

The state of the superstations

There are now four delivered across the country by satellite, and more to come, some willingly and some not; and there are the mini-superstations that go far beyond their broadcast area by microwave and other means

It has been just nine months since the FCC announced a new "open entry" policy pertaining to the resale carriers that relay the signals of independent television stations to cable television systems via satellite (BROADCASTING, Oct. 30, 1978). At the time of that decision, it was believed that the FCC had opened the way for more television stations to join WTCG(TV) Atlanta in the bid for cable systems well beyond their traditional areas of coverage.

In the interim, that belief has been borne out. At present four stations are being delivered to systems around the country. But, thus far, only WTCG actively pursues its cable audience and solicits advertising at rates reflecting more than five million homes it reaches outside the Atlanta market. Other superstations, such as WGN-TV Chicago, all but ignore the extra homes and continue to concentrate on their own area's viewers.

According to Edward Taylor, president of Southern Satellite Systems Inc., Tulsa, Okla., the resale carrier for WTCG, the number of superstations already exceeds what his company projected for 1979. Taylor believes that the four stations now on the RCA Satcom I satellite and a fifth that may go on the Westar satellite this fall represent a program market too large for the current cable television audience. By his estimates, the number of satellite-relayed stations should remain fairly constant through 1981.

■ Ted Turner's WTCG is the granddaddy of the superstations and, as of July 10 when Southern Satellite added its 1,000th cable system, the station had a total of 4.8 million cable subscribers receiving their signal via RCA's Satcom I satellite. In addition to that, WTCG estimates that another 556,000 cable homes receive its signal through terrestrial microwave and over-the-air pick-ups. Southern's basic charge for picking up the WTCG signal is 10 cents per subscriber per month.

■ The official position of the management of WGN-TV Chicago is that the station is a "passive" superstation. At this time, it neither encourages nor discourages the relay of its signal by United Video Inc. to cable systems via the Satcom I satellite. WGN-TV began going out to the systems

on the satellite hook-up in November 1978, the first station to do so under the FCC's new policy. Roy L. Bliss, executive vice president of UVI, said that as of July 18, 807,000 subscribers on 243 systems were receiving the WGN-TV signal via satellite. Systems with another 500,000 subscribers have agreed to carry the station. According to WGN-TV, over 800,000 television homes receive the station via traditional microwave or over-the-air cable hook-ups. UVI, too, charges 10 cents per subscriber per month.

■ KTVU(TV) San Francisco-Oakland is distributed by Satellite Communications Systems Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of Holiday Inns Inc., Memphis. The station signal began going out over Satcom I in December 1978 and is now being received in 214,000 homes on over 60 cable systems. SCS was originally a joint venture between Holiday Inns and Southern Satellite, but the lodging firm acquired full ownership last month (BROADCASTING, July 16). SCS charges the standard rate of 10 cents per subscriber per month.

■ The fourth major satellite-fed superstation is WOR-TV New York, which is distributed by Eastern Microwave Inc. of Syracuse, N. Y. According to EMI's general manager, Art Perkins, 31 cable systems with 93,000 subscribers now pick up the WOR-TV satellite signal. (EMI put WOR-TV on the Satcom satellite April 18.) Another 1.7 million subscribers to 118 systems in the Northeast receive the station through EMI's terrestrial system. EMI charges the standard 10-cent rate for carrying the station with a maximum monthly fee of

\$3,000 and a minimum of \$100. A 15% discount is offered if payment is made in advance.

It would be wrong however, to think of the four satellite stations as the only superstations. Traditional cable carriage and microwave links have extended the signal reach of a number of other major independent stations in the country. WPIX(TV) New York, for example, is received by systems outside the New York area of dominant influence and is seen in more than 1.5 million television households as a result.

Nor is WPIX alone. Although the non-satellite stations generally tend to be regional powers and do not extend across the continent the way the satellite stations do, most have their signal coverage areas extended considerably by cable. Among stations fitting this category are WSBK-TV Boston; KBMA-TV Kansas City, Mo.; KTVT(TV) Dallas; KTLA(TV) Los Angeles and KSTW(TV) Tacoma-Seattle.

One special case in this category is KTTV(TV) Los Angeles, which is currently viewed in 933,000 households in Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, parts of Texas, and California on 165 systems. The FCC has given permission to ASN Inc. to begin distributing KTTV (along with WGN-TV and WOR-TV) via Westar. KTTV is currently on the satellite, but ASN is only testing the signal and sales of the KTTV signal will not begin until September.

Metromedia Inc., the owner of KTTV, is contesting the commission's action, however, on the grounds that it is becoming an "involuntary superstation" (see page 44). It is Metromedia's contention that retransmission of the KTTV signal constitutes a violation of Section 325 of the Communications Act, which prohibits rebroadcast of signals without consent.

Moving and shaking at CPB, PBS. "Restructuring" was the buzz word last week at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Public Broadcasting Service. But while one group was moving ahead with its change in plans, the other was retreating.

At its monthly meeting, in Boston, the CPB board voted unanimously to reconsider its restructuring plan that had been approved by an 8-3 vote June 20 (BROADCASTING, June 25). The proposal would have restructured CPB by dividing its operations into a management services division and a separate program fund.

The board, now with a compliment of new members, voted to postpone the changes and reconsider them at its next meeting, Aug. 20-21. In addition, board members will participate in a special two-day meeting prior to the regular monthly session, presumably to get better acquainted and discuss proposals.

The seven nominees to the board were all confirmed by the Senate last week after a June 28 hearing. They are: Howard White, general counsel, ITT World Communications; Michael Kelly, English professor, George Mason University, Fairfax, Va.; Geoffrey Cowan, lecturer, University of California Los Angeles; Paul Friedlander, attorney, Seattle; Michael Gammino Jr., president, Columbus National Bank, Providence, R.I.; Jose Rivera, attorney, EEO specialist, Brooklyn, and Kathleen Nolan, former president, Screen Actors Guild.

PBS, meanwhile, was moving ahead with its restructuring plans. Appointed to oversee development of PTV I—the "Blue" service—was Chloe Aaron, senior vice president for programming. PTV II—the "Red" or regional service—will be the responsibility of Peter Downey, senior vice president for corporate affairs while Bill Reed, senior vice president for station relations, will have responsibility for the "Green" or educational program service.