



Photo: Dorothy Todd Hénaut

The following is a report from the Challenge for Change Newsletter published by the National Film Board of Canada (P.O. 6100, Montreal). It is typical of the many media related community activities which the Film Board involves itself in. People interested in using video in community action should get in touch with Dorothy Hénaut, editor, for past issues since their experiences will prove invaluable for anyone wishing to do a similar thing.

Challenge for Change attempts to implicate the communications media in the process of social change . . . The videotape recording project in Saint-Jacques is an attempt to extend to its logical conclusion the conviction that people should participate in shaping their own lives, which means among other things, directing and manipulating the tools of modern communication necessary to gain and exercise that participation.

The Comité des Citoyens de Saint-Jacques, a dynamic citizens organization in one 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 that 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.

There seemed to be a convergence between the needs and ideas of the Citizen's 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 . . . The broad objectives of the Comité 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 . . .

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 . . . 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 . . .

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 . . . 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.

CHALLENGE FOR CHANGE

An organizing tool

“Could we have stopped people in the street and questioned them, the same way, if we had not had the camera a 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 could tell it was another citizen like themselves doing the interview, and they had more confidence in us than they would someone from the CBC or NFB, or other media. Often the press deforms what is said.”

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 . . . It should be clear that community self-awareness and inter-communications are powerful leveling agents and can set off an unpredictable chain of reaction. There must be a real sense of continuity, and commitment for 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.

“The people we interviewed on 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 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.”

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.

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 the 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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