

In the way the underground press discovered its audience during the sixties, those who are into "alternative television" feel that they are destined to have an important impact on the seventies.

The video underground

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I am a cybernetic guerilla fighting perceptual imperialism. . . . VT is not TV. Video tape is TV flipped into itself. . . . Tape is metatheater. . . . Tape is feedback. These are the catchwords of the video underground. It is a self-proclaimed video conspiracy that numbers more than thirty groups in New York alone. It is spreading across the country, not only into major urban centers but to the suburbs as well. Whether from self-conscious media radicals or high-school and college students, we are in for a revolution in communication that aims to restructure our most powerful medium—TV.

This revolution is based on a radical breakthrough in technology. For what an amateur might spend on a first-class home movie setup, Sony now offers a "porta-pak"—a video camera the size of a cigar box and a recorder weighing no more than the Yellow Pages. Up to half an hour of sound and picture can be taken on one reel of tape and replayed immediately—no lab processing necessary. An hour's worth of video tape costs about forty dollars and can be used fifty times.

Compared to film, this cuts costs dramatically. The raw stock and lab costs alone of one hour of 16-mm film with sound can run to almost one thousand dollars. Portable video opens up vast possibilities for inexpensive TV productions in schools, businesses, performing-arts groups and, inevitably, the underground.

The revolution in television was launched in an attempt to explore the TV set as an art form. At Brandeis University's "Vision and Television" show last year, sets were rewired to transmit distorted, abstract images and monitors were programmed to interact with the viewer. Most of the now-established TV underground—the Videofreex, Rairdance Corporation, Global Village—were on hand to participate. Inspired by the show, Nam June Paik, a pioneer in the concept of TV sculpture, predicted that "someday artists will work with capacitors, resistors and semiconductors as they work today with brushes, violins and junk."

But the underground has moved in a different direction in the past year. There have been no more gallery shows of television gimmickry. In 1969 the Howard Wise Gallery put together "TV as a Creative Medium," the first exhibition devoted to television as an art form,

which featured Charlotte Moorman (with two four-inch Sony TV sets strapped to her otherwise bare bosom) playing Dick Cavett's opening monologue on a cello. But in 1971 Howard Wise has shut down his gallery because, he says, "I feel that I must try to put to maximum social use whatever I possess in the way of training, ability and experience." It's program content that counts now, and it's being produced in staggering quantity by the Videofreex, the People's Video Theater, the Rairdance Corporation, Global Village and the Media Co-op at New York University.

"We're on a reality trip," says Freex leader David Cort. The Freex prefer a communal lifestyle, most of them sharing the same apartment and the rest sleeping at the studio/loft at 98 Prince Street. "Technical labors bring us together," says Cort. "We are in a web of video-audio energy flows."

With Sony cameras and a panel truck, the Freex have assembled a library of more than four hundred hours of *video vérité*. Their documentation of the Hog Farm commune passing around a jug of acid lemonade at Goddard College's Alternative Media Conference last year makes the LSD trip in *Easy Rider* look like just another set of Hollywood falsies. Although their material ranges from a Smokey the Bear commercial to an interview with the Black Panther Minister of Communication on the steps of his New Haven home, the Freex prefer to think of portable video as a social-action tool rather than a transmitter of programming.

Freex leader Cort began to explore this potential before Les Levine and Nam June Paik proclaimed it a new "art form." In 1968 Cort and a Cooper Union graduate named Ken Marsh were using video tape in a Poverty Program project called Operation Discovery which was designed to build community awareness among black teen-agers in Brooklyn. "We had an open confrontation with the Brooklyn museum," recalls Marsh, "because they ignored the people who lived there. They finally gave us some space for a community video gallery to show the tapes the kids had made about bitter family battles and their friends making drug connections."

Marsh now runs the People's Video Theater out of his apartment loft at 544 Sixth Avenue. For a nominal donation, the one-monitor "video magazine" features interviews with Greenwich Village merchants on local issues like rising rents and shoplifting and the Young Lords in Harlem trying to clear garbage from a lot to make way for a playground.

