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TESTIMONY BY CITIZENS LEAGUE BEFORE
MINNEAPOLIS CABLE COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION March 8, 1979

Since 1972, the Citizens League has completed two major studies related to communications. One was focused on cable television, and the second on the region's systems for circulating information and developing understanding of public affairs. Both of these studies are relevant to your needs assessment efforts.

The first recommendation of the cable TV report was that cable systems in the Twin Cities area should be interconnected. It is the League's feeling that much of cable television's potential will not be realized without interconnection of cable systems in the metropolitan area.

The Legislature has recognized the need for interconnection. State law requires that all cable systems in the metropolitan area be interconnected.

While some work has been done to develop rules and regulations for interconnection, specific needs to be met through interconnection have not been identified. Our report suggested some general things, but now, as we seriously consider wiring the region, we must be specific about the needs to be served through interconnection.

We hope that, as a part of your "needs assessment" you will give specific attention to interconnection. The City Council, as well as potential operators, must know the role that you see interconnection playing in meeting local needs. Think, for a moment, about how programing can be different if cable systems are interconnected. Minneapolis residents with very special interests are more likely to get the programing they want. Interconnection will bring them together with citizens in other parts of the metropolitan area who share their interests, and, as a group, there may be enough of them to stimulate programing.

In many respects, interconnection is an "unknown quantity". As far as we know, no other metropolitan area in the United States has an interconnected system. Thus, you must not only determine the needs that can be served through interconnection, but you must also make recommendations regarding the equipment necessary for interconnection and a method for financing its installation and operation.

Our 1978 report on public affairs information found the process of policy-making to be made up very largely of the flow of information. As such, the institutions that handle the flow of public affairs information are inescapably a part of the community's system of governance. Presently, changes are occurring in the major news media. Among the most significant are:

--A reorganizing of news beat to focus, as the editors say, on issues rather than places.

--Personalizing the news about public affairs. Studies have shown that people tend to read about people, and as a result the media are now placing greater emphasis on covering individuals rather than institutions.

--A stronger desire to show how governmental actions impact on individuals rather than the community as a whole.

These changes lead us to be concerned about the quality of local public affairs coverage. But, they also suggest an opportunity to cable television. The newspapers and other media are making their changes on the basis of market surveys. They are "mass media" and their objective is to serve a general audience. The public affairs information needs of the general public are different from those of people with special interest in public affairs. Previously their needs were met through the general media. Now, because of current changes, there is a major and growing gap in coverage.

Our report recommended that each television station in the Twin Cities area set in motion steps that will lead to the production of high-quality local public affairs programming. As cable television comes on the scene, it too should be responsible for providing high-quality local public affairs programming. And, because it can reach specialized audiences more efficiently than other media, we feel that cable TV presents one of this community's best opportunities to improve local public affairs programming.

You should recommend that the city's franchises require local operators, working either jointly or together, provide this region with a regular public affairs program. The program should appear regularly. It should be aired at a convenient time. And, most important, it should be a serious and high-quality production...one that is more than an hour of "talking heads".

Cable television can add to the quality of our community. However, it must be possible to reach the entire community. This means that interconnection is essential. Interconnection alone is not enough; the system must also be used to help the community understand and deal with its problems. Cable can do this through good public affairs programming.

Thank you.