



Birds In Hand: RCA And A Communication Revolution

Archie T Miller

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BIRDS IN HAND: RCA and a Communications Revolution In the 1970s, the cable television industry was transformed – not by cables, but by communications satellites flying more than 23,000 miles above the earth. These satellites enabled a programming revolution that made household names out of HBO, CNN, ESPN, Ted Turner and Pat Robertson. The common thread in the emergence of these global brands was a fleet of satellites built and operated by RCA, which extended the reach of cable TV in ways that previously were unimaginable. This revolution was made possible by the technologists who built and flew these satellites – especially a team of engineers from RCA. But it wasn't easy or dull. One satellite blew up four days after launch. Another almost shook itself to pieces in deep space. Armed only with telemetry, engineers had to trouble-shoot problems on satellites worth tens of millions of dollars as they hurtled through the harsh environment of space. "Birds in Hand: RCA and a Communications Revolution" is the story of how the RCA Satcom spacecraft and the creative, enterprising people of RCA revolutionized communications in a way that forever changed the cultural life of the U.S.: The cost of private telephone circuits dropped by 50%. RCA's satellites helped catapult HBO from only 8,000 subscribers in the Northeast U.S. to 1.6 million nationwide in two years. Ted Turner put his tiny Atlanta UHF station up on Satcom-1 and by 1978 it became the first Superstation and was in 2 million homes. Everybody laughed when Turner said he would use Satcom to launch a 24-hour news channel - and today CNN is in 100 million households. The satellite-driven success of the Christian Broadcast Network (CBN) provided the public platform for televangelist Pat Robertson to launch a campaign for President of the United States. An out of work father and son had this idea of putting some local college basketball games up on Satcom-1 and before you know it, it's ESPN. RCA's Satcom-2 satellite provided telephone service to every bush village in Alaska and introduced real-time network TV service to Alaska. This is the story of how a company that gained an early advantage in a pivotal industry, and fought to maintain that leadership in the face of fierce competition and continuing technological changes and challenges.

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