

Experimental
TV

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
OFFICE OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS POLICY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20504

Date: August 23, 1971

Subject: Experimental Television in NYC

To: Mr. Whitehead

The work being done in NYC in experimental television is fascinating. It combines the type of thing you saw at CPB (ie abstract art forms on half inch tape) with reportage and community action programs.

There seem to be three main points to be made about the work I saw and the people I talked to.

One: the interest in half inch technology is not so much to create new art forms, or to make the media an art form in itself, but to give access to media to groups that have never had either interest in or access to existing television outlets. Clearly, all this ties in very closely with cable. Hopes for the use of the NYC public access channels are high, and plans to use these on a regular basis are already being made. Most groups function on the basis of being the teachers of community groups, ie being the technicians that assist the community to say what it wants, but do not involve themselves in the content.

Two: The equipment is incredibly easy to use: it is lightweight, very portable, simple technically and totally flexible. I even shot some tape myself, and the results were, I thought, not bad. The nature of the equipment has two ramifications: first, that it will proliferate and be easy for anyone to use to say anything they please, and second, that many new uses will be found for it. There is, however, one main problem with the equipment. SONY has 90% of the market, and because they have this momopoly, the quality of the product suffers. For example, with a SONY camera and Porta-pak, a different battery and microphone have to be used, because the SONY equipment is of inferior quality. Also, the tape cannot be erased some 20 times, as the trade magazines claim. I think it would be helpful

if this Office looked into what can be done to improve the quality of the product, since there is no competitive impetus for SONY to do so.

Three: The technical capabilities of half inch tape have made those who use it all the more interested in feedback situations. Tape is being used to mediate between landlords and tenants, school boards and communities, training sessions and actual performances, and the list goes on and on. The potential for this is great. Perhaps we should take the lead, and demonstrate our understanding of this potential, by allowing a group to give you questions, tape your answers, have the tape distributed to schools of communications, and then tape the subsequent reactions and questions for our own use.

Four: not on the subject of half inch, but on more conventional programming on network television of the arts. It appears that no progress will be made on this front until there is an impetus for the networks and stations to emphasize arts programs. One suggestion for how to do this is to have the FCC include cultural programming in its requirements for license renewals, supplementing the current standard of "public affairs" programming. Otherwise, the book-keeping unprofitability of cultural programming will keep it off the air. (By book-keeping, I mean that a given arts program will not show a profit for minutes on the air, but that its syndication and distribution by a network subsidiary may make it a profitable enterprise in the long run, but not for the broadcast subsidiary.) Again, the consensus is that cable may help.

Ideas and suggestions

I suggest and recommend strongly that you shoot some tape with the half inch equipment. I think you would enjoy it, and that it is the best way to learn what this movement is all about. I think, however, that CPB is not the people to set it up for you - it would be too sterile and phony. I would recommend going to the people

I did it with in New York, (The Global Village), would maximize your chance of seeing the process for what it is. If you want more info on this, you might check with Frank Shakespeare, as they did a small but I gather seminal project for the USIA.

I think we should have a workshop for the Washington telecommunications community, ie not just OTP, to introduce them to what is going on in the experimental fields.

We need to keep abreast of all this in a much more direct way than we have been. Since this is a visual and and aural medium, we should have more field trips - reading about it is just not good enough.

When I get back from California, I think I should start to collect the equipment and the tapes for us to have our own collection of half inch experimental work.

The half inch technology will lead to many problems with labor. We should start to look into this now, and have suggestions and programs ready in advance of the coming confrontation.

Again, the cry was for both money and for the exchange of information. I don't know what OTP per se can do about the former, but we can make a difference in the latter. Perhaps we can assist in the info flow by serving as a center, or seeing what we can do about setting one up. Also, we should think about whether we want to be active in the funding, or the funding process, for experimental television, or whether we want to leave this entirely to foundations, HEW, and CPB, for both process and content.

The technology will also lead to greater decentralization in information distribution and station strength. What if anything do we want to do about this? (Some claim the half inch tape can not be used on broadcast TV as it is of inferior quality. Apparently, a simple booster device can change this. It is now of good enough quality for cable.) This means it will be available soon on a wide spread basis for over-the-air and cable use.