

Challenge for Change

There is no doubt about it. It's here. Half-inch video is everywhere, and so are cable companies, and the number of people behind cameras and in front of cameras is multiplying unbelievably. Television will no longer be the medium of a small elite programming for the masses. It will be the forum through which the many segments of the community will be able to talk to each other, a medium for everybody.

Or will it?

I must say, I'm worried. The powerful attraction of imitating or improving on the slickness and sensationalism of broadcast television, and the feeling of power you get with a camera in your hands are terrible traps. It's so easy to be "clever" with those cameras, to cut in a cute little shot of your interviewee blowing his nose in an off moment when he didn't know the camera was running, or couldn't stop it if he did (because after all, he'd feel silly and unsophisticated, wouldn't he?) What I mean is, it's so easy *not to respect* the people you're putting on the screen, when you feel so strong behind your camera and microphone, and after all, you're expressing *yourself*, aren't you?

Maybe that is the crux of the question. VTR does indeed permit a sort of democratisation of self-expression. But who is it that is expressing himself: the guy behind the camera or the guy in front of it?

We're kind of pedantic in Challenge for Change. When we train people in the use of VTR, we insist from the very beginning that the people behind the camera assure the people in front of the camera that they will see the tape immediately, and that if there is anything they don't like, or are ashamed of, it will be immediately erased. We also assure them that they will see the edited tape, so they can approve or disapprove the way they have been used in editorial context. They may well be asked to participate in the editorial process, as well.

This has a number of immediate results. First, they are much more relaxed on camera, because they are less afraid of making some irrevocable mistake. In fact, they usually come out very well, because of that relaxation, and rarely, if ever, want any parts erased. But they have expressed themselves well, and when the tape is played back to them, they usually see that, and when they have finished complaining about the scar on their forehead or their double chin, they suddenly realize that they are more articulate, more *presentable*, than they ever realized, and their self-confidence takes a permanent turn for the better.

And that is a power in the hands of the guy behind the camera that is really worth having: helping people like themselves better!

The second result of this approach is that when they see the edited tape, or participate in the editing process, they learn a great deal about the so-called objectivity of the media. The process of demystifying the media is begun: they will never again be the gullible public they once were. And that, too, is a power worth having.

Let's face it. No matter how many VTR's end up running around, the people behind the cameras are still going to be a minority. It is not only legitimate but necessary that they use the cameras for their own self-expression, and I hope that distribution through cable TV, theatres and tape exchanges will allow a lot of people to share in the works of art that will come out of it.

But beside that self-expression, there is the tremendous opportunity to help other people, who will probably never get behind cameras themselves, to express themselves. This means that the film maker puts himself at the service of the people in front of the camera, becomes a teacher and a tool to help them channel their ideas to the people they are trying to reach. This is a powerful role in the social process, and I hope many of you will get involved that way.

I have this utopian dream, whereby as the pollution and smog slowly lift, and the fires in the ghettos die down, fish jump in the streams once more, greenery is renewed, people sing in the streets, one catches glimpses everywhere of a cable-VTR crew, composed of three people: Johnny Appleseed, Caesar Chavez and a little old lady in running shoes.

Cheers!

Dorothy Todd Hénaut

Metro Media Council of Vancouver

A community umbrella group made up of individual and group representative members in a media access and production collective.

Parallel Institute

Since the summer of 1970, video has been used in Pointe St. Charles as an instrument for the use of the poor people's movement to effect social and political change.

An action to obtain rights or to effect change has three basic stages: the planning, the action itself, and the post-action analysis.

During the planning, VTR encourages involvement in the articulation of problems and the offering of solutions. The camera acts as a catalyst by seeking out and uniquely storing people's ideas and opinions, for present and future reflection. People's participation ultimately commits them to action centered around shared, understood grievances based in a common organization.

During the action, VTR becomes an important tool in equalizing the bargaining power of those officials in positions of control and the people demanding application of their rights. The presence of the camera during confrontation helps create this equality by preventing officials from running roughshod over the poor, as their performance becomes a record for public scrutiny. It is for this reason that officials will often attempt to prevent filming. The potential loss of means of control and manipulation has often resulted in officials directing their attention to the elimination of the VTR as a participant. The non-negotiability of this issue can either facilitate the acceptance of demands or create an outright refusal to negotiate. Of course, the latter result only serves to increase both the size and solidarity of the movement in a long term process of people acting for themselves to secure legitimate aspirations.

The benefits of VTR in post-action activity are self-evident. The tapes are a history of events which, subject to analysis, reveal the success and failure of organization, demands and tactics, the degree of individual participation and growth of consciousness and the diffusion of same to further the base of people, issues and experiences in the on-going struggle for self-destiny.

Kathy Tweedy

We have about 20 edited tapes available on planning and organizing actions carried out by the Greater Montreal Anti-Poverty Coordinating Committee, a federation of citizen's groups. These tapes can be lent to interested groups for viewing.

