Introduction

Few technologies have been the subject of as many hopes and expectations as cable television. If one were to believe its varied advocates, cable TV could carry almost every international sports and cultural event into the home, allow retail shopping from the living room, permit instantaneous referenda on public issues, and assure emergency monitoring of fire and burglar alarms. What more could anyone ask for?

—Mitchell Moss, “Can Cable Keep Its Promises?”

New York Affairs 6, no. 4 (1981)

Cable TV, on the brink of a boom in the 1970s, promised TV audiences a new media frontier, an expansive new variety of entertainment and information choices. Cable seemed poised to provide access to a greater variety of media forms and points of view than could be found on oligopolistic broadcasting sources, as increasing channel capacity, a regulatory apparatus that had become amenable to the growth of the industry, and consumer demand for new services transformed how homes received television signals. The rapidly expanding industry appeared to lower barriers to entry, allowing independent entities to launch cable networks and allowing new media forms and programming formats to emerge and prosper. Music video, 24-hour news, 24-hour weather, movie channels, children’s channels, home shopping, and nostalgia channels devoted to programming long off-network shows were introduced.

Prior to the cable boom, most homes in the United States received only a handful of broadcast television signals, which typically included, on VHF channels, the local affiliates of the “Big Three” networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS; in most markets, a PBS station; and, on the UHF spectrum, a few scattered, independent stations. Now, the majority of American homes receive not only their local broadcast signals but also dozens, even hundreds,
of additional channels via cable or satellite dish. In 1980, 17.6 million television-owning homes in the United States, or 23 percent of the market, subscribed to cable TV. By June 2005, some 94.2 million households (86 percent of TV households) had come to subscribe to some form of multichannel video programming distribution (MVPD). Most (69.4 percent) were connected to cable; 86.3 percent of those cable subscribers received more than 36 channels. While the number of households subscribing to premium services (such as HBO, Showtime, Cinemax, Encore, or Starz!) has declined in recent years (to 28.1 million, in 2004), a growing number (26.3 million homes, by the end of June 2005) subscribes to digital cable tiers that have increased channel capacity and interactive capabilities such as video-on-demand. In 2005, subscribers paid an average $56.51 per month for cable-TV only (or $70.75 when bundled with high-speed Internet access via cable modem), and industry revenue for the year exceeded $66 billion. By June 2005, 26.1 million homes (27.7 percent) subscribed to direct-broadcast satellite (DBS) television services, which compete with cable to provide much the same service via a wireless alternative technology. Non-broadcast networks now draw a greater share of the television audience than broadcast networks (for the 2004–2005 season, non-broadcast audiences outpaced broadcast’s declining viewership, at 53 percent to 47 percent, respectively, in prime time, and an even greater share, 59 versus 41, for “all-day” viewing, over the 24-hour period).

The distinctions and interconnections between broadcast and cable television have framed the way the cable television industry was both conceived and advertised. Indeed, the optimistic early “blue sky” era of cable television was accompanied by an ever-more cynical outlook on the overt commercialism of broadcast networks, leading to a simultaneous hopefulness and doubt about the symbolic power of television—especially as it concerned the empowerment of the viewer. While broadcast television was still held to the public interest obligations set out in the 1934 Communications Act, by the 1970s, TV seemed much more committed to a commercial system dependent on advertisers than to abstract obligations to the public’s “interests.”

**Academic Attention: Cable Television Studies?**

The topic of cable television within academic settings is situated firmly within Television Studies. However, despite the increasing interest and significance of cable television, there is still a striking absence of scholarly work on the various dimensions of the cable industry, including regulatory practices, the proliferation of channels, and actual programming. Previously, most television scholarship that has explored the implications for society of the shape of the television industry and the form and content of its programming have concentrated intensively on prime-time broadcasting and a few daytime genres such as talk shows, soap operas, and children’s programming. A number of anthologies, edited volumes, and textbooks strive with much success toward comprehensive overviews of television history and approaches to TV studies; consider, for example, *Television: The Critical View*, edited by Horace Newcomb, which was first published in 1976 and has subsequently been expertly and frequently updated in new editions. Yet volumes such as this one continue to draw most of their examples of industrial formations and programming from broadcasting's mainstream forms, underrepresenting the extent to which multichannel video programming distribution systems (cable and satellite) have usurped broadcast’s role as the means by which we now receive TV and captured the majority of the audience that once clustered en masse around a handful of broadcast channels and now fractures across dozens, even hundreds of channels.

