



Except for broadcast television, every major information medium in America had its genesis in men who started out because they felt they had something important to get across. Sure, they wanted to make money, but that was almost as a by-product of unique (although not always sane) visions. Think of the early days of any medium and there's a name associated with it, not an anonymous corporate structure.

Only broadcast TV began exclusively as a marketing proposition, carefully creating psychic wants instead of servicing genuine need.

Videocassettes are probably the most hybrid medium of the century. Because they have a little in common with books, long-playing records, magazines and, of course, broadcast TV, people from each of those old media are swarming over cassettes trying to figure out where the money is. All see the new medium as the next great ship to come in, and this time *they're* not going to miss the boat.

At Raintance we sporadically are gotten in touch with people who tell us: "I want to get in on this cassette thing." When they extend that as their only understanding of portable video, we tell them to fuck-off, in so many words.

It's practically impossible to find anyone who is concerned about cassettes as a money proposition who also has any particular passion about the medium. Of course they see it as fulfilling a need for people who are pissed off at broadcast TV, but they see that need only as another lucrative market. While it's also their cant to say: "we know videocassettes are going to require a different kind of information (from film or broadcast TV)," not a one I've talked to knows what.

The following is a compilation of interviews in person with Jeff Reiss, program director of Avco's Cartrivision cassette system; Irv Stimler, President of Optronics Library, a software house; some phone raps with P.R. men at other companies; and information I've gleaned from other print publications.

Most of the above are playing a game of roulette (potential high return gambling), but they're betting all the numbers. Thus, they have huge catalogs which cater to every imaginable taste, or they're into marketing surveys where money, not survival information, comes first.

Why this is all important to anyone in alternate television is that we've all seized upon new media tools because we're pissed off at the way the old ones are being used. So if it looks like the new cassette tools are being co-opted, then we've got to be very careful how we cooperate.

Of course we all need money to stay alive (until we find a way to do it without money). That's not the issue. What is the point is whether or not we might be trading off short term gains for long term debilitation.

There are a few bucks around from Avco and maybe Optronics for production. Yet any of our stuff would be part of a voluminous catalog sandwiched in with all sorts of bullshit. So what the packagers get for the few bucks they're willing to pay is practically all of our legitimacy, *but as fuel for their context.*

Moreover, when videocassettes catch on, its going to be clear that the people producing especially for the medium, all of us in videotape inherently are, are going to be the major sources of the best material: just as the LP first imitated the concert hall and then became fabulously lucrative with a true electronic form: rock music.

The hipper cassette packagers are keeping their lines open to some alternate TV people, *but why should they reap future benefits if they're unwilling to underwrite what we're doing now, which is essentially their R&D?*

On the other hand, if we can get together a tape network of people making television for survival ends, if it also becomes a financial success will it pose a threat to interests like Avco or CBS who are pumping millions into what they hope will be a proprietary medium? They are already fanatic about how they will *control* their own distribution.

So here is the scan:

CARTRIVISION is a hardware system made by Avco, a conglomerate which, as I understand it, does some defense work along with conventional films and other things. The system has been licensed to Emerson for production, but from what we've seen it's not the best piece of hardware around. Avco plans to sell the deck in a package with a TV set and later a separate playback unit, but both configurations are particularly cumbersome. Moreover, Avco has its own standard which will be incompatible with Sony and the Europeans.

To push their hardware Avco is very heavy into programming and has compiled an enormous list of non-exclusive rights to practically every piece of old *film* around.

Jeff Reiss of Avco, their programming director, is a nice, honest guy who combines a genuine sympathy for alternate television with a sense that he's buying futures: someday it will be good business. But remember that most of Reiss' time is taken up hassling the rights to old cartoons and NFL football games, etc.

Reiss has offered contracts to three groups: People's Video Theater, Media Access Center, and The Ultimate Mirror. The PVT tape will be a compilation from their archive called "Liberation 70." Media Access has offered a tape about inflatable boats and domes. And Richard Rubenstein of The Ultimate Mirror is giving a lovely tape of an impromptu outdoor percussion and guitar concert on the island of Ibiza.

According to each, Avco has offered about \$200 as production expenses towards finishing Porta-Pak tape onto a one-inch master. As even \$200 is a lot of money these days, they've each accepted.

Jeff Reiss says that those three offers constitute almost all of Avco's production budget (remember they're buying pre-produced stuff) and he's certainly willing to consider other stuff. According to Ken Marsh of PVT, the contract calls for sales price as royalties.



## Economic Support Systems

This is the linear version of a series of raps. Credit to participants later. The hope is that you will read, think, rewind a segment or two, and then read again. The subject (global) is attitudes with respect to economic support systems for video groups and alternative networks. The aim is to ask some of the right questions, lay down explicitly some assumptions while clearing up misconceptions: common sense and equipment glamour versus economic policy. The need is to experiment with economics *and* video information exchange simultaneously.

