

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.

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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 feed back 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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