

Public Access Television: Is Anybody Watching?

By JOYCE WADLER

In theory it sounds like a terrific idea — particularly given the tendency of New Yorkers to be more than willing to offer their opinions to anyone willing to listen:

Start with a new-born communications industry — in this case cable television. Set aside free air time for anyone who wants it. Insure freedom of expression by ruling that the cable company can in no way regulate what is said or done on that time.

Then you've got public access television.

Seems like it should be doing beautifully in this town?

It's not.

Public access TV, operational in New York in its two-channel glory since July, '71, has an audience that's been put, by three separate surveys, as between five and 10 per cent of the city's 114,000 cable subscribers — at most. Despite the aim of public access to give television back to the people there are almost no facilities in New York for a person to go to learn how to use or borrow video equipment. Even public access' most devoted supporters will admit that a lot of the programming is awful. And if you ask your average New Yorker if he has any idea of what public access is, chances are he'll tell you he doesn't.

What Does It Mean?

Does that mean that the famous New York drive to speak out has disappeared and that no one is participating in the public access experiment?

Not at all.

Sterling Manhattan and Teleprompter, the two cable TV companies having the New York City cable franchise for lower and upper Manhattan, respectively, both report that nearly 85 per cent

in to public access and you might see "Let's Get High with Frank and Guy", a marijuana-reform show, or "Street Meat," a show on verbal abuse of women produced by the Women's Video Projects, or a yoga class, or a community meeting.

If you were particularly lucky, you might have seen the 1972 New York City Street Olympics broadcast, which opened with an aerial shot of sweat-shirted, pot-bellied New Yorkers racing through the city streets as a voice announced that the show was coming "from a fire escape high atop Thompson Street," then cut to a shot of the athletes lighting the Olympic torch: two bear-cans filled with Sterno.

Maybe you've even been able to catch the regularly broadcast Sunday evening of Yugoslav filmmaker Anton Perich, shown over both Teleprompter and Sterling the companies often broadcast the same show simultaneously. Perich has given public access its biggest publicity boost with his "satiric soap operas" which include a lot of Warhol stars, a lot of nudity, and a lot of talking dirty. (One of the most famous Perich shows featured a nude man with a paint brush in his behind who painted "I love you" on a sheet of glass.) Perich's other work includes interviews with rock stars, celebrities — one as yet unscreened interview with Muhammed Ali at his training camp. ("What makes me different from other men is I got imagination," says Ali, who talks in the interview about inter-racial marriage, American politics, poetry, "A man with imagination can fly.")

No Censorship

What distinguishes public



Anton Perich, the bad boy of public access television, in front of monitors showing one of controversial programs.

can reach each other," says Maxie Cohen, the director of the Video Access Center, which had served as a viewing and training center for Sterling Manhattan before it closed two months ago. "The point is not complete with "Bonanza." Public access isn't for entertainment. It's to promote community interaction and exchange."

Even Cohen admits, however, that the quality of most of the shows is terrible, and almost everyone in the industry agrees.

"Most of the stuff on public access is awful," says Sandy Schulberg, the 25-year-old assistant director at Open Channel, a privately owned nonprofit organization devoted to promoting public

they felt that the limited number of viewers of public access did not merit the space that public television did. (A representative of the Daily News, the only paper to have carried public access, said that the paper had carried limited public access listings prior to expanding their TV-film listings six months ago, and that they were seeking space to resume the listings.

Beside the problem of knowing what's on public access TV, the person who wants to produced his own program, or be on public access himself, has almost nowhere to go.

Program Dropped

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would lend equipment for which there would be a wait of "a few weeks." He referred the caller to a small, independent access center which might be able to provide training, and to Teleprompter for use of a studio.

Asked whether the Video Access Center, or its equivalent, would be opening up, Lawrence said "probably not."

Viewers who want to shoot a show outside a studio—who either want to borrow equipment or learn how to use it—essentially have no place to go.

There are a number of small, community video access groups around town, but they can handle very few people. Open Channel, which had been one of the major

equipment and facilities necessary for the production of programming," there are no specific requirements as to what those "minimal" facilities might be, and no guidelines as to what the cable companies are expected to spend on public access.

Morris Tarshis, the director of the city's Bureau of Franchises, which is in charge of the franchise agreements, says that as far as the city is concerned, the cable companies are "more than living up to their part of the agreement."

"According to the agreement, they could have charged the public for the time, instead they offered it free," says Tarshis.

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Post Photo by Terence McCarlen

ing in the public access experiment?
Not at all.

Sterling Manhattan and Teleprompter, the two cable TV companies having the New York City cable franchise for lower and upper Manhattan, respectively, both report that nearly 88 per cent of the time of Channel C, and 25 per cent of the time on Channel D, the two channels reserved for public use, are taken—though if you monitor the channels, these figures seem high.