How do video groups generate themselves? How can they plug into existing economic support systems while seeking alternative production, distribution, and resource generation schemes. (Oops, we have to watch out for the pathology of language. There is great danger in becoming ill from the disease we hope to cure. There are pervasive properties in the existing processes—the habits and styles of thinking that can infect even the *terms for a cure*) *What means are available for the early growth and survival of video groups or alternative networks? What can be done, resourcewise, to foster the growth of alternative networks? How can we establish a sub-economy for video groups, directly related to the big one at least in the short run, yet differently structured? How can we judge the success and balance of the new with the normal while gauging its wholesomeness and independence?*

The problem with Avco is that they're into a heavy public relations game and one day soon each of the above tape-makers is going to find himself on a press release along with old Super Bowl games. Even though people like Ken Marsh are particularly adamant that they will be returning fair money to the subjects of their tape, somehow combining the genuine legitimacy of the disenfranchised (e.g. PVT has done a lot of work with the Young Lords) with old movies and the like is more a reaffirmation of old media style than a creation of a new one.

OPTRONICS LIBRARY is a software house which has no particular system to hype although they reportedly are going to go with Philips.

The president, Irv Stimler, is former executive from MGM records. His catalog will contain software that only Optronics has rights to. Their most notable catch seems to be the movie, *Battle of Algiers*, which Optronics never ceases to publicize their rights to.

Stimler operates out of offices on 57th Street in New York and seems more in tune with how to make money out of cassettes than any particular sympathy for people who might genuinely want to get it off through video. He's not dishonest, and certainly likeable. Just business shrewd as its own end. In talking to him and scanning his company (there are only several employees including his college age son) and its board of directors (full of "names" like Clive Barnes), you get the feeling he wants nothing more than to keep his shit together to get bought out, soon.

Stimler was absolutely non-committal about front-ending any money to alternate TV producers except to say that he is willing to listen to any proposal and might ante up some money for tape. *After* a tape's made, of course, he says he would be interested.

Optronics has contracted with Global Village to produce a twelve issue video magazine, the first of which is supposed to be done in July and will be about using portable video.

VIDEORECORD CORPORATION OR AMERICA is a company up in Stamford, Connecticut around where CBS labs is located. The company's president, Dr. Stafford L. Hopwood Jr., used to work at CBS labs. Not unsurprisingly, Videorecord has selected the CBS-EVR system which is easily the worst idea in videocassette hardware (see Hardware Section).

This more or less reflects Videorecord's big name board of directors which, according to Sam Gale, the company's director of communications, "is full of men who have been involved with television for years." It includes William Bernbach, co-founder of the ad agency which bears half his name, and Eugene Rostow, now a law professor at Yale but once a member of the Johnson administration.

Gale concludes that Videorecord certainly understands that the cassette medium will demand its own software, but admits he sees no problems with using the EVR system, and absolutely finds it irrelevant whether or not production is done on film or videotape (of course, the EVR system doesn't care either).

Gale was scarcely aware of any alternate TV activity in the country, but interested, and certainly friendly to *Radical Software* on the phone, although a little paranoid about being quoted by us.

The spectacle seems to be a lot of men who grew up in radio and if they ever had any notion of the potential of TV never quite got it together to do anything to change broadcast. Primarily, Videorecord is interested in the so-called "institutional" market which means businesses and schools.

To hell with businesses, but if Videorecord tries to move material into schools then they're to be resisted because the EVR system is just too much of a rip-off to force on our kids. Videorecord is just another company, perhaps a little more competent, which thinks the way to develop the medium is to do marketing surveys.

While I'm on the EVR system, there is a group up in Boston called the American Program Bureau which is selling a package of ten one-hour shows and an EVR unit to colleges for \$3,000. APB, as it's known, handles radical speakers like Abbie Hoffman and Dick Gregory and sure enough that's what the package is all about. According to someone who's seen some of the shows: "they're like regular TV except they say 'shit' and 'fuck' and don't bleep it out."

Aside from the alleged quality of the programming, the political superstar trip is awfully dead dada/data to pump through a new medium with the potential of cassettes. If Abbie Hoffman is really into everything free and understanding media then why has he lent (sold) himself to a system which is specifically designed not to be copied (although you can get around that too)?

*What's worse is the thought of some university student group putting out three grand when for the same money it could acquire a Porta-Pak, editing deck and a semester's supply of tape and begin putting out its own information instead of laying back and moaning "entertain us."*

A similar potential rip-off is a company called NTS which is in New York City. They're the agents for *Channel One* and not surprisingly their package consists of two *Channel One* tapes. (The first of the two is called "Groove Tube," a raunchy, very funny satire on broadcast TV. *Channel One* has been around with that stuff for five years now and it is to what's now going on in alternate TV what say Jack Kerouac is to the so-called "counter culture": a forerunner, but also a relic).

