

TV BREAKTHROUGH

GE's Scientists Open Channels

By RON WOLF Knight-Ridder Newspapers

The television industry has been rocked periodically by predictions of astounding technological breakthroughs that will miraculously transform broadcasting.

Some actually have come to fruition. The advent of satellite communications in the early '60s provided cable TV firms with an inexpensive way to distribute programming and played a critical role in the development of the medium a decade later.

Broadcasting and cable executives are suddenly talking about another gadget that is likely to have a profound effect on the business.

General Electric unveiled electronic components last month that are part of a "bandwidth compression system" that will double the channel capacity of a cable system.

GE accomplishes this technical feat by electronically disassembling the 525 lines that make up a television picture. Every other line is eliminated and replaced by a corresponding portion of a second picture.

After the signal is received in the home, the two images are electronically separated. The missing lines are replaced by inserting an average of the two adjacent lines.

The most immediate application of this technology will be in upgrading older cable systems with low channel capacity. More than half of the country's cable customers are still served by 12-channel systems.

The devices are not yet available for purchase by cable companies, but GE expects to have the products on the market in 1984. A demonstration in Los Angeles attracted mixed reviews from cable engineers, who said that the reassembled images suffered a loss of sharpness and contrast.

Representatives of GE said that the process was still being refined. The Comband components will offer images that are undistinguishable from the original signals, they said, before the devices are placed on sale.

Much of the interest surrounding the technique involves its application to forms of television other than cable. For example, a subscription-TV station that is now selling one channel of programming could use the GE technology to transmit two channels.

Or two subscription-TV stations could team up to offer a four-channel service. Industry research shows that most cable customers are attracted to only a handful of channels.

About the same time that GE was demonstrating its Comband products to the cable industry, the company announced its intention to sell its string of television and radio stations.

The coincidence prompted Broadcasting magazine to speculate about a possible connection between the events. That GE may be thinking that Comband technology will affect cable TV and other telecommunications so greatly that it should unload its conventional broadcast outlets to concentrate on the new opportunities.

NBC Cuts Three Prime-Time Series

By KENNETH R. CLARK

NEW YORK (UPI) — NBC sent three programs to the showers Wednesday and called in the second team after a winless season in the Nielsen ratings, despite critical acclaim for much of its prime-time programming.

Following the dictates of its new chairman, Grant Tinker, who has insisted that quality shows henceforth will not be axed simply because they fail to find an audience in the first few weeks of their lives, the midseason adjustment was modest.

"Father Murphy," which pulled respectable ratings last season until NBC moved it opposite the CBS Sunday night powerhouse "60 Minutes," was canceled outright. So were two of this season's rookies — "Gavilan" and "The Devil Connection."

In addition, Tony Randall's "Love Sidney" was placed "on hiatus," with network assurances that it will return later in a new time slot. In network parlance, however, "hiatus" often is a synonym for "terminally ill."

To fill the gap left by the programmer's axe, NBC will ring in several midseason replacements.

A new weekly news magazine hosted by Lloyd Dobbins will make its debut from 10-11 p.m., on March 19. George Peppard will star in a new adventure series titled "The A Team," and the monstrous pugilist from "Rocky III" will make his debut in one called "Mr. T."

A third series, "Bare Essence," based on the book and the steamy movie run last October by CBS, and "Mama's Family," a 30-minute reincarnation of a situation comedy born on the old Carole Burnett show, with Vickie Lawrence and Harvey Korman, will round out the lineup.

Burnett, Ken Barry and Betty White will make occasional appearances on the series, which initially was slated to kick off the 1982-83 season.

NBC also will ring in a new limited series — "Family Tree," starring Anne Archer and Frank Converse as divorced parents who marry each other.

Three other series will be presented in the spring as pilots for next year's prime-time schedule.

They will be "Casablanca," a remake of the Bogart classic, with David Soul as the world-weary Rick and Seatman Crothers in the role of Sam; "Teachers Only," with Lynn Redgrave, and "Buffalo Bill," with Dabney Coleman in the role of an irascible talk show host at a Buffalo, N.Y., radio station.

"Cheers" and "Taxi" — part of NBC's Thursday night lineup which has been praised by everyone but Nielsen — will remain, but with juggled time slots.

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