

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.

DOROTHY TODD HENAUT

by DOROTHY HENAUT AND BONNIE KLINE

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."

mass media still closed to citizens

Their experience with video-conceiving, shooting, editing, and presenting their own programs—made the citizens particularly aware of the myth of objectivity in mass media reporting and sensitive to conscious and unconscious manipulation. They have become a less gullible public.

Ordinary citizens have a good deal of difficulty in getting their opinions expressed in the information media. Articles or programs about the Committee that have appeared in the local media have almost invariably been distorted pictures. The press seems incapable or unwilling to comprehend the nature or aims of the Committee.

On one occasion, the citizens discovered that journalists who talk loudly of freedom of the press consider themselves immune from interviews or cameras; they became angry when they became subjects for the citizens' cameras during the press conference for Operation Snowball. They were unwilling to be recorded as individuals, and became even more hostile to the citizens.

Hopefully, by using the ½" video equipment enough a citizens' group could eventually propose to their local TV outlet that they make their own programs about themselves and their programs to inform the population-at-large about their lives and aims and to help bring about needed changes.

Unfortunately, ½" video cannot be transferred to the 2" broadcast video with any degree of technical satisfaction for the moment. Perhaps technological advances will overcome this obstacle in the near future.

warning

We hope video does not become a mystique. "Communications", with all its glamor and mystification, can become an end in itself rather than a means toward better human lives. Some may want to use it to divert people from their social goals. It could become one more way of avoiding real social change. It should be clear that community self-awareness and inter-communications are powerful leavening agents and can set off an unpredictable chain of reactions. There must be a real sense of continuity, if film and video are to be used for real social gain rather than social disaster. **Communities cannot be used as guinea pigs for technology. Technology must serve the communities.**

In Saint-Jacques, a strongly organized Citizens' Committee guaranteed responsibility and continuity. These same video techniques could be used in the early stages of organizing by a community organizer who is committed to stay in the community a certain length of time. Social continuity is essential.

Video should not be used in a vacuum, and it should not be used to divert citizens from their social aims.

conclusion

Video equipment does not create dynamism where none is latent; it does not create action or ideas; these depend on the people who use it. Used responsibly and creatively, it can accelerate perception and understanding, and therefore accelerate action.

The *Comité des Citoyens de Saint-Jacques* could have accomplished any of their actions without video equipment. We could not say that at any time it made the difference between success and failure. But it made good things better, and helped people to grow. It is a useful tool.

For further information contact Dorothy Todd Henaut, Ed., *Challenge for Change* newsletter, National Film Board of Canada, P.O. Box 6100, Montreal 101, Quebec.



CABLE TELEVISION: THE RAW AND THE OVERCOOKED

by PAUL RYAN

... There are over 2000 cable systems operating in this country now. Roughly another 2000 franchises have been granted and another 2000 or so are pending. Six thousand or more separate cable heads means six thousand or more separate information systems: the possible restructuring of communications in this country. For schools, cable offers a unique opportunity to function effectively in the information environment. But before discussing Cable TV and the educational system it seems useful to talk about the difference between television and the way in which a videotape recorder can be used.

There was no videotape recorder on board Apollo 11, only a television camera. Television, as the root of the word implies, has to do with transmitting information over distance, in this case a quarter million miles from the moon. Videotape has to do with infolding information, as in the kind of feedback that goes on in encounter groups. Working with encounter group leader, Dennis Walsh, I videotaped while a girl stood in the middle of the group with her eyes closed and described how she thought people were reacting to her then and there. The contrast between her negative description and the positive responses to her that the playback revealed were both illuminating and encouraging for her. This was information infold. What she and the group put out was taken by the tape and given back to them. **VT is not TV. If anything, it's TV flipped into itself.**

In some ways, the difference between broadcast television and the videotape recorder is the difference between Hippies and Yuppies. As Abbie Hoffman has pointed out, the Hippies are the products of the mass medium, while the Yuppies create media events. Hippies take television as part of the service environment, merely as output terminal. Yuppies, on the other hand, treat television as an entire information system into which one can input such things as police brutality. As has been pointed out, the cost of getting a message on television for an honest man with little money is at least a few days in jail. That the Yuppies are willing to pay this price seems to me a small indication of the increasing demand of the TV generation to have a share in television systems.