NTS will put equipment out into colleges which includes true videotape in the form of a Sony AV3600 deck for playback, but the design is pure hype to fool the uninitiated. It is a column or monolith of monitors with the actual deck resting on the floor with a six inch clearance on top which makes it practically inaccessible. Moreover, it's hardwired-in which makes you wonder about NTS' claim that they'll solicit student tapes for what they have been hyping as their own "underground television network (UTV)."

The other part of the two show package will be a thing called "New York" which was to have been the latest *Channel One* show but reportedly folded after a few weeks even though it was launched with half-page ads in the *Village Voice* (about \$670 worth of advertising each time). The show's one accolade: "The Masterpiece of the New Video" was credited to none other than NTS. In other words, the show's own agent was telling people how good it was.

Well it was shit. It amounted to a kind of "Channel One Discovers the Porta-Pak" and consisted of two guys driving around New York and shooting a lot of tape from their micro bus. Occasionally they'd talk to someone and absolutely rip-off their information without telling what the tape was for, why they were being taped, or letting the subject see the camera.

Probably the height of the insensitivity was some interplay with wins. One asked for a quarter and Ken Shapiro of *Channel One* said he wouldn't give him the money because "I don't like you." Another piece of tape had Shapiro hassling a drunk by taking off his glasses and mimicking him. It's a long, tedious, boring self-indulgent piece of tape by a couple of guys who used to be the only game in town (with two-inch equipment) but got left behind when the Portables came out. So beware of NTS, especially if they're hustling your school. It's more of the "counter-culture" in drag. Strictly for the money.

What does that leave?

There are other companies of course, but if any of them have a genuine interest in an alternate television they haven't emerged. It's just another marketing medium to them. This was really brought home at a videocassette "conference" we attended last November.

What happened was a few hundred executives who claimed to know that cassettes will provide kinetic information, anything you want, when and where you want it; these guys in their coats-and-ties all drove fifty miles out of New York City (to Tarrytown, New York) sat in a deadly dull motel ballroom, and listened to people talk for eight hours.

So it looks like we're going to have to try and do it ourselves and not as a hard-assed marketing plan, but in a lot of different ways. And we don't have to wait for cassettes. The information is here now on reel-to-reel configurations and tape exchange and some sales even are going on now, without the videocassette "industry." And when the cassette machines do get here we can do our own copying and distribution because that's what videotape and decentralized media are all about.

Michael Shamberg

**Needed:** Basic attitudes coupled with solid practical advice on how to do. Suppose there are five people sitting around saying, "Boy, I would sure like to get into video or community television, or television as a self-educational tool." How do they get started, how do they grow and survive while finding alternative ecosound ways within the system to generate resources?

**Economic problems:** the first is that there will be no economics for a video group unless they can in some way generate a response prior to the need for investment (money). So far, in today's world, there have been only three sources of start-up money: welfare capitalism sources (government, foundations, food stamps); rip-off (subtle theft, direct theft, drugs); or inheritance (wealthy parents, relatives or friends who leave it to or give). The need is for some new forms of what venture capitalists call "seed money." The price of existing means (loans, direct investment in the corporation or partnership) often carry the obligation to produce along guidelines enforced (often not so subtly) by the investor. Picture a Bank of America Loan to *Video Zombies*—restrictions: no burning banks or Panther meetings.

Even with a solution to the problem of start-up money, there still remains **problem number two:** how can a video group generate the resources necessary to survive, i.e. food, equipment, tape, transfer or information, transportation, etc. Again, the classic ways are simple: be a middleman (sell other people's things to others who in turn sell them to "retail" buyers) or develop a product or service so distinct and valuable that people or institutions (CATV?) will pay to have it.

There are several grounds for concern with traditional means: the Sears-Roebuck mass-marketing approach exploits man and nature...one quickly becomes over-capitalized, over-exposed and indebted to capital. At worst the new system should be ecostatic, at best it might even shrink (as opposed to growing). The products or services must not have bad influences on the environment (information and physical), they must be sound socially and for the individual (of, by and for the people).

We need solid advice and practical recommendations. Drucker, Theobald and others talk about new economic policies, global shopping centers, the age of communication, and the age of knowledge. But it is not clear that all such thought would work when one is concerned with access to information or the restructuring of video technology.

We must watch out lest we develop a new industry with new technologies. They loom larger in Wall Street eyes than steel mills or automobile assembly plants. They capture the imagination of the money firsters. Media Access Center as a glamour stock? Exploitive speculation (making survival money the end) will result either in failure or in value-free millionaires—and we will all suffer again.