

# TELEVISION

## Cable technology offers limitless uses

By Peter Mackler

United Press International

There are those who say you can wrap the future of cable television around your finger.

It's called an optical fiber, a filament of glass only slightly thicker than a human hair. Take 44 of them, wrap them in protective sheathing, and you still have a cable barely the width of a slender cigar.

And each of these willowy marvels can theoretically carry 166 channels of laser-light TV signals — more than triple the capacity of the most advanced coaxial cable — and do it more reliably and with less interference.

With fiber you are constructing a 10,000-lane highway whereas today you have a single-lane horse-and-buggy path," says Irving Kahn, the gruffly informal chairman of Broad Band Communications Inc.

As a founder and former head of TelePrompTer, Kahn was in on the ground floor of electronic cue cards and closed-circuit TV. He was running cable networks nearly 20 years ago. Now his money is on fibers and he plans to unveil what he calls the "ultimate" system next month.

For cable, which now reaches into a fifth of all U.S. homes, the implications of fiber optics are enormous. The TV set could be transformed into an electronic genie that would provide such miracles as newspaper printouts

or home access to computer banks of cooking recipes, reference material and other information.

And all this could join telephone communications, the daily mail and video entertainment on a single fiber freeway into the home.

Yet for an industry where satellites and earth stations are as routine as slang — they're now "birds" and "dishes" — the cable world is remarkably low key about this new technology.

It's years away, they say; still too costly and plagued with bugs. But there may be more than just the normal business prudence behind the skepticism.

For some fear that as surely as fiberoptics will thread its way to the telecommunications of tomorrow, it will lead to a death struggle with the King Kong of the corporate jungle — the telephone company.

"We have never been in, nor do we have any plans to be in, the CATV business, entrepreneurs of cable television," William Ellinghaus, vice chairman of the board of American Telephone and Telegraph, testified at a House hearing last July.

Indeed, AT&T is currently prohibited from making such a move outside its traditional domain. But cable TV, which began as an aid to rural signal reception and went on to establish itself as saleable programming medium, is already beginning to expand to the more exotic services.

Mass use is still a ways off, but already on the market are two-way links that allow you to "talk back" to the TV tube, and make possible such services as computerized burglary and fire alarm systems.

It's the "wired nation" concept of the late '60s taking on new steam as dreams expand to fill the increased channel capacity. Cable operators worry AT&T, with a half-billion-dollar investment of its own in fiberoptics, will find it hard to stay on the sidelines.

After all, says Irving Kahn, "The big business in the next 10 or 20 years will be the business of information. It's a whole new ball game and everybody can play." Congress is just now trying to set the ground rules with its first rewrite of the 44-year-old Communications Act.

And the cable industry, which grew up fighting government restrictions and network charges that it was a menace to the broadcast way of life, has little doubt who would win a no-holds-barred turf war with the telephone giant.

"We say that in a head-on collision between the Mack truck and this bicycle we are riding we're going to be just a statistic," says Robert Schmidt, president of the National Cable Television Association.

Cable TV has come a long way since the first line was stretched from a hilltop antenna 30 years ago to bring television to the homes of eastern Pennsylvania's coal belt, which were blocked off from over-the-air signals.

Today more than 4,000 cable systems serve some 14 million homes, according to industry figures. Nearly 3 million shell out an extra \$8-to-\$13 monthly fee for pay-TV movies, sports and variety extravaganzas, all uninterrupted by commercials.

The immediate future looks brighter still.

Analysts predict an average

15-percent annual growth rate for cable TV over the next eight years. Total revenues, just under \$1 billion in 1976, are expected to reach \$1.5 billion this year.

For the viewer, cable TV is a cornucopia of video delights. In addition to regular entertainment fare, the country's cable viewers get news and weather services, religious shows, children's shows, consumer shows, community and public-access programming.

Cable is also flexible enough to accommodate visions big and small. For example:

—The newly created Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network plans to distribute gavel-to-gavel coverage of the U.S. House of Representatives, possibly as early as the beginning of next year.