While the living room or classroom television is merely the terminal of a larger system, videotape is a complete information system unto itself. It has input (camera and mike) storage and processing (the record/playback deck) and output (the monitor). It can be used as an entire information system enabling people to feedback to themselves the way they behave so that they can communicate about the behavior and extend their control over it. The videocorder extends people as cybernators. By contrast, behavior induced by the output of a television set is merely terminal behavior.

Confusion about the grammar of media such as tape and TV is, as McLuhan has shown, par for the course. New media begin by doing the job of the old media better. The car was a "horseless carriage." The radio was a "wireless telegraph" used for point to point communication until the Irish rebels used it for broadcast in 1916. IBM grew successful as it came to understand it was not in the business of business machines but in the business of moving information.

Cable TV is now transmitting broadcast signals better. This "snowless" signal is not what a cable system is about. **The basic business of cable is the cultivation of local culture.** This does not mean stenciling national network type programming on a local setting. Any culture is *already* programmed. This is to say, the life style of the people is structured by the local environment with its interlocking system of roads, postal service, restaurants, recreational facilities, television intake, telephone usage, etc. The role of a cable system is to increase the community's awareness of their existing cultural system, thereby giving them more control over its development: to cultivate the local culture. Just as VTR extends man as a cybernator so cable can enlarge the capacity of the local culture to communicate about and control its development. This control can include some decisions about importing information.

Centralized production facilities in a cable setting that exploit the saleable aspects of local culture for export will have a short life. This is to model the cable system on broadcast television before the invention of videotape. Packaging information for elsewhere on the stark vision-over-distance model of television amounts to strip mining of local culture. Low priced portable videotape units make it possible for the cable company to take their whole district as their studio. Feeding back into the culture rather than feeding off of it will insure lasting relations between cable and culture.

If cable can effect a genuine awareness and cultivation of life patterns, it will find its best resources in the enriched and unique perceptions of its community. The information overload in our society is placing more and more of a premium on pattern recognition. Pattern recognition is a function of perception. A diverse pattern of unique perceptions such as is possible with the growth of cable in this country could turn CATV systems into so many think tanks.

As readers of Peter Drucker's *Age of Discontinuity* are aware, our society is shifting from an economy based on capital to an economy based on information. Cable television companies are initiating policies within the dimensions of this transition. They are compelled to work out a new relationship between capital and information. Once a cable company realizes that local culture is in fact its business, it seems appropriate that it will want to develop a viable relationship with the schools throughout this country, where so much of the potential constructive, and unlimited energy for creating new relationships in our various environments is located. Via cable educational institutions can function as consultants to the developing culture. Conceivably, a cabled culture could develop to a level of enlivened awareness such that it could turn its perceptions into profit if it cared to. Brainstorming other's problems by cable through a technique of "organized ignorance" is a source of revenue the cable industry has not considered.

There is a Japanese composer, Joji Yuasa, who works with "white noise." Just as white is the presence of all color, "white noise" is the presence of all noise. The "static" one gets tuning between stations on a radio is really white noise. Yuasa boosts up this sound to a rich fullness and surrounds you with it. His composition is a process of filtering out from the fullness of noise that which he does not want.

White noise is a perfect analogue for the world of total information we are approaching. Ideally, everyone will be their own composer. **All non-private information will be available to anyone at anytime and place in any mode they want. Though there is no way of saying for sure, it seems likely that cable will be a major conduit of this information from the data banks to the home communications centers. People will have freedom to the extent that they control the filtering process.** Hopefully we can move from a mass transit system of information such as we now have (you meet their schedules) to one of random access, of self-processing in a world of information movement. Education becomes the empowering of people to maneuver in a world of white information.

Cable can serve not merely as a conduit to total information, but more importantly each separate system can provide the skeleton of an information structure in which **students can build up the indigenous data base necessary for self-cybernation.** Give them videotape, audiotape, and film and let them find forms for their own experience and their own environs rather than the teacher taking the data, informing it, and presenting it as a pre-cooked packet to be warmed over and consumed in the classroom. Self-structuring of unprepared data develops the capacity to be your own information composer.

