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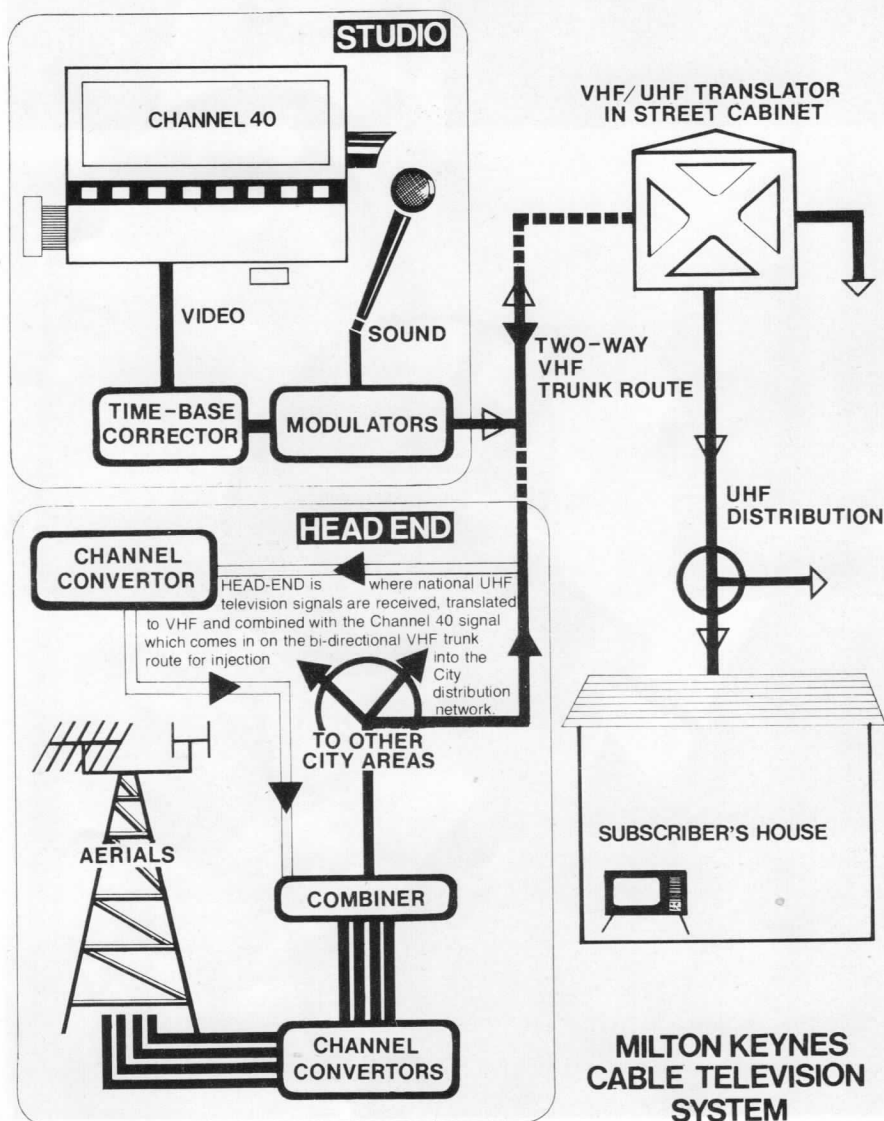
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Helping establish the community view

CG Taylor and E Williams



PEOPLE living in 10,000 homes in Buckinghamshire's new city of Milton Keynes can, thanks to the Post Office and the local Development Corporation, relax in front of their television sets and tune in not only to established favourites like 'Coronation Street' and 'Nationwide,' but also to Channel 40 – a locally produced programme which deals with news, views and activities in the community.

Channel 40 is available to all residents of the city who subscribe to the special Post Office cable system which enables BBC, commercial and other television and radio broadcasts to be piped into their homes. Telephone service is supplied by a separate cable.

The first Channel 40 programmes were screened in December last and transmissions now run for up to one-and-a-half hours every evening. Set up on an experimental basis, the 'station' is an attempt to fulfil the communication needs of a new community, to provide increased social awareness and greater participation. For a three-year period it will be funded partly by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation and partly by the Post Office.

The station is run by a small staff whose role is to help anyone who wants to make a programme. Help is given by editing material, and by offering advice and technical assistance, but no attempt is made to influence the content or objectives.

The television studio is located in two

On camera in the Channel 40 television studio at Milton Keynes, an interview is recorded on videotape for later broadcasting to residents in the city who subscribe to the Post Office cable system.

converted flats close to the city centre. It consists of meeting rooms to discuss programmes, a general office and reception area where people can watch the broadcasts, and a studio. Equipped with black-and-white television cameras, the studio is used for recording interviews, announcements and link routines on videotape. Separated from it by a large, plate-glass window is the control room from where the light, sound and vision for the studio is controlled. It is here that the videotapes are edited into their final format before being transmitted.

