Cable TV in America

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Abstract
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Introduction:

In America cable TV is a magic carpet that has matured into a proliferating business and is the last word in commercial television. Never in history, the medium of cable communication became as diversified and wide-ranging as it is today. It has propounded many a concept viz., consumer under-investment, pay TV, subscriber TV and what not.

The growth of cable TV is largely attributed to the unfulfilled demand of the viewers for novelty in television programmes and viewers’ hunger for diversified programming. Cable has made the conventional broadcast networks look obsolete and has grown beyond the community antenna television operations. Since its inception it has become the centre of public debate and posed a challenge to the scholars, critics, communication policy makers and communication businessmen.

A cable television system in an essence a method of distributing television, radio, and data signals from a central originating location to residences by way of coaxial cable.

Cable technology is not of recent origin. It was conceived as early as 1949. Initially cable television was developed to improve
the conventional broadcast television. Thus technically, cable is just an extension of broadcast television.

The credit for starting the first ever cable TV station goes to Robert J. Tarlton of Lansford, Pennsylvania. A professional radio serviceman, Tarlton made a successful bid in 1949 to catch TV signals from Philadelphia, 65 miles away from his place, by installing cable. Encouraged by his initial success he ventured into the television business. The company successfully installed a master antenna at a mountain summit and after amplifying the weak signals from Philadelphia, the signals were distributed to houses by coaxial cable hung on poles. Panther Valley charged an initial installation fee of $125 and $3 per month. Tarlton’s cable system enabled the viewers to watch three Philadelphia television stations clearly and this marks the historic origin of CATV known as Community Antenna Television System.

Thus Tarlton’s master antenna cable system a technological breakthrough and innovation, paved the way for further improvisation of cable technology. The power and influence of CATV increased rapidly and by 1961 there were 700 community antenna TV systems. This technological phenomenon is noteworthy as the channel capacity of a cable system is wide ranging unlike the television translation which is limited by the availability of broadcast frequencies. From 1949 to 1960 cable was a mere technological phenomenon designed to facilitate the reach of television broadcasting stations in rural and remote areas of United States.

From 1970’s cable became progressive when it charted programming services and the programmes were directly fed into the cable. Since cable had the potential to receive the signals from broadcast stations, it facilitated two-way communication. The advent of cable attracted the urban markets and cable became a multi-channel medium with abundant capacity for multichannel programming. Today this media giant has vast reach of 80 percent of American households and serves over 50
percent of all TV households. The current billing of its revenue has touched an all time high of $16 billion annually.

Interestingly, cable offered diversity from the conventional TV network. Because the latter offered, according to the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) regulations, three or fewer stations to each city to prevent the interference of the frequencies. Consequently, this limited the number of network to three. On the contrary, cable offered a diversity of channels beyond one’s imagination. The easy access to the abundant channels ranging from 12 to 60 was mind boggling. This system became feasible with the beaming of the signals from communication satellites to the cable system earth station.

Significantly cable TV broke the monopoly of the broadcast TV networks on the TV time. The entire television entertainment industry was under the mercy of three major corporations’ viz., ABC, NBC, and CBS. As a result, prime time gave immense market power to them ultimately resulting in limited competition. This had its repercussion on the quality and diversity of the programs. In the absence of an appropriate forum to experiment, viewer’s hunger for a variety of programmes remained unfulfilled. Under the circumstances cable opened the floodgates for creative talent and this was viewed as the finest thing to have ever happened since the inception of television. The advent of satellite cable networks certainly provided a significant alternative to the conventional television broadcasting. As a consequence potential market for fresh talent emerged thus necessitating the production of programmes exclusively for cable.

**In-Depth News Bulletins**

Further, cable has realised the need to have detailed news bulletins. It’s a fact that news is one area where print media still has an edge over television. Even with its comprehensive audio-visual impact, television is no match to the potentialities of print media in the area of news. Today, the cable system provides an extensive channel for news. Thus a 24 hour news service has
been made available with local or community news getting preferential treatment over the national and international news. Cable has the unlimited advantage of presenting news in depth thereby breaking the monopoly of major networks on news bulletins.

Cable has introduced the concept of interactive television, a milestone in the history of television broadcasting. Cable News Network, has recently introduced a innovative news request line for the benefit of the viewers. According to the Associated Press, viewers will be shown a summary of headlines at the beginning of the show and as anchors read the day’s top news, dial a 900 television number to vote on which stories they would like to see. The stories that get most votes will be shown. Interestingly this choice is confined only to the secondary news and does not apply to the lead news stories.

This move is said to be in response to the realisation that television has an obligation to give the viewers some information that they need. This instant feedback is going to give the viewers a greater sense of interaction with the medium. A day is not far off when cable can serve a variety of individual needs and like telephone it can also become a personal medium of communication.

