

The resistible rise of video

Some thoughts on a technology and social change

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Video is a subject that for some reason or other has spawned a literature of the richest gobbledygook. I should therefore explain that there are only two reasons for wishing to contribute further comment on this topic. The first is that the sanctimonious association of video with good works, (social change being assumed to be one for the purposes of this particular argument), needs to be challenged. A few less reverent opinions may usefully serve to sharpen up the debate.

Arts Council report

The second reason needs a little more explanation. Last year I was commissioned to write a paper for the Arts Council on the funding of video for cultural purposes.¹ It set out to examine in an admittedly sceptical spirit some of the assumptions on which the public funding of 'socio-cultural video activities' appeared to be based. The piece concluded that there seemed to be no case for the major public funding of new video resources (dubbing centres, distribution networks etc) in the absence of any public demand for them. Video art - arid stuff on current evidence - would get along very nicely if television companies and resource studios could be persuaded to grant access to some of their surplus facilities. Where community arts and development were concerned, video did not seem to have a sufficiently coherent function or identity to justify a special category of funding. Decisions about allocation of funds and choice of techniques (possibly but not necessarily involving video) might therefore profitably be devolved to the communities most closely involved in their ultimate uses; such people were likely to have the best knowledge of local needs and resources.

Public row

It is true to say that these opinions were not welcomed by those who were counting on funds from the Arts Council. There was a considerable row in the course of which a great deal of personal abuse got thrown around: all in all a painful experience which I have no wish to repeat. The sad thing about the fuss was that the fiercest objection was not to the arguments presented, but to the intrusion of an 'outsider' into the closed world of technological decision. Even this small world of 'socio-cultural video activity', it was made clear, was the property of the vested interests involved.

American sociologist Robert Alford has pointed out in a different context that the implied specialization of function in bureaucracies and the professions is *designed* to close off discussion and stabilize particular responses.² In retrospect it is not of any great importance that the Arts Council decides to put a hundred thousand pounds into video rather than, say,

literary magazines or the Wigan Art Centre. But it does seem to be rather a pity that bureaucratization of social decision has already reached the Arts, and that the defence of video has to be mounted with such an amount of pseudo-professional hokum.

The claims for video

That being said, it is interesting to take a look at some of the claims made for video as an instrument of social change. Very roughly they fall into three main groups:

Individual development: stimulation of creativity, confidence and self awareness.

'Democratization of broadcasting' plus stimulation of critical awareness of media subjectivity.

Community development: stimulation of participation, mutual aid, awareness and action.

Where the first group is concerned, although the literature of video and the thrust of experimental work have tended to emphasize group activities at the expense of individual work, there is still frequent reference to video used as 'psychotherapy' and as a means of

'Learning about oneself and others, learning how to act as part of a group, learning how to get things done.'³

There is, however, not much that can be said about this. Video shares these aspirations with organized religion and the educational services; but apart from that, is there any evidence that it can achieve any more than simpler resources such as art classes, choirs, council allotments, political parties, pop groups, or the local football team? Or indeed, why it should? Beside its very specific quality of instant replay which can be used in training, video is a clumsy and inflexible creative medium, unable to compete with low gauge film. An Australian report has noted that 'video is easy to use badly and very difficult to use well'⁴, and the shortage of completed tapes of viewable quality after years of semi-professional activity bears witness to the fact.

A much more interesting case can be made for the use of video as a means of changing the structures and content of television. 'Democratization of technology and the flowering of variety'⁵ may not mean much but it sounds good. The trouble about this is simply that the barriers to change in British broadcasting are patently political rather than technical⁶. For all the cable television experiments of yesteryear, the energetic talk of improved editing systems, and the revolution about to be wrought by proc-amps and digital time base correctors, the fact remains that low gauge video production has neither made nor is likely to make any impact on the struc-

ture or content of broadcast television in countries with developed national broadcasting systems in existence. It is true, of course, that sophisticated video equipment has meanwhile revolutionized professional production techniques; and it can also be noted in passing that there is nothing like experience of amateur video to inculcate the deepest respect for traditional professional television products.

Finally there is the fashionable, persuasive and perpetually elusive myth of video in community development -

'stimulating action and participation at community level; stimulating interest in needs and issues in a given neighbourhood; presenting new ideas and providing on-going community organization'⁷. It all sounds excellent. Although there is of course no *necessary* connexion between these broad social objectives and the recording of sound and pictures on magnetic tape, there is a widely canvassed opinion among workers in the field that video is 'important' and 'a useful tool'⁸. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that this is the case. This is in spite of the substantial experience of community video projects in countries throughout the world, including Britain, France, Canada and the USA. Where results have been claimed, (for example in the Fogo and Drumheller projects of the famous Canadian Challenge for Change programme), it has proved impossible to isolate any particular video contribution from the general benefits flowing from programmes of investment in deprived areas. In other cases there are simply no results to record: Greenwich Cablevision; Inter-action; Graft-on; several years of projects funded by the Greater London Arts Association; the elaborate Hammersmith participation project in which it finally emerged that the Chairman of the Housing Committee had never got around to seeing the tapes so laboriously assembled to communicate local views to him.