Like most of the video underground, Marsh seems to be a refugee from a generation that was more committed to the Peace Corps than the SDS. Although firmly aligned with the lifestyle of the "counter culture," the "revolutionary" content of their material is mild enough that all four groups have recently won grants from the New York State Council on the Arts.

Subsidy-for-survival turns out to be as crucial for alternative television as it is for most of the arts. While the underground began with a staggering outburst of productivity, it soon ran into the nearly insurmountable problem of outlets and, as a consequence, a lack of money. Some of the groups have tried to break into commercial television distribution, while others have been waiting for video cassettes or cable television to provide them with a market. So far, none of this has worked out.

The Freex' massive archive of video tapes has never been seen outside of video environments like New York's Global Village and the Freex' closed-circuit monitors in their Prince Street loft. The networks claim they couldn't use the material if they wanted to because the Sony half-inch tape is not up to the broadcast quality of the standard two-inch tape used in television studios. The underground agrees that there is some loss in technical quality but points to the fact that Hollywood was fixated on studio productions until the French in the early sixties along with the New Wave created a demand for the grainy quality of *cinéma vérité*, jump-cuts and hand-held camera shots.

But the networks remain unconvinced, and for the past year Global Village, codirected by John Reilly and Rudi Stern, has been the only commercial outlet for underground video. Starting with a wrap-around environment of ten TV monitors in a downtown Manhattan loft, the Village offered an interplay of interviews with Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, free-form "kinetic" abstractions, a couple making love in a New Jersey meadow and taped footage of Martin Luther King set against ads for Budweiser beer.

That the formula looks better on the tube than it sounds is evidenced by the fact that the Village moved to new quarters adjacent to the Fillmore East a few months ago with twelve new monitors, half of them in color, and a control booth (for mixing live footage, tapes and film) that looks like NASA Mission Control in Houston.

Under heavy criticism from other groups for charging admission and stressing entertainment over radical politics, Village No. 2 opened its new program with *The Battle of Algiers*, a video mix that runs the original film on one monitor while simultaneously running tapes of U.S. street scuffles of hard hats, students, police. Charging admission turns out to be necessary to pay the rent, but Stern and Reilly scheduled a benefit performance for the Panther Defense Fund to launch the "Battle of Algiers Video Mix." What was last year's radical chic is this year's underground credibility.

In spite of the \$3.50 admission charge, the Village is still having trouble meeting the overhead. Attendance has been poor, and Reilly and Stern have already begun to explore other outlets. They recently agreed with Optronics Library, a software production company for video cassettes, to put out a monthly video magazine under the Global Village logo. Due this summer, the first edition is slated to include tapes on urban communes, on macrobiotic cooking, the draft law and the Black Panthers. "I see this as a video counterpart to *Rolling Stone* and *The Whole Earth Catalogue*," says Reilly. "This is television aimed at building the culture rather than ripping it off."

The need for money and the desire to get more involved in community-action video virtually caused the established groups to halt production through much of 1970 as they battled to obtain a piece of the available \$260,000 in grant money for community video projects from the New York State Council on the Arts. Reilly and Stern wanted funding for a Global Village Resource Center that would schedule workshops on the community uses of portable video and a truck that could take them and their equipment to Manhattan neighborhoods to tape on-the-street interviews. The Raindance Corporation,

at the "Alternative Communication Media" conference at Syracuse (N.Y. University last fall, the Videofreex staged a screening of their video tapes with a front-screen projector. Students experimented with the portable Sony cameras in a Freex-sponsored "alternative television" workshop.



With their completely portable cameras, recorders and editing table—partially obscured—the Freex can copy, say, a hard-hat demonstration using the same equipment they'd need in the staging of a studio production.



A sampling of the fare at the Global Village, where codirectors John Reilly and Rudi Stern use an electronic synthesizer to produce color programming from black-and-white video tapes. Their material ranges from abstract "kinetic" compositions to friends John and Samantha making love in a New Jersey meadow. The five frames to the left are the work of Stern; those to the right, of Reilly.



Part of the Videofreex' collection of impressive electronic equipment is shown in their loft at 98 Prince Street in Manhattan's Soho district, where weekly screenings are open to the public for a nominal donation.