—In Findlay, Ohio, high school students produce programs on school doings, sporting events, community news, meetings and panel discussions.

—A Los Angeles channel offers information on bus services and surveys gasoline prices in various parts of the city.

—Two-way hookups allow residents at senior citizen centers in Reading, Pa., to interview local politicians and bridge the generation gap with high school students via a split-screen dialogue.

—In Little Rock, Ark., a cable franchise proposal includes the link-up of all municipal services from hospitals to schools.

Among cable folk there is a lot of talk about avoiding the "blue sky" promises that caused them so much trouble last decade. But it is still a young industry barely able to restrain its youthful enthusiasm.

"The potential uses of cable are limited only by man's imagination," says Lucille Larkin, public affairs vice president for the National Cable Television Association.

One reason for all this headi-

ness is floating 22,300 miles above the Earth's equator — RCA's Satcom I satellite, one of the "birds" that changed all the rules for long-distance signal transmission.

It not only cuts costs — \$800 for an hour-long transmission coast to coast as opposed to \$1,800 over land lines, says RCA — but makes it as easy to transmit from New York to Los Angeles as from New York to Philadelphia. All that is needed is an earth station to receive the signal and a cable network to distribute it.

And as the audience expands, so do programming possibilities. There may not be a big local demand to see a dog show, but grab enough canine fans across the country and it might be worthwhile.

"We're building the underpinnings for a national communications network," says William Bresnan, president of TelePrompTer's cable division, the country's largest cable operator. "It's now a question of community of interest rather than geographical community."

Home Box Office, the largest pay-TV distributor, fired the first shot of cable's satellite era with transmission of the 1975 "Thriller in Manila" between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. Now Satcom I is booked up on all 22 working relays.

The number of earth stations has also taken off since the cost of a workable "dish" dropped from \$100,000 in 1975 to a current \$12,000. Last year there were 200 dotting the country; by the end of this year there will be 1,200 set up or in the process of installation.

Satcom I is one of four communications birds in orbit, but the only one that services cable TV. RCA was planning to send another up in 1981 but industry sources say it's under pressure from potential clients to move up the timetable.

## The versatility of cable; can cost pennies, millions

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In Atlanta, sports mogul Ted Turner took a fledgling UHF TV station and turned it from a million-dollar-a-year loser into a "superstation" that goes to more than 3 million homes across the nation.

In New York City, a program called "Shalom Corner" regales Jewish youngsters with songs, dance, arts and crafts, and stories about their Hebrew heritage — all on a production budget of \$20 a show.

"Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood," the poet says. But program dreams large and small are now able to make their way onto the TV screen, thanks to the virtuosity of cable television.

There is nothing small-time about Turner, the wealthy 40-year-old yachtsman who bought WTCG Channel 17 in 1970 and promptly lost \$2 million on it over the next two years.

By 1973 WTCG was turning a profit, yet Turner wasn't about to stop there.

In December 1976 he made the big move up on the "bird" — arranging the transmission of his little UHF station's programs to cable systems across the country via satellite.

Some 2.55 million homes get Channel 17 via satellite-cable in addition to the 700,000 non-cable households the station reaches in the Atlanta area.

"I think there are no limits to our plans," he says.

Carol Sterling's plans are considerably more modest as producer and hostess of "Shalom Corner," a sort of advanced "Romper Room" for Jewish children ages 4-10 in New York City's Manhattan borough.

It's produced by TelePrompTer Manhattan on a grant from the Tarbut Foundation for the Advancement of Hebrew Culture. And unlike network shows that live and die on audience size, nobody around Shalom Corner can even tell you how many people watch their program.

"We are focusing in on a segment of the community that has special needs," explains Sterling, who trains teachers at the New Jersey Department of Education.

Not easy with a program budget of \$20 per show, but Sterling has learned to operate on a shoestring.

"I make everything from scraps," says Sterling, who is paid little more than a token salary for the show. "But that's part of the concept; it's very challenging."

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