This disenchantment is now being echoed in the slow accumulation of academic work on the subject, reinforcing the view that there are no lasting benefits attributable to video in the development of community activities. Of particular interest are recent Rand studies reviewing the experience of American cable stations and two Council of Europe reports, one summarizing the results of a major experimental programme of social animation in France involving the use of video; the other earlier study exploring the role of video and other communications technologies in socio-cultural development. The latter is of particular interest as one of the few studies of video attempting to pin down some of the economic facts of cost and value which tend to get lost in the general euphoria of radical emotion.⁹

No evidence

The point of the somewhat episodic comments above is to draw attention to the fact that there is nothing but enthusiasm to support the claims made for video as a tool of social change. It can of course be argued that the evidence is merely inconclusive; that it is based largely on the experience of Western nations and that perhaps applications in developing countries might provide happier results. But this brings us to the heart of the argument because, I believe that there are several basic reasons why video is fundamentally unsuited to the role thrust upon it. These reasons are rooted in the technical characteristics of

video itself and also in the structure of the industry that develops and promotes it.

An inefficient medium

First, *low gauge video for amateur use is inherently inefficient as a tool of communication*, as several experienced video workers have been prepared to admit. The poor quality images, the tedious and inefficient editing procedures and the problems associated with showing tapes make communication tiresome and time-consuming. The fact that editing is difficult tends to reduce the quality and precision of the message while at the same time introducing a process irrelevant to the communication of ideas. At this point, people with something they want to say will leave the technical work to the professionals or find another way of getting the message across.

It is important to stress the phrase 'for amateur use', because in the ranges of sophisticated equipment available for professional work every refinement of colour, playback and editing is available at a price. The catch is that if such equipment is employed for community work not only is the cost astronomical, but the technical sophistication and sensitivity of the equipment require skilled professional handling. Thus the improvements in quality destroy the very characteristics of simplicity and amateur handling that first made the *portapak* accessible to members of the community. The vision of community communication remains, as far as video is concerned, an unattainable mirage.

Cost and incompatibility

Second, *video is expensive*. While many people were carried away with the excitement of radical chic and fashionable technology packaged at £1000 a throw, experience has made it clear that the realistic running costs are of quite another order. They must cover, for a start, at least two portapaks, a monitor and editing deck, plus maintenance and repair costs at 25% of capital cost per annum; transport (contrary to popular belief video is mobile but not always portable); secure accommodation; and the major expense of an experienced video person to supervise use of the equipment.¹⁰ Unless these support resources are provided, the original investment is wasted, as the equipment gathering dust in schools and local authority departments indicates.

An added problem is that the incompatibility of different makes of equipment has not been resolved, making economical distribution of tape to offset production costs impossible. This means that the total operation has to be cost-effective in purely local terms. And while it is undeniable that video's unique instant replay capacity makes it invaluable for training, surveillance, and certain research and recording tasks, it is difficult to think of any other fields in which alternative methods would not provide cheaper and acceptable results.

Planned obsolescence

Finally, *video is subject to planned obsolescence*. At the end of the sixties the slogans of community development, citizen television and radical action made highly effective advertising for the promotion of a military technology in the domestic market. Now community video represents only an unimportant fraction of that market, and interest has moved on to the more profitable sectors of home entertainment complexes and elaborate equipment for professional

use. Video equipment is certainly going to become lighter, faster, sharper, more sensitive and coloured, but never cheaper, tougher or more reliable.

In 1976 I was involved in investigating the idea of collective sponsorship of development work on low gauge editing equipment for community use, and the major manufacturers made it quite clear that they had no interest in the community market at all.¹¹ The next generation of video equipment for amateur use will only be available colour-capable and higher gauge; the old portapak will be obsolete in two or three years. So, a great many organizations which have invested in the myths of video will find themselves dragged helplessly into a spiral of investment in equipment that is no longer suitable for the purposes for which it was originally acquired.

Modest-media imperialism?

At the end of all this, faced with the posturings of the 'Metasoftware of Video' school, the whole subject could easily be dismissed as a mildly lunatic but essentially harmless fringe activity. I take a bleaker view. Video may not have brought about social change, but it has undeniably played a key part in the intricate commercial strategies of electronic equipment manufacturers. The target has been rich domestic markets, and ultimately the valuable prize of European commercial broadcasting. The role of video has been very precisely to head the attack on the public service control of broadcasting which stands in the way of this objective in most European countries, and to soften up developing nations for infiltration and capture. It may be lamentable that so much good radical energy has gone into these games

and that people who should know better have provided willing collaboration. What is worse, and ultimately dishonourable, is that we are now being asked to play the role of 'experts' in providing these fragile and expensive toys with a dressing of educational or professional respectability for export to the Third World.

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- 11 With Michael Barrett of Channel 40 Milton Keynes; a project based on BFI and Greater London Arts funding which never got off the ground.
- 12 See *The Metasoftware of Video*, quoted above, reference 5.

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