Teleprompter's storefront studio in Harlem, which provides studio space and technicians, and tapes material for anyone who wants it on a first-come, first-serve basis, is booked a month and a half in advance. And a newly released report on public access by the Fund For the City of New York, a private foundation devoted to urban affairs, said that public access had found "a lasting, if un-organized constituency" and that fears that the channels would be used "only by the lunatic fringe" had proved unfounded.

The same report went on to say, despite the fact that "the public has been using the access channels in growing numbers, no one knows whether anyone is watching." And a random sampling of public access latest offerings indicates why.

There is some good stuff in public access, some exciting programs from groups who would not have had the means to express themselves on network television. Tune

hammered Ali at his training camp. ("What makes me different from other men is I got imagination," says Ali, who talks in the interview about inter-racial marriage, American politics, poetry, "A man with imagination can fly.")

No Censorship

What distinguishes public access from network television is its relative freedom of expression. Almost nothing is censored on public access, four-letter words and nudity are commonplace. For while the public access ruling still forbids "indecent" or "obscene" material just as the networks do, public access also forbids the carrier from controlling or censoring the material.

Freedom of expression, however, still does not insure interesting programming.

Flip on public access and you may find, as did one Post reporter who tuned in recently, a thirty-minute street scene of a traffic jam, or a half-hour interview with an exterminator. Or rock shows that begin and end unannounced. Or out-of-focus improvisational theater. And endless talk shows, on gay lib, women's lib and every other lib—and minority viewpoint—existent.

Which, a lot of the public access people will tell you, is not such a bad thing.

For Narrowcasting

"The whole point of public access is narrowcasting, as opposed to broadcasting, providing special interest programming to special interest groups so that they

THE ISSUES

Beside the problem of knowing what's on public TV, the person who wants to produced his own program, or be on public access himself, has almost nowhere to go.

Program Dropped

Prior to its closing two months ago, The Video Access Center, jointly sponsored by Sterling, The Fund for the City of New York, and N.Y.U. had offered a free video-training program. According to a Sterling spokesman, the center, on La Guardia Place in the West Village, had been closed in order to find space closer to Sterling's own studios on 23rd Street. As of last month, however, the center's director, Maxie Cohen, admitted she had been "concerned" about whether the center would ever reopen—and about Sterling's commitment to public access.

And, as of this week, it looked as if her fears were well-founded.

Though Pat Scott, the director of public access at Sterling told a reporter that Sterling still planned to open "the same facility" as had been provided by the Video Access Center, "someplace," "within the next month or so," she could not explain the two-month delay in what was to have been a temporary closing.

A reporter, posing as a citizen who wanted to produce her own show, was told by Pat Scott's assistant, Steve Lawrence, that there were no studio or training facilities available at Sterling. Lawrence also said that Sterling

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There are a number of small, community video access groups around town, but they can handle very few people. Open Channel, which had been one of the major groups, and had used a volunteer pool of 200 professionals to train and work with 500 different community groups in the past year, is currently "in a very precarious" financial state for lack of funding and is turning away everyone who approaches them.

And it's very expensive for an individual to try to produce a show on his own. The simplest video equipment, the Sony Portapak, which anyone can use (you just 1—aim the camera and 2—push a button) sells for \$1500 and rents for about \$75. The cost of the tape is an additional \$25 an hour.

Funds Unraised

The problem is getting the funds to outfit ongoing video access training centers. Both Sterling, which claims it has put \$100,000 into its public access program this year, and Teleprompter, which claims \$200,000 says they are in no shape, financially, to spend more and that it is not their responsibility to do so.

And while the companies' agreement with the city says that the cable companies "shall maintain and have available for public use at least the minimal

agreements, says that as far as the city is concerned, the cable companies are "more than living up to their part of the agreement."

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There have been suggestions that the city put a percentage of the fee it receives from the cable companies back into public access.

Tarshis, however, opposes the idea.

"If the city were to support the public access channels it could be viewed as almost a form of censorship," says Tarshis. "The funding for community television has to come from the community."

Meanwhile, however, the money is not coming—from any source.

"Public access is still an experiment, and no one ever figured out where money would come from, exactly, or how it should be used, or how much a city like New York needs," says Sandy Schulberg, sitting in Open Channel's Times Square office next to a poster advertising a gay video group. The poster says: "We must direct our technology or it will direct us."

"I think it's an experiment that isn't failing," Schulberg says. "But it is in shabby shape. The whole concept of public access is one big cop-out if the people have no access to the equipment, don't know how to use it, and if nobody's going to spend the money to even explain to them what it is."