Meta-Manual

New technologies begin life by being mistaken for the ones they replace. The car was first called "horseless carriage." Another name for radio was "wireless." And some people still see broadcast TV as "radio with a screen." There is a similar bias against portable video generated by people who are stuck in old media. Film freaks question the potential of videotape as if it were merely "Polanski movies" and are more concerned about what it can't do than what it can do uniquely. Media instructors tend to be unimpressed by the Porta-Pak because for their money it's just experience "Super-Eight." Even those who understand that the grammar of television is different from film, nonetheless mistake portables for a less sophisticated version of the old TV studio.

Portable video is a new, major medium. It is a high access form of our culture's dominant communication media and precisely the opposite of product television which can accept only artificial behavior because it is based on a scarcity of time and equipment access.

The economy of portable video is subversive to anyone whose authority and security are based on controlling information flow. Thus the usual argument against portable video is that it has inferior "technical standards," which is a hype promoted by unions whose jobs are based on scarcity, owners who can't afford both their overhead and "equal time," and educators who build a mystique of expertise and certification. They are as concerned about what it can't do in imitation of broadcast. Like two-inch, its editing capability is perfect. There are no one-inch portables. However, all of the half-inch portables listed below can be interfaced with one-inch to provide perfectly edited one-inch masters.

The major technical problem with half-inch systems had been an unstable signal which permitted clean edits and even intra-system compatibility, in some cases. But most of the "technical" objections came from people who had a vested interest in limiting access to TV. Some of the best video we've ever seen was made very early, relatively crude Porta-Paks which were nonetheless flexible enough to go where people had something to record. Porta-Paks are versatile products.

Many of the technical problems have been eliminated since the Porta-Paks were first introduced in 1968. There is now a Japanese standard (JVC) which is interoperable with the leading manufacturers (although not all the parts share it) but has a stable enough signal to be edited on relatively inexpensive (approx. $950) half-inch editing decks (e.g. the Sony AV3650).

Most of the information in this report is grounded in our own experience. This tells you what has screwed up both electronically and mechanically from our own experience. Where we have none it's been left blank for others to feedback and fill in our ignorance.

Support. Some Porta-Paks are less flexible than others first, because they have few inherent options, and second, because they are not manufactured to Sony's manufacturing specs. Thus, the charts below give more space to one-inch than to the three other available half-inch systems, two of which are manufactured for two brand names.

Manual

There are three standards of videotape and a fourth one coming: two-inch, one-inch, half-inch, and quarter-inch.

Two-inch or "high band" tape systems are in- digenous to broadcasting and are exclusively low access systems. They are temperature sensitive, complete to operate, and stationary.

Generally, the wider the tape the more information it can hold. Two-inch systems, also called "quadraplex," lay the scanning signal perpendicular to the edge of the tape. All one and half-inch systems incorporate helical scan which lays the signal at an angle to the tape edge.

Typically, clean editing was once an exclusive function of two-inch machines. One-inch was first used as a cheaper version as their size and price range ($1000 to $10,000) made them ideal for installations with closed-circuit TV systems which imitate broadcast. Like two-inch, its editing capability is perfect. There are no one-inch portables. However, all of the half-inch portables listed below can be interfaced with one-inch to provide perfectly edited one-inch masters.

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