brief TO

THE CANADIAN RADIO AND TELEVISION COMMISSION
FROM CHALLENGE FOR CHANGE/SOCIETE NOUVELLE

Challenge for Change/Sociète Nouvelle was estab-
lished to focus on communications and social
change; to create an awareness of the nature of change
and its accelerated pace in present day society and
the need which we all have (and especially the least
organized amongst us) of harnessing and working
with it.

In the beginning this took the form of making
films "about" such subjects as poor people, welfare
agencies, minority groups, human rights, etc. This
approach proved unsatisfactory because it was essen-
tially no different from the treatment given the "dis-
advantaged" by many television programmes, govern-
ment reports and newspaper articles in that action
that could result in change was very often out of the
reach of those affected. The problem remained but
often with the subjects highly embarrassed and fre-
quently more frustrated than before. Slowly, a dif-
f erent philosophy grew—that of involving citizens
in the production process—choosing their own sub-
ject areas, controlling the editorial process, and de-
termining who should see the film. The film maker
from the Programme now became a spark plug for
process rather than a creator of product and could
use his previous liability as an outsider to mediate
difficulties and bring conflicting parties together.

With the introduction of low-cost portable and
easy to use 1/2" videotape equipment—and C.R.T.C.‘s
proposed community channels on cable systems ("for
the enrichment of community life through fostering
communications amongst individuals and community
groups"), CITIZEN ACCESS TO THE MEDIA
became one of the main thrusts of the Challenge for
Change programme.

By preparing their own programmes for the
community channels on matters of immediate concern
to themselves, we felt it would be possible for ALL
citizens to participate in local issues; to dialogue
with their elected officials; to tap into various infor-
mation sources and generally to express themselves
in whatever way they wanted—be it political debate
or cultural expression, or just talking with each other
directly. Such a system could be the key to the
"human scale" that the huge, impersonal media have
lost. It could reintroduce the human scale into
problem solving and indeed make local problem-
solving everyone’s concern. The danger would be
that monologue instead of dialogue; one way com-
munication instead of feedback; and "coverage"
rather than an exchange of informed opinion would
turn the channel into a Tower of Babel. However,
given the timidity of much local media, the "econ-
omic disinterest" of the national media and the al-
ost complete lack of access for the ordinary guy,
we felt that the Challenge for Change philosophy
advocated access to cable would be a positive way of encouraging

WHICH SIDE HAS IT HAD?

One of the many traps that creative and con-
cerned people are now being sucked into is cable
television. Whoever believes that gaining access to
cable will enable him to control his destiny in any
meaningful way, is a fool.

In Canada and in the States, cable access groups
have been systematically blinding themselves. The
energy of the liberals has been spent on proving
that they are good boys sincerely concerned with
human ecology, and so they feel they have earned
the privilege of cable access (see National Film
Board's Challenge for Change brief to the CRTC). The
radicals aren't going to play that game, they
spend their energies on demanding the inalienable
right to cable access. It is all a joke.

The CRTC is responsible for broadcasting in
Canada. Like a medieval touring court it travels
the country grudgingly receiving briefs from elec-
tronic-media supplicants. The bored and busy court
members can’t possibly be expected to hear all the
briefs, so they listen to this one, and listen to that
one. Afterwards, the access groups scuttle back to
their churches, lofts and YMCAs, hoping they have
made a good impression.

Meanwhile, there is a brief that no one seems to
have read. The capitalists, the cable station owners,
are trying to justify themselves: "In spite of the rapid
growth of cable, the revenue growth of TV broad-
casters has been sustained, their operating profits
have accelerated...the large growth in cable view-
ing had little effect on the audience of Canadian
television broadcasters." As far back as 1968 the
RAND corporation was recommending community
access to cable. Was no one suspicious? I quote
from a later RAND report explaining its apparent
altruism. "Cable's small negative impact in the 1980s
will probably be unobservable—lost in the static of
more decisive developments."

Government knows it. Big industry knows it. Even
small cable companies know it. Everyone knows it
except the groups fighting for cable access. CAB LE
IS DICKSHIT.

Sure people should make their own programmes
and have access to cable. Sure the cable com-
panies should be licenced as utilities with no respon-
sibility for the content of the program originators.
We can even go a step further and say that pro-
duction and distribution should be separated; cable
companies should be equipment supply centres
providing hardware, while the transmission of pro-
grames should be on separate utilities under citizen
control. Cable definitely has potential value. But the
exaggerated romance with the equipment is siphon-
ing off productive energies out of all proportion to
tits usefulness.

