



# What Can We Expect?

- The US Experience -

**In the United States, where community-based channels have been in operation since the early days of cable, public access channels are now carried on an estimated 2000 of the country's 10,000 cable systems.**

While much of the programming looks like low-budget versions of standard TV fare (talk shows, entertainment programs, even MTV-style music video shows made by aspiring VJs) the potential of these non-commercial community channels has been tapped to bring important issues and voices direct to viewers.

Programs like *Alternative Views* in Austin, Texas, shows made by AIDS activists and labour groups, and public access programming distributed by satellite are bringing to audiences across the country issues and viewpoints that mainstream television never touches.

Access channels are today providing an estimated 15,000 hours or more a week of original community programming - more than the combined output of the major US commercial and non-commercial broadcast networks in a year! Preliminary results from a recent national survey suggest that the average cost per month to each subscriber is about 36.6 US cents (slightly more than the cost of a postage stamp).

Programming comes from across the spectrum of viewpoints, values, tastes, issues, styles and purposes. Conservative Republicans, evangelical preachers, amateur philosophers, animal rights activists, atheists, girl scouts, recent immigrants, the Red Cross, firefighters, the disabled, the deaf, psychics, financial advisors, dentists - almost every group, persuasion or viewpoint - shares these channels.

Among the programs which have exemplified the power of these channels to bring the otherwise unseen or unheard to audiences are:

- *Alternative Views*: a long-running talk show which for over 10 years has produced alternative journalism exposing covert government operations, toxic hazards, foreign policy fiascos and other issues often ignored by the mainstream press.
- In New York, AIDS activists use a program called *Living With AIDS* to give practical advice to people who have AIDS or are HIV positive - a vital service in a country where after 10 years of AIDS it remains a struggle to get out even the most basic AIDS information through the mass media. The activists also use their camcorders to document rallies and demos so that they can take control of the way their efforts are documented in the media, by telling their own stories.
- In Chicago, the Chicago/Gary Area Union of Homeless utilised access facilities to empower homeless participants, and used the completed video they made to inform the public about homelessness in Chicago.

- One of the most successful and best known access programs is New York's *Paper Tiger*, which for the past ten years has focused on the investigation, critique and analysis of the communications industry.

Tapes of the shows are distributed to universities, museums, public access stations and art centres in the USA and abroad, and programs currently available from *Paper Tiger* include the Gulf Crisis TV Project, five videotapes examining the impact of the war in the Persian Gulf, and *Roar!* an anthology and guide to media activism.

In one important respect the US situation is not comparable with Australia, in that the public access channels there are not subject to content regulation of any kind. With totally unfettered free speech, no overall editorial control and non-discriminatory access, extremist groups such as the White Aryan Resistance and the Klu Klux Klan have been able to use access channels to broadcast their messages of hate, along with others like extreme fundamentalist religious sects preaching apocalyptic messages, and animal rights groups showing gruesome laboratory tests. One program even showed people how to build an explosive device at home.

In one city, Austin Texas, the community television operator was able to persuade Blacks and Jews to make their own programs to counter the extremes of the Klan, but in Kansas City, authorities shut down the access channel rather than have it used by the Klan (this move was later successfully challenged in the courts as an inhibition on free expression).

Ironically, just as Australia moves into community TV, US policy makers appear to be embracing the idea that the commercial market place will provide any services or information that interest people. The regulatory framework by which new technologies are integrated into existing structures tends to reduce communications to a fundamentally commercial activity.

As an example, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is proposing, under the name 'video dial tone', to allow telephone companies to distribute video signals - potentially hundreds of them - direct to homes, without any editorial control by the carrier. To date, the FCC has made no provision for non-commercial, localised use, offering channel capacity to anyone who can afford to pay, and neither the FCC nor Congress has made any move to protect existing public channels in the fast developing communications landscape. □

(This material on US access cable is a synopsis of articles from *Index on Censorship* 2/1993. CU uses IOC material with its permission).