

Commercial Newsgathering From Space

May 1987

NTIS order #PB87-235396



Recommended Citation:

U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, *Commercial Newsgathering From Space*
—A Technical Memorandum, OTA-TM-ISC-40 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing
Office, May 1987).

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number **87-619818**

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Foreword

The news media have begun to increase the use of satellite imagery in reporting on world events. This has led some to believe that the media will soon wish to own and operate their own remote sensing systems dedicated to newsgathering. The media have generally supported the idea of a dedicated "mediasat" because it could supply a stream of timely and critical information, peering where repressive governments or dangerous natural environments have heretofore kept the press at bay. However, the mediasat concept has also generated concern. Some U.S. policy makers believe that the media's use of this potential] y intrusive technology could create national security problems, complicate U.S. foreign relations, and, perhaps, erode the average citizen's expectation of personal privacy.

In order to become more fully aware of the opportunities and risks associated with the media's use of remote sensing technology, the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology requested the Office of Technology Assessment to examine this issue in a technical memorandum.

This technical memorandum concludes that although the technology is available to create a mediasat system, the high cost and current low demand for remotely sensed data will limit media efforts to own and operate a dedicated remote sensing satellite system. Nonetheless, government and commercial remote sensing activities will continue in this country and in other countries. These activities will provide the media with an increasing variety of sophisticated and relatively inexpensive remotely sensed images. As the media's use of such images increases, conflicts are certain to arise between the media's first amendment rights and certain U.S. national security and foreign policy interests. OTA concludes that such conflicts are ultimately manageable, but that the existence of foreign remote sensing systems (which can only be indirectly affected by U.S. laws) may require some international consultation.

OTA was assisted in the preparation of this technical memorandum by many outstanding advisors and reviewers. We express sincere appreciation to each of these individuals and organizations. As with all OTA reports, the content of this technical memorandum is the sole responsibility of the Office of Technology Assessment and does not necessarily represent the views of our advisors or reviewers.



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NOTE: OTA appreciates and is grateful for the valuable assistance and thoughtful critiques provided by the workshop participants. The workshop participants do not, however, necessarily approve, disapprove, or endorse this report. OTA assumes full responsibility for the report and the accuracy of its contents.

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