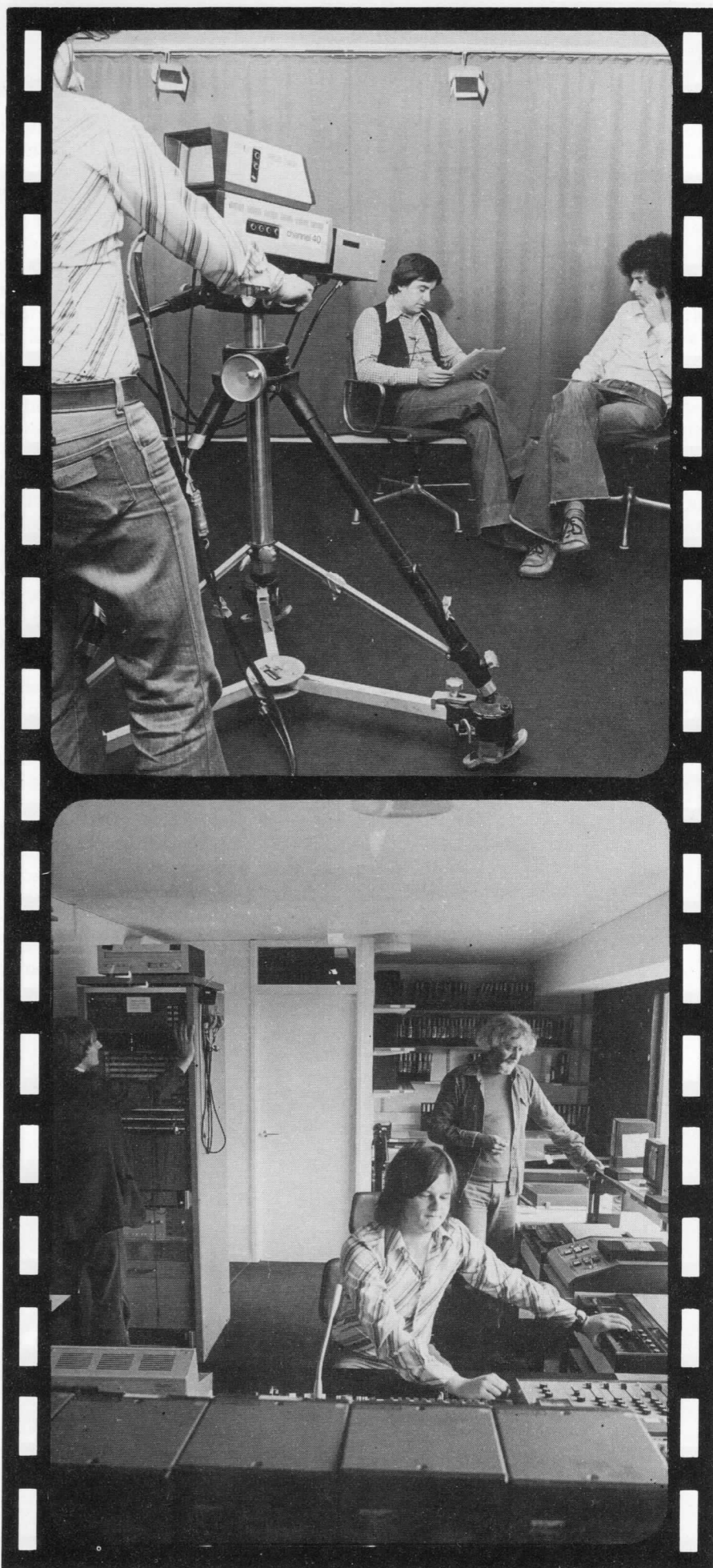
The philosophy of the Channel 40 staff is that they should act primarily to help the residents of Milton Keynes make their own programmes. Of the first 445 tapes recorded, 86 per cent were on topics suggested and defined by Milton Keynes residents themselves, and covered a wide range of activities from a folk music programme to a discussion between the Over-50s Club and local councillors. Although most programmes are initiated by residents, the station staff at present do most (77 per cent) of the filming. They are, however, working towards training residents to do most of this work for themselves.

It is hoped that, in a year or so, most programmes will be filmed by amateur cameramen from Milton Keynes, although editing still has to be done by station staff. Editing decisions are made by the initiators of the programme wherever possible. If more equipment can be provided, residents will later be given the opportunity to do their own editing, and live broadcasts may also be possible.

Because the portable video recorders used by the station are small and relatively unsophisticated, the television pictures produced are subject to timing errors which result in 'jitter' of the picture when viewed on a normal, domestic television set. Editing and recording of the tapes only compounds these errors.

To make the pictures more acceptable the Post Office has used a digital time-base corrector, which acts as an interface between the studio and the Post Office cable system to produce an out-

In the studio's control room, Post Office Technical Officer Brian Davies, left, checks the time-base corrector. Channel 40 Project Director Michael Barratt, far right, supervises videotape editing work.





Left: Trainee Technician Apprentice John Simmons measures television signal levels on the VHF/UHF translator equipment at a roadside cabinet.



Below, left: Incoming television signals are monitored at the Channel 40 head-end where UHF signals are processed and transmitted to line at VHF.

put which is as stable as those produced by the national television companies.

This then is the local television station, and how the Post Office gets the programmes to its audience. But is it a worthwhile service? The Annan Committee (Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting, Cmnd 6753, HMSO 1977) came out strongly in favour of such stations. Detailed research findings on the reactions of the community will become available through a research programme funded by Telecommunications Systems Strategy Department. A first series of interviews with Milton Keynes residents was completed just before the first programmes were transmitted, and the 520 interviewees will be questioned again in November 1977 and 1978.

Preliminary results from this study suggest that people are enthusiastic about the idea of community television. Some 98 per cent thought it was a good idea; 49 per cent said they would like to participate in making a programme; and 48 per cent said they would be prepared to subscribe 10p or more a week to support such a station. The survey is also designed to see if Channel 40 is helpful in informing residents about local events, in involving them in community activities, and in generating some community spirit.

The Milton Keynes Development Corporation is particularly anxious that all new residents should be helped to settle in quickly, and that Milton Keynes should become a real community, rather than just a miscellaneous collection of people and houses dotted over the countryside. It will be interesting to see, through the results of the survey, whether Channel 40 is helping to realise this aim.

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