

## IN THE HANDS OF CITIZENS: A VIDEO REPORT

**CHALLENGE FOR CHANGE** is a program designed to promote understanding and provoke social change. In a nutshell, we feel that the technology of communications should be understood and used by the people who are trying to find solutions to their problems, and who normally have no access to the media. The program originally started three years ago with film only, but has integrated the special usefulness of video and its projects. Half-inch video allows complete control of the media by the people of a community. They can use the camera to view themselves and their neighborhood with a new and more perceptive eye; they can do interviews and ask the questions more pertinent to them; they can record discussions; they can edit tapes designed to carry a particular message to a particular audience—an audience they have chosen and invited themselves. The processes these steps involve can make significant changes in the development of a community organization, and video can become an important tool.

We hope that very soon community groups will be able to prepare a ½" video program, and have it broadcast on local or cable TV, and any news about this technical possibility will be appreciated.

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### comite des citoyens de saint-jacques

The Comite des Citoyens de Saint-Jacques, a dynamic citizens' organization of downtown Montreal's many poor areas, was founded in March 1968 at a public meeting called by a handful of concerned citizens with the help of a community organizer from the Urban Social Redevelopment Project. At the meeting the citizens agreed that bad health was their most immediate problem. On receiving no help from provincial and civic authorities, the citizens decided they would take the affair into their own hands. They rented an apartment in the area, renovated it themselves, and recruited medical and dental workers who were interested in the idea of a citizen-run community clinic. By October, they opened their clinic five nights a week.

### nfb involvement

There seemed to be a convergence between the needs and ideas of the Citizens' Committee and those of Challenge for Change, and we approached the Committee with the idea of a project exploring the use of videotape recording equipment in community organization. The Committee recognized its potential effectiveness as an organizing tool and formed a VTR-film group. This group has eight members, of whom six are from the neighborhood and two from the NFB (the authors of this article), so the term "we" is used here to refer to the VTR-film group. This group has carried out all actions with the video equipment, and has also guided an NFB film crew in the shooting of 16mm film, organized the screening of rushes for the Citizens' Committee, and is now working closely on the editing process. We hope to present three films: the VTR project, the clinic, and the Citizens' Committee, each in both French and English versions. All important questions of policy are brought by the group to the Citizens' Committee as a whole, for decision.

### consensus on the aims

We held our first meeting in November 1968 and discussed the various possibilities for using the VTR equipment. The most important thing that came out of this discussion was the firm consensus that the VTR equipment should be used to serve the aims of the Citizens' Committee and should not distract the members from those aims. The broad objectives of the *Comite des Citoyens de Saint-Jacques* are to work as citizens to gain as much control as possible over their own lives. The main job of the Information team to which the VTR group is attached, is to sensitize the inhabitants of the area to their common problems and to communicate the Committee's hope that together they can act to change their situation.

### familiarizing ourselves with the equipment

In the following weeks we discovered that when the equipment was left in the offices nobody used it. But when various members of the VTR group started taking it to their homes and photographing their children, we got over our diffidence about using the equipment as we learned how simple it was to use. Or, to translate the citizens' description: we "tamed" or "domesticated" our VTR.

We usually formed two-man teams, with one person on camera, the other interviewing with the microphone. We all made errors, mostly at the beginning, and each of us at one time or another has brought back an underexposed tape, or a tape with no sound because the microphone was not plugged in properly, or nothing at all because the tape was inside out. We rarely made the same error twice, and there are not very many you can make with the VTR.

### an early use

Students sought to ally themselves with the Citizens' Committee. With mixed feelings of suspicion and need, the Committee organized a teach-in and fund-raising blitz in all the community colleges and technical schools in the area. We used the VTR equipment, both camera and playback, which we set up in the cafeteria of the school. We played tapes of citizen meetings, then taped the students while we explained to them the activities and aims of the *Comite des Citoyens* and requested their support and donations. These tapes were then played back on the monitor.

The most interested students took camera and mike in hand and went from classroom to classroom eliciting funds from students and teachers alike. The whole operation was surrounded by all the aura of glamor and gadgetry of the new technology. It was fun.

### operation boule de neige

We were still floundering around, testing possibilities and uses of the equipment, when the Information team proposed a week-long information and organizing campaign for the end of January. The aims of the campaign would be to inform the residents of the community of the existence of the Committee, to stimulate debate on their collective problems, to gain new and active members, and subsequently to decide on new projects. The format of Operation Snowball (thus named because it starts small, but can turn into an avalanche!) was to include a press conference on Monday, a series of five public meetings in various areas of Saint-Jacques from Monday to Friday, with a big *gete populaire* on the Saturday night.

### a program to prepare

This was exactly what the VTR group needed to give it some direction. We proposed to prepare a half-hour program on the problems of the people in the area, which would be shown at the opening of each meeting. Building on the existence of the clinic, the theme of the campaign was, "Why are we sick?". This led to exploring the causes of ill health: bad housing, unemployment, inadequate welfare, sparse recreation facilities, low-grade education, and bad medical care. We did some practice shooting. It was in December and January, and the bitter cold required special techniques, such as covering the equipment with blankets to keep it warm if we wanted to interview people on the street.

In early January we drew up a tight schedule, and divided ourselves into two or three-man teams to cover the various problems.

### a reaction by authorities

For the section of the program dealing with medical care, two of the members of the VTR group went into the out-patient department of one of the large municipal hospitals to talk to the people in the waiting room. Within ten minutes the director of the hospital hauled them into his office, confiscated the tape, and demanded that they come back and erase it. After a discussion with the other members of the Committee, it was decided to comply with the hospital's wishes because the Committee had chosen neither the subject nor the terrain for a confrontation. But we fully measured the effect this simple recording device could have on an authority that did not have faith in free information.

