

The FCC delivers on cable

After years of debate and quarrel, CATV gets blueprint for expansion; question now is whether it will stick

In appearance, it is impressive, the FCC's magnum opus on CATV—some 500 pages of report and order, rules and appendices, separate opinions of the commissioners, plus collateral items including notices of proposed rulemaking dealing with issues not treated in the main document. But it was uncertain last week, when it was finally issued, more than three years after the rulemaking project was undertaken, whether the document is to be the rock on which a major new industry—cable television—is to be built, or so many pounds of sand destined to be eroded by the elements of time, resistance and events.

FCC Chairman Dean Burch, who since joining the commission over two years ago has made it his mission to bring forth a package of CATV rules that would permit the industry to develop side by side with broadcasting, described the commission's action as "historic," one that he hoped "will regularize and validate an industry that never knew what its future was."

The statement of John Gwin, chairman of the National Cable Television Association, reflected the relief and jubilation of an industry that has considered itself chained ever since the commission began regulating it, in 1966. "The freeze is over," Mr. Gwin said. "The FCC's adoption of new rules for cable makes this a most significant day in the history of communications. This

is the watershed from which all progress of cable television will be measured."

The rules for the first time permit CATV systems to operate with distant signals in the top-100 markets as a matter of right, thus providing cable with the economic base its operators say is needed if it is to deliver the benefits that broadband wires make possible. The rules also specifically require the delivery on those promises, at least to a limited extent: CATV systems in the major markets, for instance, will be

obliged to make channel capacity available to the public, educators and local government at no cost. ("The rules," said Chairman Burch, "will remove a bar to access for the public, so any member of the public can get on a television facility and communicate with other members of the public.") And they contain provisions designed to prevent cable from "jeopardizing the basic structure of over-the-air television" and to protect copyright owners.

The rules are to become effective



Two of the principals involved in fashioning the cable TV rules released by the FCC last week were Chairman Dean Burch (top picture at right), who briefed the press Thursday noon, and Cable Bureau Chief Sol Schildhouse (bottom picture), who answered reporters' questions after the briefing. The gist of their reports is documented in the accompanying story and—in a special section on pages 21 through 36 of this issue—a full-text presentation of the most critical elements of the new rules.