New York University Media Co-op member Bill Etra edits tapes in his Manhattan apartment. The "directors" series he initiated so far includes Arthur Penn, Don Pennebaker, John Cassavetes and the Maysles Brothers on video tapes. Photo, Bill Etra.



George Stoney, chairman of NYU's Institute of Film and Television, is creating a New York counterpart to Canada's social-action "Challenge for Change." With him is student Andy Mann. Photo, Bill Etra.



Rudi Stern, left, and John Reilly at Global Village No. 2 at 91 Second Avenue, New York. Behind them are three of the twelve television monitors—six in color and six in black and white—which help create this multi-channel video theater for "counter culture" programming. Photo, Bernard Gotfryd, courtesy Newsweek magazine.

originally formed to create a magazine for video cassettes, proposed to create a Center for Decentralized Television which would hold seminars on the social uses of video tape; it sounded like the Global Village Resource Center. The People's Video Theater wanted an outlet for a Community Video Journalism which would attempt the same thing.

The debate among the groups sounded like an aphorism contest between Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller. In seeking to find language to express the implications of their movement, they often got sidetracked into rhetoric at the expense of real work. In struggling for money they lost the sense of cooperation vital to the new, wider community to be achieved through video technology.

While this struggle went on, some of the leading innovators dropped out by going back to the universities and thus opened up a new front for the TV revolution. Andy Mann, who built the original Global Village switching system (which orchestrated all ten monitors from the parts of a traffic light he found at a New York City auction, explains, "I got tired of the money hassle I just wanted to make tapes."

Andy found a group at New York University called the Media Co-op. The Co-op was launched during NYU's student strike in the spring of 1970. Students with porta-paks discovered that although administrators were terrified of meeting with hostile students, they would watch tapes of students if they were sitting safely in their offices. Video tape is somehow so real, so immediate, so believable. Just like television.

Nominally under NYU's Institute of Film and Television, the Co-op is open to all students. "We feel it is vitally important to recruit, train and encourage people to cover anything they are interested in communicating to others," runs the manifesto. "We are dedicated to the principle of free access."

So far, the principle of free access has worked. Pat Thomas, an anthropology major, borrowed the equipment to tape an interview with Margaret Mead, but she has also begun to contribute to the "Directors' Series" launched by Co-op members. Pat's tape on Don Pennebaker has been added to an archive that already lists Arthur Penn, John Cassavetes, Costa Gavras, Grotowski and the Maysles Brothers.

The tape on the Maysles discussing *Gimme Shelter* (the movie featuring the Rolling Stones and a bike-gang killing at the Stones' Altamont concert), made by NYU student Bill Etra, is particularly valuable because it explains the "out-takes" that reveal the creative process in filmmaking. The original opening shot was to be a "film on film" of San Francisco detectives looking at and analyzing the now famous murder footage, frame by frame. "Cinematically it didn't work somehow," says David Maysles, "but it gave us another idea. Why not shoot the Stones looking at the same footage?" They did and in the finished film it is a chilling commentary on the Stones, rock culture and the media as alienator as well as community-maker.

The Co-op has been so successful that the University gave a group in the Co-op \$6,500 to cover equipment costs to establish "Video-Tec," a center for TV campus news coverage that will be monitored two hours a day in NYU's Loeb Student Center. Cameras and recording equipment will also be on hand at Loeb so

the news after they see it, and their responses will be spliced together with other recorded material to create an unending commentary. In alternative-television jargon, that's feedback.

"What we're really talking about," says "Red" Burns, a gray-haired lady in her fifties appointed by NYU as Community Media Coordinator, "is an alternate medium that will give a voice to people who've never had access to the establishment one. It's going to allow the kind the programming communities want—not just what somebody tells them they should want."

When apartment squatters met head-on with brownstone owners last year, the community was defiant toward any attempts at mediation. The NYU students went in with their cameras and taped interviews with both factions. "At first they didn't want to see each other," explained Ilean Connell, head of the eight-member student crew. "'No! I don't want to see him,' each would say. 'I've heard it all before.' Now they ask us if we've done any shooting and if they can see their opponent's latest tape."

