

COMMUNITY ACCESS SCHEME

Early in 1970 we began experimenting with a borrowed two camera video unit. Our premises were a completely open definition of community video and a desire to provide video access to as large a number of people as possible. Working with these two concepts of community application and open access, the unit was out every three or four days for some seven months. Almost all of this work was done with free equipment and surplus computer-type tape on homemade reels. This cut our expenses to 80¢ per recording hour, or 2% (one fiftieth) of the normal cost, virtually free access to a sophisticated technology. The economy resulted in poorer image quality, but most of the projects could not have been undertaken otherwise.

The project which took on the greatest significance was the film "Soledad Brothers." Produced for the Soledad defense committee, it is being used extensively by them in organizing support for the Soledad Brothers and for prison reform. The film is a highly informational document which is generally shown in conjunction with speakers from the defense. This film was edited from some twelve hours of video taped interviews with ex-prisoners of Soledad, lawyers, and members of the Brothers' families. The production expense prior to making the transfer to film was \$60. The transfer and first print cost \$864. The cost of doing the original recording on film (over \$5000) would have been well beyond the defense committee's resources. This project brought into focus for us the critical need at all levels in the community for meaningful access to communication tools. We were confronted with the enormous potential of video tape as a solution to the problems which have always frustrated the development of liberated media as a functioning community resource.

BASIC PROBLEMS FOR ANYONE COMMITTED TO ALTERNATIVE MEDIA:

Economics — How do we obtain maximum suitable production for the least money?

Distribution — How can we reach people in new ways — where they are? How can we increase the potential for reaching people with the information they need when they need it — quickly and cheaply? How can forms of distribution match most closely community

needs on higher levels than simply showing films for fundraising and entertainment? This is really the question of developing decentralized information systems as opposed to trying to beat mass media at their own game of packaged information, predigested news, and insinuated messages.

Production — How can we supplement the role of the professional communications worker, whether the sympathetic documentarist or the network bureaucrat, with real participation by people involved in the focus of a given situation, the possibility of their finding roles in the actual production and developing their own forms of communication?

For example, a sympathetic portrayal of ghetto residents could be done by CBS News or the Maysles and it will basically feed back to the kind of liberal sentiment that produced that portrait. But a group of people creating their own documents, their own expression of themselves and their lives, their own skills in communication, is a challenge that demands our attention and respect, and only secondarily our possible sympathy.

THE POTENTIAL OF VIDEO TAPE

Portable video recording is revolutionizing communications. It is a much more accessible visual medium than film. Economically, film is beyond the reach of masses of people. Technically, film is a craft before it's a means of expression, requiring an enormous investment of energy separate from the communicating impulse. The initial outlay for video equipment is less than for equivalent motion picture equipment and video production expenses are a small fraction of film expenditure.

VIDEO TAPE RECORDING IS A SITUATIONAL PROCESS

Video tape recording is an instantaneous process, offering participants complete, immediate, and simple control over the entire recording circuit. The subject can become aware of himself as he appears in the medium and develop his expression in direct relation to the medium. The video camera can be as private an object as the movie camera, but can also be subject to collective access and instant criticism

EXTENDING VIDEO RECORDING AS A SOCIETAL PROCESS

Video tape recording is the tool with the greatest potential for developing communications as a means for a community to realize its own identity and needs. A community oriented video project could define a community, rather than simply defining an audience. The project will become most meaningful as the community defines itself.

A Video Project should function on three levels:

- As an independent, self-expressive unit.
- Working as a unit with the participation of those engaged in a specific project.
- Assisting groups in developing their own independent expression.

In practice the unit will not function categorically, but will develop as an experiment with the dynamics inherent in the video medium in relation to immediate social priorities and a vision of decentralized, liberated communications.

To return briefly to the problem of distribution within a decentralized information system, video cassettes and cable television both hold much promise but are in an early stage of development. Sixteen millimeter film is still the primary "alternative" medium. A temporary requirement of a video project would be, in effect, to produce films (via kinescope) to achieve maximum immediate distribution.

VIDEO/FILM

A one hour edited film (transferred from video tape via the kinescope process) to the internegative stage will cost \$800 to \$1000. The reproduction of a film from internegative is the least expensive method of obtaining multiple prints. A print of an hour long film then costs \$110.

A one-copy transfer of an edited video tape to film costs \$300 for an hour. Three groups can have twenty minute films done for \$100 each if they are transferred at the same time and the basic lab fee for the kinescope set-up is shared. This would make it possible

to produce monthly newsreels, for instance, which could be circulated for free by defense committees, ecology groups, tenant unions, free clinics, welfare rights organizations, and so on. The cost of simply producing and distributing video tapes is less than a dollar per minute.

These production costs will be borne, where possible, by the participants in a given project. If no such funds exist, the project can be completed through the taping and editing stages and funds can be sought on the basis of a finished tape. We should not overemphasize the film aspect — much work can be done purely as video tape, especially as video facilities and distribution increase. Within the next several years home video cassette units will become common. Video facilities are already a reality in the schools. In fact, tapes can now be played back on the tape deck of a portable unit wherever there is a TV set.

MODULAR STUDIO

The basic unit of the community video studio is the porta-pak, a compact, battery operated, one man sound and video recording and playback system. The porta-pak is relatively inexpensive (\$1500) and can be easily operated by anyone, including the very young or those with no previous experience in the visual media. Expanding from this unit, our vision is a full scale studio and continuing video workshop. First we need six or more porta-paks to maximize availability. It will be necessary to provide some basic instruction in the use and care of the equipment, so we will institute regular workshops which will be an important feature of the overall project. For editing and playback we will add several video tape decks and monitors. This will enable us to set up video playback theaters anywhere and will also allow simultaneous and diverse use of the facility by several groups. In order to convert all this into a standard video studio, using multiple cameras and instant editing and special effects, we will add an electronic switching panel. This studio can produce video cassettes, films, and tapes for cable broadcast, and can involve the participation of a fairly large number of people. The complete facility costs \$15,000.

Groups or collectives who have become involved to the extent of wanting to initiate their own production can obtain the porta-pak as their basic module and synch into the studio for editing and expanded production. The complete studio is inexpensive enough that similar studios could be established as local centers in a growing network. This decentralized system of community studios should eventually be complemented by a technical center for mass producing cassettes, for upgrading half inch tapes to two inch broadcast standard, for developing new designs and modifications for equipment systems, etcetera.

The time has come to make electronic communications as available as the leaflet, the poster, and the community newspaper.

Anyone interested in supporting this community video project please contact us at 16 Ashbury, San Francisco, Ca. 94117, 415-752-2604. We are Andy Fahrenwald, Jean Fahrenwald, and Bruce Schmiechen, sometimes called Alternetworks.



Sony Corporation of America/VTR Division
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Long Island City, New York 11101

Gentlemen:

I own _____ portable unit(s) #AV3400 and/or have worked extensively with them in a variety of situations. I feel it my duty as a consumer to inform you of your product's performance in the field. One characteristic in particular has repeatedly come to my attention:

Machine rips, wrinkles, and generally mutilates videotapes

- Regularly
- Often
- Sometimes
- Every once in a while
- Only during important segments

Sincerely,

Name _____

Address _____