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Collective meetings are held every Tuesday at 7pm in the office and are open to all. All contributions — articles, pictures, cartoons, stories or letters are welcome. See you there...

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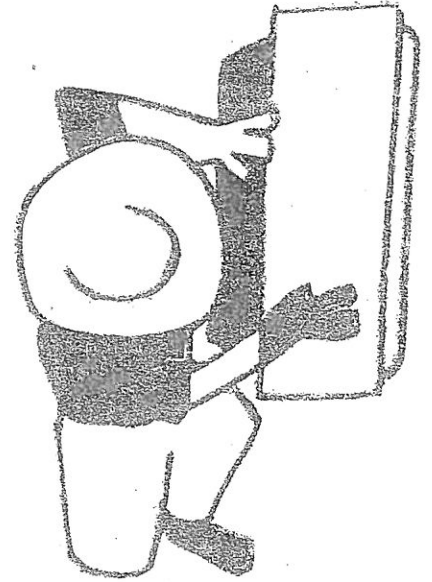
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# Swimming

Cable (editor's error!) PL

Having scored a few credibility points ~~ITV~~ companies pulled out of community cable eight years ago. Peter Lewis retells the story.

## against



**F**UGHT IN April 1973, the battle of Baskerville Bold, over the Bristol Channel station logo, perfectly encapsulated the relations between Rediffusion, the communications giant, and its experimental cable TV station. Rediffusion's publicity department wanted something bold, brassy and upper case, reminiscent of the company's old ITV logo. *We* wanted an art student's nautically flavoured circle of lower case Baskerville Bold, the winning entry in a competition we'd organised locally. The jingle — guitar and vocal by another student — matched the logo — unassuming, low-key, participatory. Though totally at odds with the corporate image, our ideas prevailed, thanks to the support of the London-based executive in overall charge of Bristol Channel. Later he was to say in exasperation: 'Who is this "we"? I thought I'd appointed a station manager down there'.

'This we' was a small staff and some hundreds of volunteers. The volunteer help was all-important — the crucial difference between Bristol Channel and

mainstream broadcasting — but it made for an awkward interface with a hard-selling commercial company like Rediffusion. And what happened in Bristol between 1973 and 1975 is a piece of history that should not be allowed to be buried, because it has relevance for the public debate on cable today.

In 22 months, on a cable network that reached an eighth of Bristol, 700 hours of programmes were transmitted. Most were made by local volunteers, assisted by the core staff. The programmes came from all over the city, from all kinds of groups and individuals and in a mix of styles that defied categorisation. Advice centres, trade unions, churches, the museum, arts organisations, youth clubs, pubs, rock bands and folk groups, hobby and sporting clubs were among the 'information providers' — as well as the campaigners and pressure groups that the BBC's Open Door has subsequently made familiar. A small local station, with a door open wide and continuously, allowed

## the tide

the whole variety of local life to reflect itself. Resources and training were necessary as well as an understanding, slowly developed, that what was being offered local people was not *coverage* in the manner of newspapers and broadcasting, but the *use* of a facility.

CABLE SERVICE

PUBLIC ACCESS

FUNCTION/PLEASURE



**B**RISTOL CHANNEL was visited by Dutch MPs, French planners, the Labour government's Annan Committee. It was filmed by Swedish, Irish and Belgian television. Its programmes were applauded at video festivals in Graz and Cannes. Yet in March 1975, with a year of the original licence still to run, Rediffusion closed it down at a week's notice.

Why? Why was it that Rediffusion set up a station which earned them not a penny (the licence allowed no advertising, no increase in subscription) and cost £¼m? And why were they allowed to close the station down so abruptly without intervention from the Labour government or the Home Office? The answer tells us something about the cable companies which now have the ear of the Department of Industry and about the need for regulation which they and the government are urging us to abandon.

The version of history which the cable industry has persuaded the government to accept — and which is found in the Hunt Report — dismisses the community television stations as failures for 'not being economically viable' and unable to 'cover their costs'. But the licences never permitted the stations to earn revenue. The big companies got into community television unwillingly, because they had to. At the start of the 70s there was only one way they could see to reverse the decline in cable subscribers caused by the spread of improved over-the-air reception, and that was pay-TV — then starting to boom in the USA.

