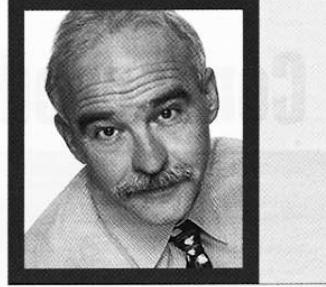




**P.J. BEDNARSKI**  
EDITOR



## Freeing Up Free TV

At NATPE, for a change, there seemed to be a world of opportunity

**W**hen you work at a place called BROADCASTING & CABLE, you get a great chance to see both businesses side by side. Those of you who work in one or the other know this already, but it comes as a shock to the outside world that B doesn't think much of C, and vice versa, and this is true even as consolidation has blurred the division.

When Tom Rogers ran CNBC, he once told me, he seemed a little lonely at network meetings when everybody else was laughing hysterically over cable's boasts about 0.6 ratings and simultaneously thought he was an agent of the coaxial spy camp collecting broadcasting's best secrets. Now NBC's all about cable.

Nonetheless, when cable has a convention or the cable marketing organization CTAM sponsors a series of seminars, the sessions tend to have a forward spin. At NCTA conventions over the years, the buzz has been John Malone's 500-channel universe, or telephony, or cable modems, or DVRs built into set-top boxes, or just plain old digital set-top boxes. Everything at NCTA is about change, and change is good. The music between sessions is really loud and upbeat.

The Gloomy Gus of the media business is broadcast television, for sure. Whenever broadcasters gather a group of more than 10, you can be sure the conversation will quickly turn to how the industry must Stop Congress! or Stop the FCC! Or Nielsen! Or Repurposing! Or Consumers! Or the networks! Or Peggy Charren, even! Because, broadcasters have been told, if they don't act fast, they will be out of business in (pick a year that is coming soon), sure as shootin'!

Some of this is temperament. Broadcasters are older because their business is, and they've been bugged all of their lives, forced to fulfill some public-interest standard that they are proud of most of the time and loathe every time they have to be in another damn parade. They're much more heavily under the thumb of the FCC than cable is, which gets pasted only about once a decade when its rates go higher than the cost of a Buick.

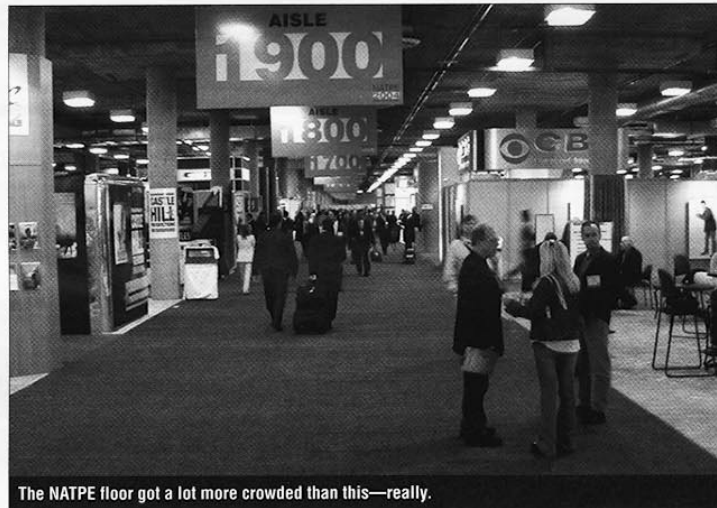
And some broadcasters must feel unappreciated. Cable, wonderful cable, is still filled sunrise to sunrise

with product that once aired on the bad independent station in their market, or new programming so indecipherable that broadcasters can't fathom it. For them, *South Park* or *Punk'd* should be on the Greek to Me Channel. And that Animal Planet stuff about monkeys and giraffes used to be on Sunday afternoons on their channels where it got a 1 rating, which didn't cause anybody to write

ers that they will have an opportunity to add channels and revenue streams. Broadcasters, after more than a decade of high-def dithering and multicast malarkey, now see the real deal starting to happen. Broadcasting, old and croaking, is in renewal, like those Rust Belt cities a decade ago.

Broadcasters probably don't quite understand what they'll be doing in

**Broadcasters probably don't quite understand what they'll be doing in the near future. But I sense optimism.**



The NATPE floor got a lot more crowded than this—really.

an exclamatory press release.

Maybe I've taken too long to get to this point, but, at NATPE last week, a lot of that us-vs.-them stuff by broadcasters was muted. Instead, there seemed to be some transcendent forward motion. "I like the way it feels on the floor," said one syndicator (who didn't have a booth there), and others were surprised that there were crowds—really decent crowds—around.

I believe two things caused it.

First, attendees saw NATPE almost die last year along with the economy, and, this year, syndicators and buyers seemingly willed it to breathe again. Lachlan Murdoch was telling someone that, every once in a while, everybody in the business needs to get together, simple as that.

Second, there are complicated new technologies convincing broadcast-

the near future. Only about six people even have a clue. But I sense optimism. (I also sense confusion. When I read the story about Great Britain's Freeview in our Jan. 5 edition and the story about U.S. Digital Television's multicasting experiment in Salt Lake in our Jan. 12 issue, I confess I had to read some paragraphs two or three times.)

But back to the optimism part. I haven't left NATPE feeling that way in a long time. It has been a show shrinking in size, in influence, in meaning—a bunch of salesfolk chasing a 2 rating. This year, though, broadcasting—free TV—seemed full of possibilities. ■

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