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 the masses. It will be the forum through which 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 initiating 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 'elevated' with those cameras, to put in a cute little shot of your interviewee blowing his nose in an off moment when he didn't know the camera was recording, or somehow slip it if he did (because after all, he'd feel silly and unnecessitated, 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?

Yes, that is a question of the quality 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 Change for Challenge. 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. It 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 say that, and when they have finished complaining about the way on their forehead or their double chin, they suddenly realize that they are more articulate, more presentable, than they ever really were, 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 commercial organization such as a cable company, for the use, deployment and scheduling of a community programme can be made under the full control of a community, demands and tactics, the degree of individual participation.

A community programme can be defined not only 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 help by not only 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

Metro Media Council of Vancouver

Programme

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

Bruce Lawson

Parallel Institute

The benefits of VTR in post-action activity are self-evident. The tapes are used to increase both the size and solidarity of the movements by showing the successes and failures of the actions carried out by the Greater Montreal Anti-Poverty Coordinating Committee. The presence of the camera during the planning, the action itself, and the decision to record the events can help the group learn a great deal about the so-called objectivity of the media. The programme can become an important tool in expelling the beginning power of those elitists who control the media, the softening up of mass media, and the strengthening of the grass-roots movements. It is for this reason that the training and development of non-commercial organization such as a cable company, for the use, deployment and scheduling of a community programme can be made under the full control of a community. Such a 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.

Bruce Lawson

Costanzo Passarelli