There have been, certainly, a number of publications that focus on television content enabled by the rise of cable television. Several have taken the music video as their subject. More recently, a few authors have turned their attention to analyses of cable and satellite TV’s cultural and social alternatives. Other scholars have focused narrowly on particular high-profile cable series. This growing body of new research is a strong indication of the recent preeminence of cable programming and the beginnings of the scholarly attention it warrants.

This book examines the role of cable television in this proliferation of formats and channels and in the disaggregation of a once-mass television audience, as well as considering some of the implications of these trends. In this book, we look beyond broadcasting’s mainstream, toward cable's burgeoning alternatives, to critically consider the capacity of commercial media to serve the public interest. The essays in the book represent new work by leading and emerging scholars in a variety of academic disciplines—communication and cultural studies, film and television studies, media economics, gender studies—as well as by industry professionals. The essays that follow focus primarily on cable television within the United States, but we also include discussions of globalization within television.
markets as well as examinations of cable's intersections with broadcasting, satellite television, and the Internet. The book is divided into three parts: Institutions and Audiences; Channels; and Programming. These categories are, of course, not mutually exclusive, and the chapters within each section necessarily touch on, draw from, and connect to the chapters in the other sections. For example, many essays in the Channels and the Programming sections explore the history of the networks and studios they examine. Likewise, essays in the Institutions and Audiences section address concerns about channel development and programming. In the remainder of this introduction we briefly outline some of the key elements and issues facing the cable industry.

How Cable Is Different: History and Regulations

The emergence and increased installation of cable technology in the American home during the 1970s was positioned and celebrated in terms of cable's difference from broadcast television. Cable television, it was claimed, could offer less "lowest-common-denominator" and crassly commercialized television, less intrusive advertising, and more interactivity on the part of the viewer, more viewer empowerment. In other words, cable TV would ostensibly "serve" the public interest in a way that broadcast television ignored. In fact, to some extent, the cable TV industry has brought new owners into the medium of television, upended longstanding programming traditions, and addressed audiences underserved by broadcasting. However, while offering many of these distinctions from broadcast television, cable television also shared a number of similarities with it. The cable market has been largely, but not exclusively controlled by the same powerful conglomerates that dominate other media markets; it has repeated and recycled broadcast programming concepts (and programming itself, in the form of repurposed and off-network syndicated series); and it has competed fiercely for those audiences already favored by broadcasters.

Cable's more relaxed regulatory environment and diverse patterns of ownership can be attributed directly to its distinctive origins. Broadcasting has, historically, been the most regulated arena of the U.S. media, reined in by a few not-so-little words first found in the Radio Act of 1927, which was written as powerful corporations positioned themselves to dominate the manufacture of radio equipment, the production of content, and its distribution throughout national networks. The act declared that broadcast stations would be licensed (and licenses would be renewed) only if it could be determined that these stations would serve "public interest, convenience, or necessity." This phrase was repeated in the Communications Act of 1934, in reference to both broadcasting (radio, and later, television) and telephony. The regulatory apparatus sought to shape broadcasting as a public trusteeship. Thus, a privately owned, for-profit industry was granted use of a public resource, the electromagnetic spectrum, through which its signals would be transmitted from station to listener and viewer. In exchange for access to this presumably scarce resource, commercial broadcasters would be obliged to serve the audience, even as they strived to profit by selling their audience to advertisers. That is, while the concept of public interest has never been precisely defined (beyond vague agreement that the broadcast industries should operate as a competitive marketplace and represent diverse viewpoints), broadcasting has been charged with the sometimes contradictory tasks of addressing not only the most potentially lucrative audiences but the nation as a whole, and addressing us not only as consumers but also as citizens.8