The students are unconcerned about outlets, aside from Loeb Center, because they are after a community dialogue, not telling the people in Queens about the abandoned-car problem in Harlem. "Most often reading newspapers or watching television is a substitute for action," explains George Stoney, who is chairman of NYU's Institute of Film and Television. "It is entertainment, always hooked to advertising or circulation or rating systems, and is aimed at the passive third party—the reader or the viewer who does not want to get involved and for whom most news is created. That's the beautiful thing about the way students are using videotape recorders; they provoke useful action by encouraging real dialogue."

George Stoney is unconcerned about whether "tape is metatheater" or his students "cybernetic guerillas." He has been too busy using film to stimulate social change in Canada for the past two years. In a program called "Challenge for Change," sponsored by the National Film Board with a million-dollar annual subsidy from the Canadian Government, Stoney and other filmmakers were hired to explore the needs of Canada's poor and report back on film. More than eighty films have now come out of the program, including an essay on the wretched lives of the Mohawk Indians and the dehumanization of welfare recipients.

At the beginning the emphasis was on film, but then the Film Board discovered video tape. Their first experiment was a company town where they interviewed local residents, taping their complaints and dissatisfaction, and then played the tapes to the City Council. The Council listened, met many of their demands, and eventually the residents gained access to the local television station. The community was so impressed with the usefulness of the video recorders that the local church bought portapak and returned the government cameras to the Film Board.

When asked if he thought that commercial TV would ever give similar access to U.S. communities, Stoney replied, "When it's amusing." What distinguishes the Stoney approach is that he doesn't want access to the established media, be they networks, cable stations or cassette distributors, because at best this is irrelevant and

at worst destructive to the kind of interactions he wants to create.

Stoney knows that, to survive, an underground movement must not blow its own horn too loudly until it has gained wide support and a measure of success. Alternative video has started to work in Canada, with the full support of the Canadian government, and it has begun to spread to American high schools, partially through the efforts of George Stoney.

When Stoney received a phone call last September from his daughter explaining that her high school in Brookhaven, about sixty miles east of Manhattan, was about to be closed over a racial conflict, he sent her a portable video recorder. She, other students and three teachers joined in the taping of interviews of both factions in an attempt to mediate the crisis. The teachers were fired and the equipment banned.

Students from neighboring Longwood High School who had "helped out" at Brookhaven borrowed the exiled porta-pak for their school. Two months later, an underground newspaper appeared at Longwood announcing the Blacks should go back to Africa. The editor claimed he didn't really believe it but "just wanted to provoke a verbal confrontation between whites and blacks." The student-body president "expressed his disapproval," the principal "deplored slurs on any race, black or white," and a black leader said she "supported the editor's right to say it if he felt like it." They got it all on tape, two hours of it, and edited it down to a twenty-minute presentation for a special meeting of the student body. The crisis passed and alternative television has become a way of life at Longwood.

Other high-school students have expanded their audience to include the community by utilizing their local cable-television station. When Newburgh High School officials prohibited a video workshop on campus, the students set up their own TV studio in a downtown hotel with two portable video units and an unlimited supply of tape. Their first tape, a discussion of drug addiction among local teen-agers, went out to the seven thousand subscribers of the Newburgh cable station.

When Paul Krassner, editor of the *Realist*, took his first look at the efforts of New York's video underground, he told them, "Look, I can get you the same equipment for a fraction of the cost—a mirror." When the movement was in its self-conscious infancy, Krassner was right. But now the low-cost equipment is beginning to spread to the suburbs, and even the established underground is beginning to show signs of recovery. The New York State Council, perplexed over the battle for funds, decided to spread the wealth and give each of the New York groups a grant averaging thirty-five thousand dollars. Global Village will use the money to establish weekly seminars on the use of video tape to provoke social change, and the Videofreex are outfitting a media bus that will travel throughout New York State training people in the use of the equipment, showing them how it can promote community dialogue and how to gain access to local cable stations.

It's been two years since FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson published his book *How to Talk Back to Your Television Set*. While it was a worthy effort to stir up the medium, it missed the point that the new video revolutionaries are making—people can learn to talk to each other *through* their television set.