The 1970 Tory government which was planning to introduce commercial radio could easily be persuaded, the cable companies thought, to include pay-TV in its plans for the future of broadcasting. Instead, they were surprised by the offer of three-year licences for local television in five locations. Though the services were not going to be allowed to earn revenue, the companies reckoned that if they could score 'brownie points' with a bit of local programming, they'd give it a try. So came about that uneasy alliance between what a journalist at the time called the cable mercenaries and the missionaries of community television.

But the Heath government fell in 1974. Labour set up the Annan Committee and referred all questions to Annan. Cable was seen as a Tory initiative, not to be encouraged: what was actually being achieved by the local stations was not examined. With no immediate prospect of pay-TV, the companies decided to pull out. They were allowed to do so in flagrant breach of their own rhetoric about 'community involvement'. Rediffusion closed Bristol Channel at a week's notice in March 1975, Sheffield Cablevision at a day's notice at the end of the same year.

**T**O LABEL THESE services as failures is to accept the ITAP/Hunt — and Tory — assumption that information must be judged by its market potential. It is also over-simplistic, because the government of the day never laid down criteria for the success or failure of the services. Certainly the companies failed to win their desired goal — pay-TV. But many hundreds of individuals and groups in six different locations succeeded in learning to use the medium and communicating with their 'constituencies'. These same 'constituencies' failed to persuade the Labour government to adopt a supportive policy towards what were in effect innovative local public services, despite their success in impressing the Annan Committee with the importance of what they had accomplished. In the one area, Swindon, where thoroughgoing social scientific research (by the University of Leicester's Centre for Mass Communication Research) was applied in advance of and during the community television service, results showed that the cable station, Swindon Viewpoint, succeeded in attracting a significant proportion of the available audience and helping them to make sense of their local environment. Bristol Channel, Swindon Viewpoint and the other cable stations were indeed pioneering a new form of local public service, but their efforts were ignored by the Left and mistrusted by professional broadcasters. The public access they provided, however, prefigured

a system in which information, like transport, health and education, is regarded as a right, not a marketable product.

**O**PPORTUNITIES FOR such local services have virtually disappeared from broadcasting, as resources are concentrated on network competition. There are no nursery slopes in British television and only Channel 4, though it, too, operates nationally, is able to offer some strictly limited patronage to independent film and video. If we are indeed to see cable expansion on the scale being proposed — £2½ billion-worth of investment over the next few years — then benefits must also be sought at the level of local culture — and we must begin to define what we mean by that phrase. The so-called 'community television' services of the 70s were the unintended result of a conjuncture of commercial aims and political caution. They were not what the present-day lobby means by community media — autonomous, democratic, accountable — because in the crucial question of the birth and death of stations 'the community' had no control.

Nor am I claiming that all the programmes produced questioned the assumptions and practices of mainstream broadcasting; many were derivative, imitative. (In the same breath I should add that few have ever been seen by the professional broadcasters who dismiss the notion of access on the basis of a cursory acquaintance with BBC's Open Door.) But, by accident almost, the 70s cable experience illustrated the latent needs that surface and the talents that find expression when space is provided. Since then, of course, the same point has been demonstrated by the radical alternative press up and down the country.

Now that channels on cable are again up for grabs what needs working out are the structures which will allow the participation of local groups and diversified sources of finance (some at least derived from cable profits) to produce a genuinely democratic local public service. We also need a greater readiness than has been hitherto apparent on the part of public service broadcasters inside the present institutions to recognise the potential strength and richness — and indeed the crucial importance — of what lies outside. Public access channels, second language channels, educational channels must be reserved. Their provision, with proper resources, should be made a condition of cable licences with hearings held in public and rules which also protect the priority of BBC and IBA services. These local channels should be included when there is discussion of minimum quotas; they should receive their share of whatever revenues may in the future be devised to support public service broadcasting. Certainly, too, local programming should be brought within the scope of agreements which, like the Channel 4/ACTT Workshop Agreement, would protect legitimate union interests.

Unless this happens we may find our culture has little chance of resisting a multi-channel, multi-national invasion.