Thus it can be said that broadcasting emerged, in the form of radio and, following in the template established for radio, in the form of television, as an oligopolistic market whose players enjoyed significant market power and agreed to some constraints on the extent of that power. In contrast, as Megan Mullen shows later in this volume, cable TV, or as it was initially called, Community Antenna Television (CATV), originated in the late 1940s and early 1950s in the hands of individual, independent entrepreneurs without ties to established media corporations and with little scrutiny or regulation of their efforts. While cable television was spared the public-interest obligation and some of the specific ownership and content regulations pertaining to broadcasting, it would be misleading to characterize this market as entirely unfettered. Eventually, cable and direct-broadcast satellite television would be overseen by a combination of federal and local authorities. For example, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) sets ground rules for the kinds of franchise agreements that can be negotiated by municipalities with cable systems. The FCC has also, at times, regulated cable pricing. And the television industry, like any other, can be subject to antitrust policies of not only the FCC but also the Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission.

However, most limitations on ownership and content placed on broadcasting are largely absent from cable and DBS regulations.9 This absence is justified by the fact that broadcasters transmit their signals free-to-air over
publicly owned spectra, to be captured by anyone with a receiving set and an antenna. In contrast, cable and satellite transmissions are received only by those audience members who choose to bring this kind of television into their homes by making monthly payments and who typically acquire or lease special equipment in the form of set-top boxes or roof-top dishes. Cable and DBS are, in the eyes of the courts and other authorities, “invited guests” (perhaps, more accurately, hired help) that a subscriber could banish simply by unsubscribing. Given the purposefulness that is said to characterize reception of cable and DBS signals, Congress has seen fit to let the market rule without some of the constraints placed on broadcasting by means of the “public interest” clause; moreover, the courts have ruled that, unlike broadcasting, cable and DBS channels hold the same First Amendment rights as print media. In other words, the rules treat cable and DBS subscribers as citizen-consumers whose needs are best met by market-driven media.

Institutions and Audiences

Given its legacy from broadcast television, it is unsurprising that cable technology was characterized by both optimistic and pessimistic forecasts over the role cable would play in audience empowerment. Within the context of looser regulatory control and the installation of technologies that could receive programming delivered by satellite, the promise was that cable would address the problems that continued to haunt broadcast television. As Megan Mullen points out, early policy statements on the possibilities of cable (by, for example, the 1971 Sloan Commission on Cable Communications) associated the technology with a kind of “revolution” which could eventually “remedy all the perceived ills of broadcast television, including lowest-common-denominator programming, inability to serve the needs of local audiences, and failure to recognize the needs of cultural minorities.” The idealism of such a claim is quite similar to the language used at the emergence of other communication technologies: telegraphy, photography, radio, and television. Like these technologies, cable promised to radically revise the viewers’ relationship with media by encouraging a more active viewership and a newfound sense of political and cultural empowerment. Because cable did not use public airwaves, and thus was not regulated in the same ways as broadcast television, there were fewer constraints on its content. For instance, since cable was not

(initially) conceived as being dependent on advertisers, it promised to cater more to the direct needs and tastes of specific audiences through niche channels. Capable of this kind of direct audience address, cable channels were seen as possible facilitators of viewer empowerment and a potential catalyst for citizenship.  

Importantly, this was not simply an idea that circulated in the world of telecommunications policy. As Thomas Streeter argues, the enthusiastic claims about the value of cable as the groundwork for an information highway were included in the policy reports and city documents produced by government agencies and others interested in the new technology and planning for its implementation. This discourse also found its way into public and industry discourse. Moreover, since the burgeoning cable industry was not yet tied to major media conglomerates, it seemed to exist as a communication technology that encouraged independent entities to create networks and channels that allowed for alternative kinds of programming.

