

HBO scrambling

Home Box Office Inc. said last week that it had started testing scrambled feeds to Eastern affiliates of its Cinemax service and that tests to Eastern HBO affiliates will start today (April 29). The tests, to be carried out initially during interstitial program periods between features, are to insure that descrambler units sent to the East Coast systems are installed correctly and operating properly. All affiliates in good standing have been given one descrambler unit for each Cinemax and HBO receive antenna they have installed at their system head-ends. HBO said the tests will also confirm that all operators have completed and returned to HBO a descrambler authorization-registration card. Testing on the Cinemax Western feed started March 15 and scrambling of this feed is now operational daily, HBO reported. It said tests on the HBO Western feed started April 15.

A union for C-SPAN?

C-SPAN may soon be a union shop.

The National Association of Broadcast Engineers and Technicians (NABET) has petitioned the National Labor Relations Board to conduct an election among C-SPAN production employees to see if they want to be represented by the union.

After meeting with between 20 and 30 of the affected employees in the union's Bethesda, Md., offices three weeks ago, Harry Coyte, NABET's director of organizing, said he felt "confident" that the union would be voted in. But, he said, he doesn't know whether enthusiasm for the union has grown or waned since then.

Before the vote can be taken, the NLRB has to determine how many of C-SPAN's 83 employees are eligible for union representation, part of the co-called "unit." NABET has identified 46 production technicians and engineers it believes should be part of the unit. The NLRB will rule on the unit size following a hearing on Thursday (May 2) unless the union and C-SPAN can settle on a number before then.

Once the unit is established, it will take a simple majority of it (24 or 46 votes, for instance) to vote in the union. If the union gets in, said Coyte, it will decide what it wants and then begin negotiating a contract with C-SPAN.

Between now and the election, said C-SPAN spokeswoman Susan Swain, C-SPAN management will be talking with their employees in hopes of heading off the movement toward unionization. "We hope we can solve the problems before something like a union is necessary," she said.

As Swain tells it, a union, with its demands for more money and more benefits, could put a strain on the nonprofit network, which has been run on a shoestring since its inception six years ago. If costs go up, she said, either C-SPAN rates will be raised or

employees will be laid off.

Coast is clear

A Los Angeles judge has approved a \$2.7-million emergency bank loan to CommuniCom Cable Television, the Los Angeles cable operator that sought protection under federal bankruptcy laws last January. The payment, authorized by Bankruptcy Court Judge Richard Mednick, will allow the system to operate at least through June 30, by which time a new financial plan is expected to be announced for continued operation during the balance of 1985.

CommuniCom, believed to be the first major urban system to declare bankruptcy, has about 47,000 subscribers in a 300,000-home franchise extending from downtown Los Angeles west to Venice Beach. The largest of 14 area franchise holders, the company has reported debts of more than \$165 million.

The Bankruptcy Court is supervising private lending to CommuniCom by Security Pacific National Bank and First National Bank of Boston. The company, which received a \$2.3-million loan last February, is expected to seek additional loans totaling at least \$10 million some time by the end of this year.

According to CommuniCom's new chief executive officer, Richard E. Matthews, the company is still talking to possible buyers about selling the system but no serious discussions are pending.

In an unrelated move, the Los Angeles Board of Telecommunications Commissioners has unanimously approved a draft ordinance that would grant United Cable a 10-year replacement franchise for the 166,000-home East San Fernando Valley franchise. The present franchise is due to expire in 1987, however United has argued that it needs more time to complete construction of the system. The commission is requiring that United make an upfront payment to the city of \$500,000 for deferment of certain access facilities the company had proposed in its 1980 franchise proposal.

Financial expansion

The Financial News Network, Santa Monica, Calif., plans to expand to a 24-hour-a-day schedule in May, with the addition of evening and weekend sports programming. The basic cable program service added four hours of nightly sports programming, under the title *Score* (8 p.m.-midnight NYT) on April 1. The four-year-old service has also shifted its *Wall Street Final* to the 7 p.m.-8 p.m. time slot.

Anheuser-Busch's AB-Sports and Dallas-based Pro Serv Television are producing the weekend sports fare, while Pro Serv is handling weeknight sports. The expanded schedule also includes business news updates and sports scores. Other offerings are *Business Today*, fed at 6-8 a.m. NYT and

again at 9-10 a.m. following *BizNet*, from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

According to FNN, AB-Sports will contribute some subscribers and program elements previously committed to the Sports Time regional cable service in which AB-Sports was a partner with Multimedia and TeleCommunications Inc. The venture went out of business March 31. FNN has taken over transponder time that was previously allocated to Sports Time.

The network, which serves 18 million homes via about 1,000 cable systems, expects to show its first profit later this year.

Pacific berth

One out of every five residents of the Pacific island of Guam were expected to turn out last Saturday (April 27) for the launch of the Home Box Office and Cinemax pay television services on Guam Cable Television, according to HBO. "With the entire island of Guam invited to attend, this may well be the largest turn-out for a pay TV launch in the history of the cable industry," declared Lee M. Holmes, president of Western Systems Inc., Guam Cable's parent company.

The launch party, held in Ypao Park, was to include a fireworks display, celebrity appearances and a preview look at HBO's *USA For Africa* music special.

Guam joins Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and the 50 states in receiving the two Time Inc.-owned pay services. The programming reaches Guam by tape-delay from recordings made at Western's Pasadena, Calif., headquarters. The island system passes 28,500 homes and serves 23,000 subscribers.

Audio consolidation

Star Ship Stereo, Satellite Syndicated Systems Inc.'s cable audio service, introduced a number of changes last week, in some cases getting rid of duplications, in others cutting costs, and in some cases doing both.

SSS terminated its Satcom IV lease and consolidated certain formats on Satcom III. "With more and more cable systems turning away from Satcom IV," said Jim Trecek, SSS vice president for sales and marketing, "the expense of leasing subcarrier space and the equipment required to look at an extra satellite has become cost-prohibitive for both SSS and system operators."

Star Ship Stereo has been offering a package of 11 full-time, commercial-free formats. Termination of the Satcom IV lease was made possible by combining the Rock and Rhythm & Blues channels into a single new format called Hot Hits. Among other changes, the classical format is being replaced by WFMT(FM) Chicago programming. SSS is also moving its In Touch Network, a free reading service for the visually handicapped, to Satcom III, which it said will allow more systems to offer this service.

SSS said it had also learned that the origi-