

## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. news media's<sup>1</sup> recent use of satellite images to cover such newsworthy events as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the Soviet "shuttle" launch site at Tyuratam, and the progress of the Iran-Iraq war has raised the possibility that news-gathering from space could become a routine and profitable commercial activity. Some media experts have supported the concept of a mediasat<sup>2</sup> 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.

The mediasat concept has also generated concern. Some U.S. policy makers believe that the media's use of this potentially intrusive technology could increase the visibility and risk of military operations, complicate U.S. foreign relations by angering allies and adversaries, and erode the average citizen's expectation of personal privacy.

Believing that "the use of space technologies by the media and the merging of traditional journalistic practices with long-held national space policies has not yet been satisfactorily addressed," the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology<sup>3</sup> requested the Office of Technology Assess-

This technical memorandum uses the terms "news media" or "media" interchangeably to refer to both the electronic and the print media. The branches of the media are referred to separately only when the different needs would appear to dictate unique technology or policy choices. Except where otherwise indicated, the term media refers only to the U. S. media.

"Mediasat" is not an existing satellite system or business organization. As used in this technical memorandum, the term "mediasat" refers to the concept of a satellite system and business organization that would routinely collect news and information for media use from space.

<sup>1</sup>Letter from The Hon. Don Fuqua, Chairman, House Committee on Science and Technology, to John H. Gibbons, Director, Office of Technology Assessment, Oct 16, 1986; letter from The Hon. Bill Nelson, Chairman, Subcommittee on Space Science and Applications, House Committee on Science and Technology to John H. Gibbons, Director, Office of Technology Assessment, Oct 7 1986

ment to examine this issue. In response to the committee's request, OTA contracted for papers on remote sensing technology, the media's needs and desires, the national security implications, and the legal issues associated with newsgathering from space.<sup>4</sup> OTA held a workshop on December 18, 1986, to discuss these papers and to explore generally the opportunities and risks of the media's use of satellite imagery. This technical memorandum relies heavily on, but is not limited to, the information found in the contract papers and the workshop discussion.

Although the U.S. media currently make some limited use of satellite imagery, OTA is unaware of any serious planning to establish a mediasat organization. The purpose of this technical memorandum is not to examine the feasibility of a specific satellite system or business plan, but rather, to assess whether current government policy is appropriate to accommodate both current activities and future developments. Because the mediasat concept is, for the most part, undefined, OTA was forced in this technical memorandum to make a series of assumptions regarding fundamental issues such as cost, markets, technical capability, and utility of a mediasat. Although these assumptions are critical to OTA's conclusions, they are only "best guesses," based on the advice of experts in the media and in the field of remote sensing. With regard to specific issues—such as the economic viability of a mediasat or its effect on national security and foreign policy—altering these underlying assumptions could dramatically alter the conclusions reached in this technical memorandum.

(In January 1987, the committee's name was changed to the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology)

<sup>4</sup>A summary of the papers on remote sensing technology and legal issues are included in apps. A & B