changed to 5000—but what I'm not really sure about is how accessible do we all want this to be. We want to say it's so available that one individual can go in front of it and expound a view. From an operating point of view it poses a very large problem. How is this all to be accomplished?

THEA: And do people really want it?

JEFF: The technology is becoming more and more accessible so we have to come to grips with that. A guy now stands up in Union Square, but with technology the impact of one individual on a lot of people is becoming greater. . .

BARRY: The cable television idea is that you've got 12 or 15 or 27 or 47 or however many channels and technically, going back to the wire itself—it will handle any frequencies. . .The more channels there are, the less control to any one person, which I guess is what we're all yelling about here or talking about or thinking about is all going to evolve.

THEA: I guess I'm pessimistic, that it'll get to evolve that easily.

(Barry leaves)

BERYL: Well, what steps can people take in order to access cable? Right now many of us are originating our own programming. Paul Ryan is going up to a cable conference. What's he going to do there? What is he opting for?

JEFF: Barry Steigers represents the kind of guy who will talk about anything. But a lot of your cable operators aren't even at awareness level 1. First you should differentiate between Multiple Systems Operators (MSO's) and Single System Operators (SSO's). The single systems operator is the kind of guy I characterized before—a local middle class guy who wants to make some money, and chances are he's in a community that doesn't have good reception. He got the franchise from the city. He probably had a contact to the city councillor or he had a lawyer who knew. . .

ARTIE: And it's on a non-exclusive basis, so someone else can come along and get a franchise too.

JEFF: Then you've got the multiple systems operator who has a corporation; stockholders who are very heavily into the scene of making a lot of money and getting big. A multiple systems operator looks at local origination as a way to make more money. From what we can see, he probably sees it as a way to add more subscribers to his station, perhaps over the possibility of getting advertising on the local channel. And that's what Barry said. No matter how you run through the economics, it doesn't seem that you can ever get enough local advertising to cover the cost of local programming. The single system guy is not interested in making more money. He probably spends one day a week at his system. He doesn't want to hear about origination. He doesn't care if it makes more money or if it doesn't make more money.

ARTIE: That's a very broad generalization. The people who have been most successful in origination have been the moms and pops, the ones who care, who take pride in their systems and want to provide a utility type service.

THEA: Right. But I think the division Jeff's making is that they're not really concerned with the other implications of cable as well, the really broad-band capabilities. I'm sure they're the ones who would very easily go along with the splitting off of the services—really setting up a common carrier system. All they're interested in is the hardware.

JEFF: I think that looking at this from another end, in this society a person's bread is his vote. And if he wants a certain kind of information, and he needs it, he's going to pay for it. And if he's going to pay for it, there's going to be a capitalist around who's going to give it to him because he wants to take that bread. And we are dealing with the capitalists who

own cable systems and who need to be convinced that this is indeed what the people want to see.

THEA: Let's take a look at broadcast. Every broadcaster must do a certain amount of public service broadcasting, but he has control of when and where he does it, so he puts it on at all odd hours—there's a Sunday morning ghetto hour—and he does it because he's made to do it. All I'm saying is that right now when laws are being made around the new cable industry, let's try to construct it in such a way that access is guaranteed to people. I do think that the cable operator will be able to afford it, and I've discussed this with cable operators. They certainly will be able to afford it if they are left those other channels to make money from. If they are still collecting subscription fees which they will be, if you allow them to lease the other channels, etc., or maybe do programming on one channel.

ARTIE: Instead of 5% of your gross revenues going to city municipalities, which is what's happening right now, why not make it 3% and dedicate 2% to the support of public channels.

JEFF: Let's go back to Paul Ryan, or to any group or person experimenting with new kinds of programming. You're a bunch of people who know how to handle equipment, understand that if the equipment is handed out properly and used properly the kinds of results that come from that. The assumption has got to be right because if people indeed want it and need it then they're going to pay for it, and there are going to be people around, people who have money, who are going to respond to that by giving that to them. We're trying to reach the cable operators. Explain to them the methodology. Show them some tapes. Show them some examples of things that have happened. Show them how it might be profitable. Put them in touch with Foundations that have money, that can fund the equipment to begin with, to start doing the things. If people like it, they're going to ask for more. They're going to write in, call up, look for equipment, and it's going to start to happen if in fact it works. Laws are fine. But make the systems as fluid as possible. Allow it to happen—as much money, as much exposure, as possible, and see whether or not our assumption, our idea works. PHYLLIS: How do we ourselves get access, and how do we influence those who already have access? They'll both happen side by side. The second one already exists.

THEA: There are many fronts you have to operate on and giving people equipment and having Paul and many other people going into communities is not going to be adequate if you're not going to have the laws to back it up. They have empty time now. They'd be crazy not to give it to you. But you've got to take people where they are. You are not going to change information systems that quickly, nor are you going to change people's ability and ways of taking information in. People now are programmed when it comes to television. You are not going to change their attitudes towards television that quickly or radically by introducing open type of programming (such as the kind of thing that Raindance would do) on a channel in a given area. That, in and of itself, will not prove to cable operators this is a great, sexy thing, and man it works. Because what they're thinking about in reality is what's sexy. What can I put on my system that's going to make people subscribe? The Knicks and Rangers, that's sexy man, that's what people will subscribe to. People look at television now as something that's programmed, as entertainment, as escape from reality. They have never experienced television in any other way. All I'm saying is that until you allow them the time for the process of controlling their information, of seeing a different source a different way, you are not going to change their viewing habits. That is going to take time.

JEFF: Are you going to legislate that they change their viewing habits?

THEA: I'm saying you do both things. You keep making it available, keep giving people the equipment, and helping people to know how to make programs, but make sure that it is backed up by the legal aspect so that when people get to the point where they say, "hey, this is what I want, I want access," the laws are there that say you must give it to them.

ARTIE: Going back to Paul approaching the cable operators. They're only listening to him because the FCC has said you must originate by April 1, 1971. If that hadn't been said I don't know how many would be listening.

THEA: This was a legal action, and it came out of the FCC.

BERYL: Why did they push it up to April?

THEA: Lobbying, pressure from the cable operators, and they may try to push it up again. . . the point I was trying to make before is I think it's terribly important to give people the expertise and allow them to utilize the technology. But people have to become aware of the fact that when franchises are granted that there be stipulation made for public access. First, you find out where cable franchises stand in your community, if indeed they have been given out, or if they haven't. Number two, in most instances, they have just been given away. They just say nothing; they're like bus franchises with no stipulations of what the cable operator must do or must not do. In this country the jurisdiction at this point is still within the local community. You as a person within the community have more access to affecting the legislation. Eventually it may end up in the FCC. However, right now the feeling is the FCC really is looking at the municipalities for guidelines, and sitting back and taking a longer view and allowing a lot of this to evolve in front of them. So you would try to stipulate at least that you have some public channels, that this is required of whoever the cable operator is, that he sub-divide these channels in such a way that they service individual communities, so it's not just two public channels that go out to the entire community, but that it is sub-divided in such a way that each neighborhood has access to do some programming for itself. This is also stipulated in the New York City franchise, and that origination facilities be made available. . . . What I did in Two Bridges with Paul as a matter of fact for a while, and with Ken Marsh, was bring that equipment into the community so people could experience it, so the people could utilize it, again not talking about the process of media, but letting the people experience the process and having the half-inch portable equipment available and letting people get that immediate feedback at community meetings, so they begin to understand what that process is. Most people really want to act when they learn about something. . .

see RAND report on Cable Television by Ned Feldman