### shooting situations

Having learned this lesson, we decided not to waste time on confrontation by trying to shoot inside the Welfare or Manpower offices, but instead to interview the people coming out of these offices. Our strategy was amply rewarded with some frank, stark statements from welfare recipients and job applicants.

For the housing segment we started out by shooting exteriors, but the cold rapidly sent us into the corner restaurant. This proved a good tactic, for we started a discussion with the owner and one of his customers, learned a great deal about the neighborhood, and were introduced to a woman who lived in "one of the worst slum buildings in Montreal." She invited us into her home to show us where part of the ceiling had fallen down last July.

### editing

The material was edited down from about four hours to forty minutes. At first, members came to the Film Board to do the editing—by electronic transfer—with the NFB technicians. This travelling, as well as the necessity to do this during working hours, was most unsatisfactory, and subsequently we brought the tapes to the Board with notes from the group on exact footages for editing. Neither this system nor the visual result of transferring were very satisfactory, and we are just now going to try editing by physically cutting the tapes, which the citizens can do themselves and which is visually less irritating.

### the public meetings

The VTR group did some interviewing in the streets on the day of the meetings, inviting people to come and see themselves on TV. These tapes were run, unedited, a half-hour before the start of the meetings as people were coming in. The public meetings were held in school halls or church basements. We placed six 23" monitors around the room with about 20 chairs in a half-circle in front of each. The active members made a point of spreading themselves among each group. When the 30-minute video presentation was over, each group moved its chairs into a circle and plunged into a discussion. Having seen people like themselves on the familiar TV screen, discussing their problems with utter frankness, removed much of the reticence and timidity people have in a group of strangers. They simply said, "I guess this is the place where I can talk freely," and talked at length of problems shared and possible collective solutions.

### participation

The Committee had refused to propose some special project at these public meetings because it felt strongly that new members, who would be participating in any new action, should also participate in deciding what that new action should be. The consensus at the end of the week's discussion was that immediate action should be taken on housing, a food cooperative, recreation, welfare and baby-sitting services. At the next regular meeting of the Committee, new work groups, comprising many new members from Operation Snowball, were set up to organize these actions.

### vtr as record

We recorded on tape a number of meetings of various types, but we found that people rarely had the time to view the tapes afterwards. The few members who have taken time to view old tapes have gained a good deal in self-awareness and in understanding of others, as well as a historical perspective on their progress.

When the Welfare team organized a large demonstration, the action was taped and was shown that night at an evaluation session. The participants were excited and thrilled to see their demonstration on the screen, and used the opportunity to view the action in a different perspective and to evaluate it. A few attitudes began to change, especially towards the police, who are held in some fear but who behaved quietly and without menace during the demonstration.

### democratizing

One of the things that has disturbed the VTR group is that we have been too privileged in using the equipment. It is now being further democratized. For example, members of the VTR group have joined each of the various other work teams, to help them use the VTR in their actions. Anyone who expresses interest in joining the VTR group has always been welcomed.

### future projects

The Committee has just obtained a meeting place, the *Maison des Citoyens*, and we intend to run tapes there which will allow many more of the members to view the tapes and will help new members catch up with the others.

Future plans include using the video to improve communications between the various working committees, placing the viewer in local shops and taping discussions with people in the neighborhood, and recording future actions. There is also the possibility of taping reports and research on various institutions in the city, and the hope of preparing programs that might be broadcast on public television. The video will also be used to help young people in the neighborhood make an 8mm film. Courses in history or civil liberties will be dramatized for video presentation.

### evaluation

In March we taped a meeting of the film-VTR sub-committee evaluating the use of the video equipment. The following are quoted from that discussion.

### effects on the individual

We were not very interested in ourselves when we started."  
 "But it helped me a lot to know myself. You see how you function."  
 "It helped me gain more confidence in myself. It's important to know who you are."  
 "It develops your critical senses. You become two people—he who acts, and he who watches himself act."  
 "The people we interviewed in the street—I really felt they wanted to get a message across. They wanted other people to hear about their problems, to share them. People feel pretty isolated."  
 "I think the people hoped their message would reach the powers-that-be. They had never had the chance, before."  
 "When we watch the tapes, we don't just learn to know ourselves better; we also come to understand others better. After that, it's much more fun to work together."

### an organizing tool

"Could we have stopped people in the street and questioned them the same way if we had not had the camera and microphone? I don't think so. It's a good pretext for talking to them."  
 "When people were interviewed, they became interested in the Committee. Then they came to the public meetings and became involved and eventually joined the team."  
 "During the public meetings, with the video program, I had the impression that people really recognized the face of the neighborhood. And they had felt very isolated from one another."  
 "People are suspicious at first. They don't know if they are free to talk. The video program showed people talking freely so they saw how far they could go themselves."

### objectivity

"We didn't pretend to be objective, like journalists do."  
 "Yes, sometimes when we asked questions, we also gave the answer, and when someone didn't know what we were talking about, we gave him the information."  
 "If someone didn't know how to express himself, we sometimes helped him with the words."  
 "People could tell it was another citizen like themselves doing the interview, and they had more confidence in us than they would in someone from the CBC or the NFB, or other media. Often the press deforms what is said; they don't transmit exactly what we have to say."  
 "On the other hand, the people knew they couldn't pull the wool over our eyes. They couldn't try any affectations. With ordinary citizens doing the interviewing, they knew we knew who they were. They couldn't get away with any tall stories."