

Back to the Future

BYRON POWERS

He stood six feet eight inches tall and he was dressed in a T-shirt with a slogan on it and his name was Dirk and he loomed over me to ask if I had a few minutes to talk about public-access TV.

Sure. Hell, yes. As soon as my pulse rate returned to normal. As soon as I could stop wondering whether I'd get to keep my credit cards. Actually, once I realized he did not intend to carve a zodiacal sign on my abdomen with the rusted edge of an Indiana license plate, I sort of welcomed his company. Of all the 13,148 delegates registered at the thirty-fifth annual National Cable Television Association convention in Dallas a few months back, there did not seem to be a more interesting prospect for a few minutes of relevant rapping than Dirk Koning, executive director of the Grand Rapids (Michigan) Cable Access Center.

Power to the people. Carry it on.

He was as gloriously out of place—out of *decade*—as it was possible to be in this ad hoc nation of bust-my-buttons bidnisspeople (even the women wore wing tips) milling about the exhibit hall and the conference rooms of the Dallas Convention Center: these proud, scrubbed young entrepreneurs of the Wired Nation snapping a few Instamatic shots of their gleaming Cable-Data/QuickData booths before the doors opened to admit *more* scrubbed entrepreneurs wearing buttons that read "I ♥ Scrambling."

Amiable, plucky, self-starting folk, to be sure—but this was a convention, after all, that reached its apex when a gaggle of Bunnies from the Playboy Channel staged an impromptu raid upon the pristine escutcheons of the Christian Broadcasting Network a few booths away.

Dirk Koning, public-access commando, was not mainstream here. Not among these high-rolling outriders of television's new multichannel era, these eager beavers of an industry in transition.

This convention was most assuredly not about giving the product

away to people for free. None of that Seventies Utopian nonsense, that fin de siècle hippie pipe-dream notion of channels where you could watch bald-headed people in rimless glasses making humid speeches about rent control. Or having sex.

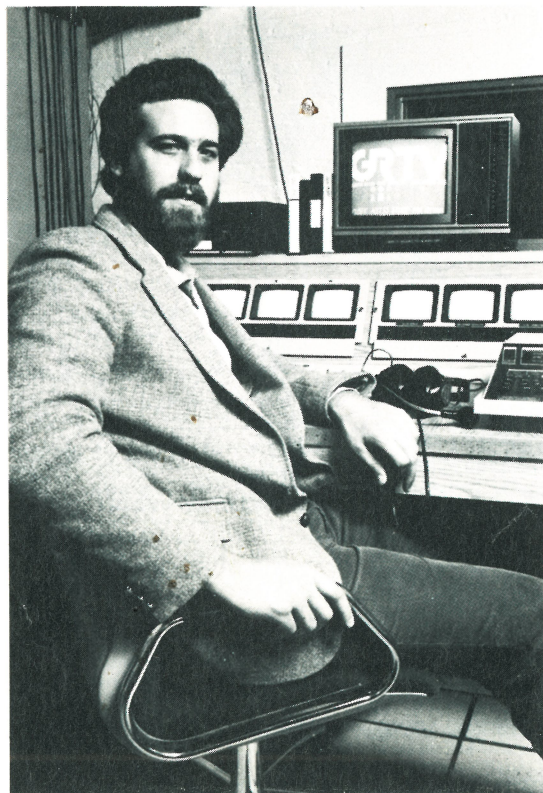
The NCTA represents an industry that laid almost 700,000 miles of coaxial cable around America in the past generation, thank you. Now, in Dallas in the late winter of 1986, the NCTA was facing the fact that its wiring bonanza was about over—diminishing returns and all that—unless it started muscling up and playing hardball. Some image retooling was in order here. No more would cable be perceived as a passive conduit for the networks and big stations. In order to get that tough-nut other half of America wired up, cable must transform itself into a *competitor* with the networks. It must learn *programming*. Learn *marketing*. Learn to be an aggressive dispenser of the indispensable. Dr. Ruth. *Larry King Live*. More music videos. The Atlanta Braves, man.

National pay-per-view, the delegates were learning to rethink, and copyright and scrambled signals to foil those damn satellite-dish owners. The spirit of deregulation was in the air. Free-market competition. Public access? Good God, did we say something about reserving channels for *public access* back during those franchise hearings? Oh, my. Well, that was a long time ago. That was the *Seventies*. Does today's viewer really want to tune in to Earth Gardening with Dr. Pisses when for a few extra bucks he can watch Rambo defoliate a jungle?

"Public access has been a forgot-

Are tomorrow's television moguls Little Leaguers, Vietnam vets, indiscreet magicians and Miriam Green with her violets abloom?

Dirk Koning at the command center of GRTV, Channel 1/23, in Grand Rapids. Forget *Sizzling Sinema*. This is what cable was supposed to be all about.



ten stepchild," Dirk Koning said with a certain wariness that belied his bulk and his pirate name. (As a board member of the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers he did, after all, have to maintain diplomatic ties to the go-getters around him.) "There's been a lot of us-them," he went on. A lot of cable operators have decided that they want back some of the channels that they allocated to access back during the franchising era—they'd love to put a few more pay services in.

"We access people are committed to preserving the community's right to a channel. I mean, I can sell peanuts on the networks if I have the money, but I cannot buy a minute to talk about nuclear proliferation."