The infinite potential of cable system has seen dramatic growth in the use of data channels viz., programme guides, weather guide, news and service bulletins. At present the cable news services are popular and the rates are nominal per subscriber. The news services are offered by prominent agencies viz., AP News Plus, Reuters News View and UPI Data cable and accessible 24 hours.

In America, over the years television has been transformed into a potential medium of commercial communication. The famous words of an expert that television is a ‘vast wasteland’ has come true with TV dubiously asserting its role as a box of commercials. Today, viewers regard excessive commercials as
invaders of their privacy. It’s true that commercials provide potential source of revenue and enable the TV networks to be self-reliant and independent in their functioning. But the need to be self-reliant has been taken too far by earning huge revenue at the cost of the viewer’s interest. Now, with the popularity of cable TV, the cables have been turned on the broadcast television networks. The tremendous progress of cable TV has enabled the viewers to watch commercial free programmes. Thus today the viewers call the shots.

When TV first appeared on the scene the experts aimed to accomplish the objectives of information, education and instruction through this medium. However, over the years, TV has become entertainment to the core with other objectives taking a back seat. Scholars hoped that TV can bring about development and it was regarded as panacea for all developmental ills. Unfortunately in United States prime time and the best TV networks serve the commercial interests and they are the prerogative of the entertainment industry. Commercial TV is a goldmine; even the introduction of public communication channel through Public Broadcasting System was not an entirely satisfactory solution.

This parched area of education has, therefore, prompted the cable to make innovative uses of television. Today, it can accommodate government, education and library channels thus enabling the viewer to derive the benefits.

Public-Access TV

The introduction of public-access is a significant development in the cable industry. Public-access has been defined as those channels that are set aside for direct use by the public, with no control over programme content exercised by any intermediaries, such as the cable operator, other than those imposed by libel laws or profanity restrictions.

The provision for public-access channel was made by the FCC to make available separate channels for government, education
and the community as a condition to procuring franchise to run private companies. According to the 1984 Federal Cable Act, “Public-access channels are often the video equivalent of the speaker’s soapbox or the electronic media with the opportunity to become sources of information in the electronic marketplace of ideas.”

Thus public-access is nearest to the doctrine of free expression. As there was no dearth of cable channels, the idea of allocating a few of them for public communication seemed feasible. The advent of public-access channels popularly known as the PEG i.e., Public Education and Government channel, was in response to frustration with the government channel, was in response to frustration with the broadcast systems, which did not accommodate much local government and education programming and which could not offer adequate citizen access.

Public accesses provide an avenue through which organisations and special interests may participate in television programming. This channel can be the eyes and ears of the community reflecting the cultural diversity and diversity of opinion, thought and ideas. Public-access enables the people to make and show their own television programmes on first come, first served basis. The services include television production training, technical assistance, programme preparation and scheduling and additional programme production support. The resources include equipment, production facilities and channels.

Accordingly, the community members can produce and submit non-commercial programs for showing in their local system. Significantly, the content of the programme is determined exclusively by the public and they assume responsibility for the format of the public-access programmes produced.

Interestingly, there is no set of criteria for the selection of a programme in public-access. It’s irrelevant whether people like the programme or not. There is no one to judge the quality of the
content. Barring obscenity, a resident can design any non-commercial programme in the way he intends to communicate. No one can thrust his/her opinion on the merit of another’s programme.

This innovative concept of participatory media gives the community a splendid opportunity to use it as a tool for community development. However, the public-access aspect of cable TV may suffer if the public is apathetic as it is the conscience keeper of the community.

Today in America the public-access channels exist because there are still public spirited individuals who value the communication tool to speak for themselves in their own way and to share their experiences, opinions, frustrations and hope. These people also derive some creative satisfaction, as the public-access channel in most towns is the only available outlet for creative expression. The access channel is inexpensive, simply, unsophisticated, flexible and maintains intimate support with the community.

As the practicability of public-access is determined by the community, the impediments are many and they may stifle its progress. Since the taste, interest and needs vary from community to community it is an acid test for the community to tolerate and endure all kinds of programmes. Thus, a matured citizenry which is able to cope up with unconventional television is absolutely necessary for the smooth functioning of public access. The words of Mike Wallace that “cable television can give us back our neighbourhoods” have come true.

The expansion of cable with its abundant potential to absorb improvisation will have clear implications in the distribution of educational, informational and cultural programmes. Consequently, cable has widened the horizon of interactive communication. The day is not far off when cable television will
become a personal medium catering to individual needs and demands in a new communication environment.

REFERENCES


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