

It seems so natural today. Having cable television in our homes, giving us a vast selection of channels from which to choose, is a given condition for the vast majority of us. I can remember in my early years it was not like that. We had the three networks and a few local channels. A Black face on television doing something productive was very few and far between. When the great singer Nat King Cole got his own television show in Los Angeles we were all so proud. Our music was available to us and we were indeed becoming a valuable part of American culture. Gone are those simple years that discounted and downplayed Black intellect, talent and culture.

It was 1948, when entrepreneurs would introduce cable television to three markets – Arkansas, Oregon and Pennsylvania. They would service the mountain areas of these states where normal television signals were extremely difficult to pick up. In just 4 years, there were 70 cable systems servicing over 14,000 households. By the 1960's, there were over 850,000 households and 800 cable providers. This was phenomenal growth but was seen as a great threat to the local television owners. They convinced the federal government (Congress and the Federal Communications Commission –FCC) to slow the pace down and bring in tighter controls through enhanced regulation.

Cable television hit an anemic growth rate throughout the 1960's because of the above obstacle. They would limit cable operators offering movies, sporting events and syndicated programming. It was actually an assault on freedom of speech. Please keep in mind that the cable growth was coming from private funds such as venture capitalism and equity investment. There was not a drop of government money – county, state nor federal. This was true Americana as the founders of our government intended it to be.

The FCC was, in fact, a prohibitive entity to the growth of this new technology which targeted information, entertainment and thought.

Champions of the upstart cable industry finally convinced the government authorities to lessen the blockage they created and let this valuable technology grow and become available to the American marketplace. The demand should determine if it should expand and the demand was about to blow up to incredible levels. The creation of satellite technology along with friendlier regulation caused a spike in available capital. Great American entrepreneurs like Jack Kent Cooke, Charles Dolan and Ted Turner would gather the needed capital and revolutionize programming based on the demands of the American consumer. By 1980, nearly sixteen million households were subscribing to cable companies. It was just the beginning.

As these entrepreneurs began to populate and jobs were being created exponentially, Black Americans happily found that they were included. Thank the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act for this. Local regulation and licensing would come from the city and county level. The face of city and county government had now become a “rainbow” in most local communities. The newly formed cable companies knew they had to be inclusive. Job hires, training and ownership were being “dipped in chocolate”. Cable companies were coming with diversity in the entertainment and ownership industry. The late Mayor Coleman Young of Detroit and past DC Mayor Marion Barry along with other vanguard Black mayors in the nations demanded Black ownership participation. Two notable beneficiaries of this new opportunity were the late Don Barden of Detroit and Robert Johnson of Washington, DC (BET).

As cable progressed and the more successful ventures became multi-billion dollar empires, telecom giants such as Verizon and AT&T have joined the industry which includes Comcast, Cox and others and provide great competition in our larger markets which ensures competitive pricing and even more jobs and careers with very diverse populations. The largest union in telecommunications is the Communication Workers of America – CWA. It is probably the most diverse union and has been very fair when it comes to African American workers. Management at all of these cable providers has an appreciable share of Black participation.

Every genre of Black music is now available on cable television. Black produced movies, talk shows, history segments, news and individually owned channels exist today and that is a very good thing. Children, millennial and seasoned Black adults can find what they are looking for and are educated to new ideas and happenings. It is without any doubt in my mind this is the greatest industry sector for economic opportunity amongst Black Americans. Stories like this keep America great and strong.

To keep this story growing and succeeding it becomes very important that regulating authorities at the local and federal level realize that regulations must support free enterprise, encourage private capital and promote diversity. The best model for this is the Cable Story.

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