Illustrations: André Montpetit
people to participate rather than spectate in determining their present and future.

Once upon a time the Town Hall was the place where all citizens could participate in their own affairs. With the growth of population in urban areas we have to move the Town Hall into people's homes. Community channels can be the way.

Summary of Findings
1) The use of VTR with industrial sync for cablecasting is feasible, and the technology is immediately available. The cost of $2,000 only for cablecasting would kill community programming.
2) Truly portable equipment is essential if programming is to escape from the studio to allow people to participate on their home ground. Regula-
tions (1/2") which TV only for cablecasting could be unrealistic. It is
3) It is quite possible for producers to produce adequate material after a very short period of practice. They will not have the high technical gloss but this is not of prime importance if the raison d'être is "people-participation".
4) Local programmes have proved popular wherever they have been produced, but this novelty will wear off if people are only "programmed-at", and not "programmed-with".
5) The present C.R.T.C guidelines state that a community channel should be provided but there is an inevitable confusion between "community programming" and "local programming".

Community Programming—to us, means that EVERYONE has the privilege of using a local channel. It is not necessarily to be granted by the Owner. Community programming means citizen participation—guaranteed by a truly representative body of all stations that excludes neither the poor nor the police. It MUST mean FEEDBACK and two-way communication. Perhaps it should be called Community Service.

In practice LOCAL PROGRAMMING means coverage of local events by the cable company. The company decides what goes on the air—and, therefore, what does not go on. Some companies are owned locally and open discussion of local community affairs is often avoided because of conflict of interests. Other companies are owned by political or commercial vested interests. It is possible that some form of rotating Charter Board or an independent Review Board might be suggested by C.R.T.C. If they own a chain of stations, costs are minimized by broadcasting prints or tapes, around their system. Therefore, a given community channel might only get as little as one hour of local material. In Fredericton, a community hall (in a section of the town not yet "cabled") could be rented to become a studio for $5,000.

7) Feedback should be strongly encouraged as an essential part of community programming—whether this is in the form of wired locations with cameras installed, or videophones, or phone-in audience reactions or open-ended audience participation shows. For example, in Fredericton, a community hall (in a section of the town not yet "cabled") could be rented to become a studio for $5,000.
8) Minority groups should be encouraged to produce their own programmes for a community channel. This could be done by the provision of federal or provincial grants to help them with equipment and general production costs.
9) Legal liability for a given programme has to be transferred from the cable company to the programme originator—not only to get the operator "off the hook", but also to ensure "responsible" programming.
10) To ensure that all segments of a community are given the Right to Access—local coordinating bodies have to be created that will not be dominated by political or commercial vested interests. It is possible that the final form of a Selective Right to programme by operating as a Review Board or an independent Charter Board might be suggested by C.R.T.C. If they own a chain of stations, costs are minimized by broadcasting prints or tapes, around their system. Therefore, a given community channel might only get as little as one hour of local material. In Fredericton, a community hall (in a section of the town not yet "cabled") could be rented to become a studio for $5,000.

Throughout the cable flurry I have been haunted by one question. The aggressive marketing of cable and the importance given it by government are out of proportion to its apparent economic or propaganda value. Why are the authorities so interested in what is cablecasting is feasible, and the technology is immediately available. The cost of $2,000 only for cablecasting could be unrealistic. It is not necessarily to be granted by the Owner. Community programming means citizen participation—guaranteed by a truly representative body of all stations that excludes neither the poor nor the police. It MUST mean FEEDBACK and two-way communication. Perhaps it should be called Community Service.

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But beyond the technological supermarket, there remains an even more profound flaw in the cable vision: and that is, whether we want to replace Johnny Carson with Jerry Rubin, whether we want to develop a brighter, more intelligent, ever more seductive TV, even if it has the purest socialist heart. True, poor people's housing developments don't usually have their own auditoriums, and hence a cable TV town meeting would offer some organizing potential. But why not just build a meeting hall, instead of using twice the resources to construct a TV system? Television watching is, to begin with, a passive activity. That's why you ought to keep your eye on it. If it is true that passivity, alienation, and a sense of powerlessness are among the most dangerous epidemics in our society today, the television set is suspect at the outset regardless of what’s programmed on it.