As was the case with broadcast television, the technology that enabled cable was not the essential factor invoked in the public and policy discourse concerned with the revolutionary qualities of cable. As Streeter articulates, although constantly labeled as “new,” cable was not necessarily “new technology.” Rather, it was the use of this technology that was understood as novel: the increase in channel capacity and the development of a market so that more channels were available were the potential catalysts for the “revolution.” Indeed, it was precisely these “new” aspects of cable that made it “possible to speak of cable, not as an embodiment of social contradictions and dilemmas, but as a solution to them.” Cable was seen as a possible remedy to all sorts of social problems, such as racism and poverty, because it could “narrowcast” and thus more accurately represent an audience. And, as Streeter argues, “Cable, in other words, had the potential to rehumanize a dehumanized society, to eliminate the existing bureaucratic restrictions of government regulation common to the industrial world, and to empower the currently powerless public.” The chapters in Part I of this volume address the history and development of cable systems and audiences, and anticipate the convergence of digital media delivery to the home.
Channels

It is clear that the hyperbolic promise of cable was never quite fulfilled. In fact, the current structure of the cable industry resembles the familiar format of broadcast television in almost all ways. There was no televisually-inspired “revolution,” and many cable channels and much cable programming are now owned and produced by the same transnational media corporations as the broadcast networks. However, the utopian discourse that framed the early debates on cable, especially in terms of the public interest, was essential for providing a context for channels such as CNN, C-SPAN, and even Viacom’s Nickelodeon to emerge precisely because it focused attention on television’s potential to empower viewers as particular kinds of citizens. To enforce public interest obligations would necessarily change the scope of the television industry, and it would certainly transform the dynamic among viewers, media owners, and advertisers.

In part, this dynamic changed through the proliferation of channels, whereby in a few short years the cable industry has added hundreds of different channels to the television landscape. A familiar question results from this kind of quantity: is a more diverse television system such as cable capable of accurately representing different audiences and publics, or does the proliferation of channels and the concomitant increasing centralization of media ownership indicate that the cable industry is a particularly profitable site for new niche markets and the commodification of identity? Joseph Turow identifies cable as one place for the cultivation by advertisers of “primary media communities,” wherein communities of consumers are sought in order to nurture brand loyalty in a progressively more cluttered commercial landscape. Situating cable television alongside other communication technologies that are part of a new wave in marketing dedicated to narrow niche audiences and to the cultivation of “lifestyles” in lucrative consumer groups, Turow understands cable as part of a new “fractured society.” In fact, in seeing two cable channels, Nickelodeon and MTV, both owned by Viacom, as “pioneer attempts” to establish a kind of advertiser-shaped community, Turow argues that “While [Nickelodeon and MTV] started as cable channels, they have become something more. Owned by media giant Viacom, they are lifestyle paradises that invite their target audiences (relatively upscale children and young adults, respectively) into a sense of belonging that goes far beyond the coaxial wire into books, magazines, videotapes, and outdoor events that Viacom controls or licenses.”

Cultivating this “sense of belonging”—the “something more” that constitutes a cable channel—has been a particularly successful way that cable channels have positioned themselves in the television industry, where it is not so much the programs on individual channels that are important, but the designs of the channels themselves: Nick is for kids, Animal Planet is for pet owners, Food Network is for foodies, etc. In Part II of this book, the authors look at specific cable channels as a way to parse out some of the contradictions in the regulatory history of cable—contradictions between the “blue skies” discourse that shaped the early cable industry and the intensely competitive nature of the current cable industry. As the authors in this section point out, some cable channels frame themselves according to a particular “theme,” such as animals or food; others shape their identity around particular audiences, such as African Americans, children, or Latinos. These narrowcasting strategies are implemented with varying degrees of success in meeting both cultural and commercial desires.