There's no getting around it—this does have the whiff of that old-time Aquarian religion. Grass-roots populism, this whole Spaceship Earth. And Dirk Koning, a 29-year-old mellowed-out giant who was born on an Indian reservation and once turned down a chance to play defensive end for Bo Schembechler at Michigan, did seem, in this pleasure dome of welcome barbecues and recapitalization forums, to be a time traveler out of his zone, a sort of *Hitchhiker* who'd landed in the wrong garden party.

I asked him exactly what sort of programs he ran on his access system back in Grand Rapids (which is situated, wonderfully, in the underground fallout shelter of the public library). And Koning's wariness melted into the sort of delight I had not seen lately in—well, Brandon Tartikoff.

"We program sixty hours a week," he said. "First come, first served. We do (cont. on page 66)

(continued from page 65) about everything. We do first-run, locally produced noncommercial television. Stuff the commercial channels in Grand Rapids should be doing but aren't—in fact, we've been designated as 'competition' by them. No more freebie equipment."

For example?

Koning shrugged a where-to-begin shrug. "Religious?" he said. "Twelve hours back-to-back on Sundays. The Christian Reform Church in Grand Rapids now has a mobile van running around town; it's sunk about \$200,000 into equipment. Our longest-running religious program, though, is the Elder Larry D. Weaver; he's a storefront preacher in the inner city. He takes a camera to his church, hits the play button himself—you can see him run around into the field of view—sits down and preaches for an hour.

"The local United Auto Workers have their own mini-van. They do a show called *Images of Labor*. We have a kids' exercise show—*Kids in Shape*. We do sports; we do the *Little League Game of the Week*. There's a *Vietnam Veterans Report*. We do entertainment—weekly musicals, band concerts and things. We have a magic show, *Magic With Paul*; I don't know his last name offhand. He spends his half hour unveiling the secrets of magic. I'm sure the other professional magicians hate him. We do a show with a realtor, *Now Is the Time for Real Estate*. We do *Violets in Bloom With Miriam Green*—she abso-

lutely loves violets and tells you for thirty minutes a week what she knows."

Somewhere on the exhibit-hall floor, the Playboy Bunnies might have been duking it out with Jimmy Swaggart, but I didn't care. Suddenly, Hit Video, EventTeleVision, Shari Lewis—I don't know, it all seemed a shade studied. I had developed an inexplicable craving to say "Good-bye, Dallas, hello, Grand Rapids." Call me jaded.

"Tell me," I said to Dirk Koning, "about—about public affairs!"

"Gavel-to-gavel coverage of the local city commission," he told me. "Unedited. No editorial control. When we first proposed this a couple years ago, the city opposed us—not in its interest, it said. Now it has tried to *mandate* us. The commissioners love it—they actually feel compelled to *attend* the meetings now. Some of them have learned how to turn around and face the camera and orate. It's terrific."

"Tell me about it," I said as a sublime vision took shape in my mind of a woman named Miriam fending off Joan Collins with a fistful of violets.

When I got back to New York, I telephoned a friend of Dirk Koning's in Washington, D.C., a woman named Sue Buske, the executive director of the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers. I was curious to know just how drastically access television had shrunk since the cable operators had gone

big time and how much longer this charming, vestigial form could possibly hold out.

I was pleasantly surprised. "We're actually gaining rapidly," Sue Buske told me. "In 1975, there were about seventy access operations in the country. Today, we know of at least 1,000.

"And that growth has happened in spite of a lot of barriers. The cable industry has not warmly embraced access channels, although some companies do have policies that are quite supportive. But we do have this phenomenon of cable companies that promised, say, four access channels during their days of competitive franchise bids, coming back now and saying it's not financially feasible to keep those channels open."

The Supreme Court didn't help any. In 1979, the court overturned a 1972 order by the Federal Communications Commission that mandates access channels for all cable systems with more than 3,500 subscribers.

What helped save access television from oblivion, in Buske's opinion, was an institution not normally distinguished by its enlightenment—local municipal government.

"In markets where the city administers cable, we've had a lot of support for access," she said. "It's usually financed by a portion of the 5 percent of the gross receipts that go to city hall. Also in our favor is that viewers actually seem to *want* access. They want to watch it and they want to *do* it. People are more sophisticated now about the power of television, and they want some. They're not intimidated anymore about the magical box."

Nor is access television any longer an arcane refuge for the disaffected political left wing. Right-to-lifers are busily spinning out their programs now, and evangelical Christians in heartland towns and cities and old people and children. In fact, the most beguiling aspect of access television, 1980s-style, might not lie so much in any given show as in the straightforward, can-do, utterly *American* approach to it that is being demonstrated by ordinary people.

In Paw Paw, Michigan, for instance, there is the housewife/adult-education instructor who, five days a week, gets in the family car, rounds up videocassettes that have been produced by people in her neighborhood, drives several miles to the local access studio (which used to be a concession stand for a football field), lets herself in with the key under the mat, slips the cassettes into the machine—and sits patiently for four hours while the homemade programming unspools. For those four hours she is Faye Dunaway in *Network*. Better. She is real.

Every man a king, Huey Long once said. Access television is beginning to promise that every man can at least be a Ted Turner. Or a Dirk Koning. Eat your heart out, Dallas. The hour of Grand Rapids approacheth. ■

Pulitzer Prize-winner Ron Powers is media critic for CBS Sunday Morning.

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