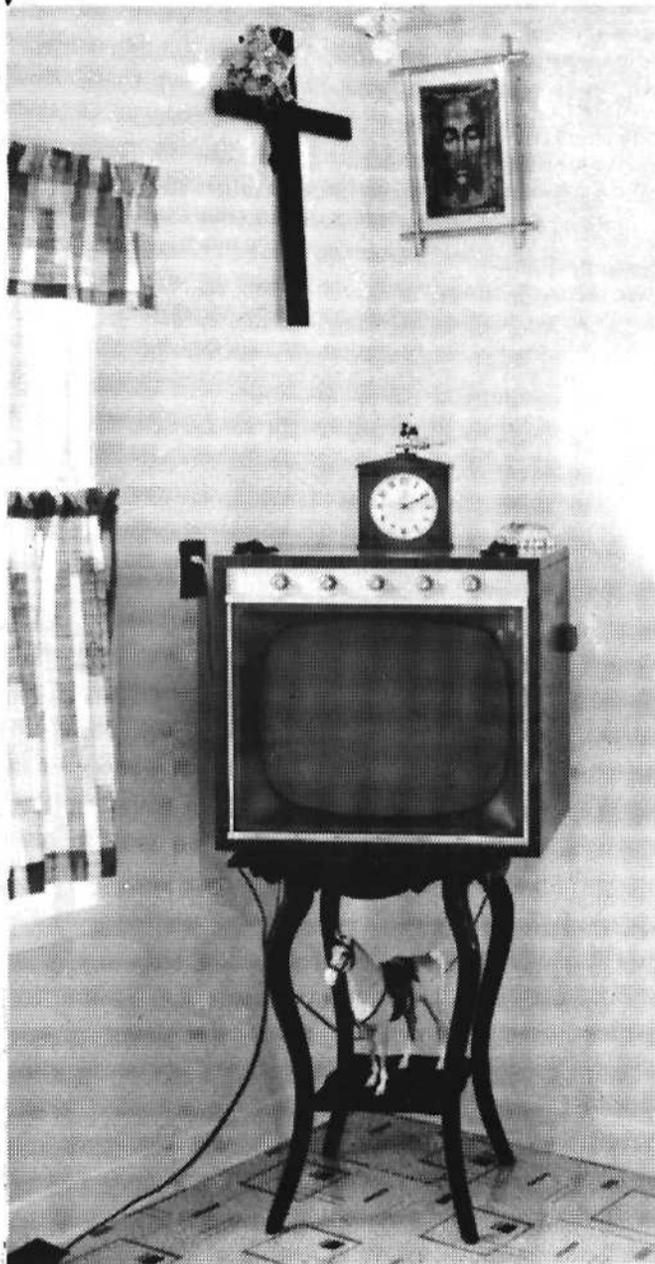


Photo: Gabor Szilasi

A community programme can be defined not by its content, but by how it is made. A community programme must be made by the community rather than merely for it, and it must be made under the full control of a community group. Programmes made by community groups for the use, deployment and scheduling of a commercial organization such as a cable company, would not qualify as community programmes, since they would be made in exactly the same way as existing commercial programmes are made, with final control resting with the owner of the equipment.

Bruce Lawson

Training Programme

We are a group of nine participants being trained in an Experimental Training Program for Social Animators. Most of us are high school dropouts. We don't know of any similar project in Canada below the junior college level. The idea originated with a youth group here in Park Extension, (a multi-ethnic district in the heart of Montreal), who, finding themselves in dead-end jobs, had asked the Community Corporation for training in community work. One of the most effective ways we have found to use VTR within the Program is for evaluation—individual participants were asked to look at themselves on tape and to evaluate their own role in a group discussion. A variation was to have one participant watch another participant on tape and then give his impressions of the other's ability to listen and participate within the group. Still another exercise was to have the entire group follow one person on tape and then each express his understanding of what that person had actually said. We found this helped us become aware of how we each functioned within the group and also to see the changes and progress taking place both individually and as a group. I will also use this technique with CUSO volunteers before they leave Canada. We also used VTR to film resource people. These tapes became part of our library and have been used by the participants who missed the original sessions. Another reason for our having video is to produce a complete record of the Training Program (practical work in the field, study, reflection, evaluation) so that others interested in starting such a program could see what problems we faced, and profit from our experience.

When video was introduced at the beginning of the Program, most of the participants were eager to get a crack at the equipment. At first it was used a lot, but much of the original material was wasted because no one had learned how to use it properly—this in spite of the manufacturer's (Sony) claim that even a child could use it successfully the first time. After the initial enthusiasm wore off, only one participant continued to use the equipment frequently and learned how to handle it properly. Since the trainees as part of their work have become involved in various projects throughout the city, interest in, and use of, the VTR has again become high. So far, we have taped protest rallies for welfare rights, action in the metro for lower transportation fares for senior citizens, and a citizens gathering on tenant rights. The project with which I am involved now is thinking of using VTR to encourage citizens to form tenant associations in various districts of Montreal, with the hope of forming a central coordinating body from the various groups. The plan is to interview individually as many tenants as possible and have them express their views on the condition of housing, urban renewal, rental fees and tenants' rights as they now exist in this Province. These citizens will then be invited, along with their friends and relatives, to a general meeting where they will get the chance to talk with other tenants, see and hear others' views on these problems, and discuss possible solutions.

We found that a drawback in using video for organizing citizens is the reluctance of many people to being taped, because they are scared the tapes may be altered or used for "subversive" purposes.

The Program's production of finished tapes has been limited because of lack of adequate editing equipment—a situation we hope to remedy soon.

Costanzo Passarelli