Because cable channels often are designed to capture a part of the market share that is under-marketed, there are important ways in which cable channels “recognize” audiences that have been historically obscured by broadcast television. BET, HBO Latino, Bravo, Lifetime, Oxygen, and Logo, among others, have all tapped into consumer groups that have been underserved by broadcast channels, namely African Americans, Latinos, women, and gay men and lesbians. While this kind of recognition is crucial in a media society that often equates visibility with social value, it also works to commodify particular identities within boundaries established by cable companies. Additionally, niche channels have the tendency to marginalize distinct groups, identifying them as “different” from the mainstream (and thus deserving of their “own” channel), so that the result is not a harmonious multi-channel, multi-cultural televisual universe, but rather one in which broader audience channels continue to define the norms of representation.

Programs

The optimism that propelled the growth of the cable industry over regulatory hurdles and then throughout the consumer market for subscription television was not only based on promises of a more competitive television market and more channels within that industry. It was also the
programming that could be distributed via those new outlets that heralded a new era. But perhaps ironically, many of the most successful pioneering, nationally distributed cable networks (such as Home Box Office, launched in 1972; The Movie Channel, 1973; and Showtime, 1976) focused on feature films, most of which had already enjoyed theatrical releases. Others, such as ESPN (1979), offered more of already familiar content: an entire slate of sports programming, rather than the broadcasters’ few timeslots per week. Tried-and-true genres would be, in many ways, cable’s bread-and-butter, and channels from Bravo to TV Land would fill endless hours with off-network series, interspersed with flagship original programming.

Early advocates for cable touted the use of cable systems to produce and air locally originated news in communities not served by broadcast stations. They also envisioned telecourses and other educational programming that would be provided by schools and universities, as well as healthcare information offered by professionals. While these kinds of programming would be part but hardly the eventual mainstay of cable, other content that had not found much of a home in broadcasting tried cable, too: religious programming; in-depth coverage of governmental functions via C-SPAN, launched in 1979, as a form of voluntary public service; and high-end arts and cultural programming. Innovative programming models such as these sought to serve audiences with interests and needs that had been largely unmet by broadcasting; some flourished, others fizzled.

Still, continuing to be intent on attracting viewers with programming that is at least somewhat different from what can be found on the broadcast networks, cable has forged new kinds of programming that is not bound by broadcasting’s decency regulations on profanity and sexual content. In addition, cable has also come to broach controversial subjects that advertisers might shy away from in broadcasting but embrace in cable if cable links them to a niche market. These conditions, which have freed cable from broadcasting’s “lowest-common-denominator” strategies, have left it to devise tactical programming models which are examined in Part III of this volume. One of these tactics, most closely but not exclusively associated with advertising-free, premium subscription cable, is the creation of a “quality” genre, defined as adult-oriented drama with high production values like The Sopranos. Another tactic involves developing programming that appeals to small but avid audiences which have demographic qualities coveted by advertisers and which can easily be lured away from broadcasting with edgier programming such as Queer Eye for the

Straight Guy and Chappelle’s Show. Elsewhere, cable repackages old genres in new ways—as in the form of single-genre channels providing 24-hour news (CNN, Fox News Channel), 24-hour sports (ESPN, ESPN2), or even 24-hour game shows (Game Show Network)—and operates as only one prong of a multimedia blitz organized around particular media brands, such as the Worldwide Wrestling Entertainment. Each of these tactics is addressed in Part III.

Cable’s Contradictions

The utopian visions of the early cable industry promised a different, improved, more connected television landscape. Clearly, many of those initial goals have been reshaped within the competitive media-conglomerate context, and some of the same struggles over what constitutes the “public’s interest” that plagued early broadcast television continue to have resonance in the more contemporary niche-channel cable universe. The essays in this book continue the exploration of the historical, regulatory, ownership, and programming parallels and disjunctures between broadcast and cable as well as other media. Additionally, these essays also address several fundamental questions that arise from cable’s particular regulatory and ownership histories. Primary among them is the ability of cable and satellite television to serve the public: does cable, with its loosened FCC controls on content and its move toward niche channels, reflect a public’s interest more accurately than broadcasting precisely because it is not bound by partisan regulatory policies? That is, how does cable’s largely for-profit structure impact its ability to serve the needs of the public as citizens as well as consumers and to serve us as members of both distinct niches and as members of a common society?

