



## Current News

### Miami Herald: Tom Whitehead's Vision

The late Clay T. ("Tom") Whitehead, former Distinguished Professor of Communications Policy at Mason, possessed a vision of the future in telecommunications that helped shape the communications world as we know it today, according to **Professor Thomas Hazlett**, whose comments on Whitehead's importance to that industry were carried in an August 3 *Miami Herald* article.

"Before Whitehead, the idea that any part of the telecommunications market could be open to competition was radical," Hazlett told the newspaper. "In television you had three networks; in telephone you had Ma Bell and nobody else."

"All the stuff that has come since -- cable television and cellphones and broadband -- springs from the idea that Tom Whitehead introduced, that a competitive market would bring innovation and diversity," said Hazlett. "You can't say that everything that's happened since 1974 is attributable to one guy, I guess, but if you could, it would be Tom. He was very, very important."

When Whitehead arrived at the White House in 1970 as a 31-year-old junior economist, he suggested unifying telecommunications policy under a single White House office. As the head of this new office, Whitehead assembled a small team that included CSPAN founder Brian Lamb and a youthful Antonin Scalia, now a U.S. Supreme Court justice. Together, the members of that team fought for an "open skies" policy that would allow private companies to launch communications satellites, with that policy becoming law in 1974. The resultant swift launch of private communications satellites served to spawn the cable television industry that we know today and to chart a course away from the monopolistic telecommunication policies of the past.

**His ideas launched the future**, *Miami Herald*, August 3, 2008. By Glenn Garvin.

*Excerpt:*

"Extending a TV signal beyond its ordinary broadcast range in those days required using long chains of microwave repeaters, one every 30 miles or so. But if the cable companies could get access to reasonably priced satellites, Whitehead knew, the sky would literally be the limit. They could start producing original content and competing

with the broadcast networks.

"For the next three and a half years, Whitehead fought ceaselessly for open skies. Along the way, he took up some other battles on behalf of cable. Broadcasters, who also sensed the potential threat from cable companies, were trying to strangle them by charging exorbitant copyright fees to carry signals from local stations. The Supreme Court had already ruled against them once, but the broadcasters, experts in bureaucratic guerrilla warfare, were using the FCC to fight back.

"Tom just announced one day that he was going to conduct negotiations on this,' Lamb recalls. 'He used the power of the White House to call everybody in, and Scalia sat there and knocked heads, and he got them to agree to rates. And then the FCC had to back off.'

"The open-skies policy Whitehead wanted finally became law in 1974. Western Union launched Westar 1, the first private communications satellite, that April. The next year, RCA followed suit; the principal customer for its Satcom 1 satellite was an obscure New York cable company called HBO. Showtime, TBS, CSPAN and the channels that would eventually become the USA and Christian Broadcasting networks followed soon after. The lively, burgeoning cable industry that Whitehead envisioned was well on its way to reality. He would live to see the day when, at any given moment, more than half the television viewers in America were watching the cable channels he midwived.

"It's not exactly correct to say that Whitehead's struggle against the telecommunications monopolies has been largely forgotten. Mostly it was never known in the first place. The arguments, though fierce, were also dry and technical, and Whitehead's vision was so far beyond the horizons of imagination that most people never even faintly understood the implications.

"That remained true even after he left the government and made millions of dollars in the satellite industry. Lamb remembers a conversation 20 years ago in which Whitehead was predicting that television's giant satellite dishes could be shrunken to a couple of feet in diameter and placed in every home in America. 'Everybody thought he was completely nuts,' Lamb says. 'And I think about it every time I drive down my street and look at all those DirecTV dishes.'"

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