There is a technique being used in some schools for teaching an inclusive kind of anthropology. Students, insofar as is possible live the life of another people for as long as a year. This includes cooking, monetary system, education, etc. . . . With cable it is possible to do this with one's own culture "live on tape." The near and the now can be put on tape in such a way as to permit detached examination. The dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living is close to the concerns of an educational system based on the detachment possible with the phonetic alphabet. If you code experience in the phonetic alphabet it can be examined. Videotape offers a different mode of detached examination. For example, there is on the market an inexpensive VTR that takes a frame a second for twelve hours and can be played back in a half hour. Simply placing this at different meeting spots would reveal patterns of interaction; documentaries could be produced of people on the street, in shops, on the phone, in homes. Regular exchanges could be set up between sister cable systems: rural/urban, black/white, East coast/West coast, etc. In the schools teachers from different disciplines could be transformed to function as commentators on the video verite, sharing the experience of this information immediately and directly with the students; using the verite not as an audio/visual aid to the teaching process, but as a primary source of information.

The movie and broadcast television have implicit in their structures a perceptual imperialism. You watch what others want you to watch to a large extent in the way others want you to watch it. Others control access from camera angle through the editing process to the decision as to whether it will be shown. Film edits the experience of others for you. With videotape on the other hand, you can pre-edit your own experience simply by setting down your script on audio tape and following it in front of a camera. Film is the packaging of information in cans. Videotape involves the feeding back of process. Film rips information away from a situation for use elsewhere. Videotape can feedback into a given situation and enrich experience. Film extends man as a spectator. Videotape extends man as a cybernator. Film imports information. Videotape implodes indigenous data and works with the raw, the uncooked data—the "static" of the surround. In the cauldron of a cabled culture this kind of data could be more exciting than moon rocks. It should be said that cabled cultivation of local culture can only proceed through a process of creative destruction. We do not yet understand the information contours of culture well enough to cybernate smoothly. In this condition, raw data is dada.

Talk of the wired white world given the realities of cable is somehow reminiscent of the political realism of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Concern with cable is concern with the art of the possible. Those of the interface generation between the establishment and the new youth who try to put portable videotape in the hands of students will soon find themselves accused of running guns to the Indians. Harold Innis, a mentor of McLuhan with a sense of political realism, saw social change as the result of the disenfranchised groups (in this case youth) trying to gain control of the new communications media and thereby gain a form of social power. Providing high school students with portable videotape is like providing David with a slingshot. **The broadcaster armor of the communications giants seems even less vulnerable than was Goliath. Yet anyone who has experimented with portable videotape equipment knows instantly that the potentials of television have hardly been touched. Perhaps nothing that is really television will happen with television until those who were raised on it gain control of it.**

New media like Cable TV mean opportunity, not inevitability. The power gap opened up by this new media has attracted a host of contending parties and opened up a number of tricky questions. Educators who decide to enter the cable arena will soon find themselves involved with local politicians, media barons, venture capital, the FCC, Supreme Court, Congress, copyright, lawyers, broadcast interests, computers that want to talk to other computers over cable, the possibility of a two-way system, the Joint Council on Educational Telecommunications wanting twenty percent of cable capacity for education, questions of local advertising, franchise questions . . .

This much seems clear. There is a natural alliance between the TV generation, those educators and others who understand something of the implications of being raised on TV, and the cable television industry. From the side of the educator there are a number of difficulties with such an alliance:

Many of the franchises negotiated by the town fathers contain unimaginative, token provisions for education. The cable companies will have to be willing to give on this.

Practically all of the possibilities I have talked about here are based on the use of portable half-inch videotape equipment and to a lesser extent super eight film and audiotape. The industry generally is adopting a one inch format which confines it to studio and mobile van production. Formulas will have to be worked out for transfer of half to inch, and direct use of half inch. There is also a question of the quality of the image yielded by half inch. Standardization of line resolution for cable seems to me unnecessary. If the image is stable, it should be allowed. To make the definition of the image uniform would be as senseless as making the comic strips in the Sunday funnies of uniform definition.

The ethical code of the National Cable Television Association reveals they have done little thinking about the TV generation. They conceive of their responsibility toward youth in terms of providing the "right kind" of information and withholding the "wrong kind" of information. Educators will have to show the cable industry the critical necessity for a systems approach to the needs of the young rather than a content approach. Part of this dialogue need be the critical discussion of the feasibility of and possible ways of implementing a two-way system.

The world of white information and the outcome of contentions over cable seems far away. Yet when we realize that a child born this year will be 30 in the year 2000, these concerns become critical. We need offer the young multiple means of processing information, not load them down with the opprobrium of obsolete content.

Both the FCC and the cable industry want cablecasting. Given the right combination of circumstances, portable videotape, cable availability, and the will to do, educators may well declare themselves fed up with the overcooked, cafeteria style curriculum, and go roll in the raw data of the seventies.

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