Attempting to answer these questions definitively is a difficult task, primarily because the cable industry is thoroughly shaped by important contradictions regarding audiences, citizens, and the role of television as a kind of “public” service. Although it is this very contradictory nature of the cable industry that shapes the tone of this book, part of what we hope to do here is to recognize the symbolic power of television in terms of pleasure, of imagined community, and as a means of empowerment. At the same time, this symbolic power is always constrained by the political economy of the system, and this volume gives us a rich picture of the contradictions and complications of this media form. To this end, we interro-
gate the potential of cable to fulfill a “public interest” and take seriously the potential of the industry that was celebrated in the “blue sky” period.

NOTES

1. Throughout this volume the term “cable” is often used as shorthand to refer to channel line-ups that are available both from wired cable services and direct broadcast satellite (DBS) services. As several contributors illustrate, there are some important differences between the reach, costs, and offerings of cable versus satellite; however, the two provide a largely redundant channel line-up, albeit through different technologies.


7. See for example, the Reading Contemporary Television series published by I. B. Tauris, which includes volumes released and forthcoming on HBO’s The Sopranos, Six Feet Under, Sex in the City, and Deadwood; on Showtime’s The L-Word; as well as on the broadcast hits 24, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Desperate Housewives. On academic responses to The Sopranos, in particular, see Dana Polan’s chapter in this volume.

8. Regulations meant to ensure that broadcasting operates in the public interest by maintaining a competitive marketplace have included rules preventing any two of the major broadcast networks from merging; caps on the number of radio and/or TV stations that a company can own, which have been raised and in some instances removed over time; and the defunct Financial Interest and Syndication Rules, which forced the networks to buy some independently produced programming. In regard to content, the FCC has obliged broadcasters to serve the public interest through the Fairness Doctrine, which required representation of opposing views in regard to controversial news and public affairs programming (rescindment of this doctrine unleashed talk radio and talking-head punditry); limits on the number of commercials per hour and commercialism in children’s programming; and rules that define and respond to complaints about broadcast “indecency” and “profanity.”

9. There are, of course, some limits and obligations placed on subscription TV. For example, cable and satellite systems are not permitted to air material that may be deemed "obscene," but they are not at this time subject to the rules than regulate “indecent” material on broadcast airwaves. Since 1972, "must carry" rules (in continuously challenged and rewritten forms) have required cable systems to retransmit the broadcast signals of local stations, and since 1994, revisions to these rules have obliged cable systems to secure permission to retransmit local stations’ signals, usually involving compensation. The general structure of the industry and
technological specifications—that is, rules pertaining to franchising, channel usage, pirated signals, consumer privacy, and other matters—have been developed in the Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984, the Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992, and sections of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 (which, among other things, rescinded the 1992 Act’s rules regulating fees charged to consumers). And, since 1972, the FCC has required cable systems in at least the top 100 markets to set aside public access channels; see Felicia R. Lee, “Proposed Legislation May Affect Future of Public-Access Television,” New York Times, November 8, 2005, E1, E7.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 227.

16. Ibid., 228.


18. HBO also offered sporting events—primarily boxing—from early in its history.

19. Ralph Lee Smith, The Wired Nation: Cable TV: The Electronic Communications Highway (New York: Harper Colophon, 1972), esp. ch. 2 “New Kinds of Television,” 10–21. Presciently, Smith notes that a great deal of programming on the Professional Channel for physicians, which was promoted at the 1968 NCTA Convention, was provided by pharmaceutical companies; he also observes that educational programming could unfortunately be subject to “the dangers of commercial packaging” (28–29).

20. See Mullen, The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States, on movie channels, 105–10; on religious channels, 116–18; on C-SPAN, 123–25; and on ABC’s ARTS channel and CBS Cable, 156–58.

21. Distinctive television programming has been defined as “quality” long before the boom in the production of original cable series, in ways that both overlap and diverge from the current model. For more on “quality” in broadcast-network programming, see Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, Tise Vahimagi, eds., MTM: ‘Quality Television’ (London: British Film Institute, 1985).
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